

Hopelessness, Suicidal thoughts and Self-harm among Incarcerated Population of KP

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ABSTRACT

Criminal offenders especially those in correctional settings lack adequate social support which could exacerbate feelings of isolation, despair, and hopelessness, leading to an increased vulnerability to self-harm and suicidal ideation. The present study was conducted with an aim to assess how hopelessness influences self-harm and suicidal ideation among criminals; and to explore gender-wise variation in hopelessness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts among criminals. A purposive sample of 80 criminals (40 males and 40 females) was selected from Central Prisons of Peshawar and Haripur. The age range of respondents were from 18 to 50 years. Instruments used for data collection includes, Beck's Hopelessness Scale (BHS) (Beck et., al 1974), Self-harm Inventory (SHI) (Sansone et al., 1998), Beck Suicidal Intent Scale (SIS) (Beck, Schuyler, & Hermen 1974). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics. Independent samples t-tests were used to examine gender-based differences in suicidal thoughts and self-harm among criminals. Correlational analysis was conducted to assess the relationship among hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm. The study reports demographic findings from

80 respondents, detailing gender-wise distribution across age, marital status, educational level, socioeconomic status, type of criminal offence, and duration of incarceration. Overall, the results indicate a relatively higher proportion of participants who were unmarried and lacked formal education, alongside a substantial representation of individuals involved in murder-related offences; females accounted for a greater share across most demographic categories. In addition, the findings demonstrate statistically significant gender differences in hopelessness, self-harm behaviors, and suicidal intent among criminals. Female participants scored significantly higher than male participants on the Beck Hopelessness Scale, the Self-harm Inventory and the Suicidal Intent Scale

Keywords: Hopelessness, Perceived social support, Self-harm, Suicidal intent, Criminal behaviour, Gender differences, Mental health in prisoners

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Introduction

Correctional psychology has been concerned with psychological well-being of criminals. Psychological stressors adversely impact the psychological, social, and emotional processes of incarcerated individuals. Imprisonment causes sensory, cognitive and social, deprivation, in-turning lower the psychological well-being and quality of life (Combalbert et al., 2018; Williams, 2003). Psychological well-being and mental health have been repeatedly documented as pivotal goals to achieve in a variety of contexts, including justice and health (Pinto et al., 2017). Prisons exert constraints on personal autonomy, freedom of movement, and social engagement, which have been found to be strongly linked to high levels of psychological distress among prisoners (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; Haney, 2018). Giving criminals a second chance enables them to step out of the continuous loop of crime and resettle into society as productive members. This tactic not only advantages the criminal, but also society as a whole. After all, everyone must be given a chance to learn from their errors and work towards a better future. The relationship between mental health issues and criminal behaviour has been extensively studied, with self-harm and suicidal thoughts being especially significant concerns among incarcerated individuals. Among the various psychological factors influencing these behaviours, Hopelessness have emerged as critical predictor. Hopelessness is a psychological condition characterized by a pessimistic outlook on the future, the belief that one's circumstances cannot improve, and absence of perceived control over one's life. It is often considered a key cognitive component in the onset of diverse psychological health issues, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. According to Clim (2019) the concept of Hopelessness is as a central feature of depression, and since then, a growing body of research has examined its impact on mental health, coping, and

behaviour. Hopelessness is a strong predictor of depressive symptoms in young people, with increased levels of Hopelessness leading to higher depressive severity. The study used a sample of over 1,000 adolescents and found that Hopelessness not only correlated with depression but also with suicidal ideation and attempts. Their work emphasizes the function of Hopelessness as a predictor for depression, suggesting that addressing Hopelessness early in life may help prevent the development of greater psychological issues such as chronic depression or suicidal tendencies.

Nock et al., (2021) highlights the need for early interventions to reduce Hopelessness in adolescents, potentially preventing long-term psychological harm. The relationship between Hopelessness and suicidal ideation amidst a sample of adults diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) was studied previously. Findings showed that Hopelessness was a significant predictor of suicidal thoughts, more so than the severity of depressive symptoms alone. The study emphasized that while depression often co-occurs with suicidal ideation, Hopelessness specifically contributes to the feeling of despair that can lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Hopelessness is a key focus to prevent suicide prevention and significantly effect decision-making process related to self-harm. Empirical evidences show that prisoners as compared to general population experiences more psychological issues, as Hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014; Fazel et al., 2017). such findings highlight the importance to prioritize the need to focus on mental health issues in prisons, especially in context where mental health care is limited. People entering the prison system are most at risk during the early stages of their incarceration, as they are expected to adapt suddenly to a very restrictive and alien setting. Newly Incarcerated criminals often face high levels of anxiety, fear, confusion, and emotional distress as they struggle to cope with prison life (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958). Poor early prison adjustment, especially in vulnerable individuals, has been linked to higher

risks of Hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and self-harming behaviors (Dear et al., 2001; Fazel et al., 2017). This crucial phase of psychological vulnerability and needs to be addressed with utmost care.

In Pakistan, the mental health needs of the incarcerated population are still an area of unexplored research. Prisons in Pakistan are known to face challenges such as overcrowding, lack of access to mental health professionals, poor screening methods, and a lack of psychological intervention programs (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2022; WHO, 2014). Peshawar Central Prison, one of the major correctional institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, houses a diverse population of inmates, many of whom enter incarceration with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including exposure to trauma, substance use disorders, socio-economic disadvantage, and limited access to healthcare services prior to imprisonment (Fazel et al., 2017; Naeem et al., 2020). The prison environment itself may further intensify psychological distress. Prolonged confinement, uncertainty regarding legal outcomes, separation from family members, and restricted opportunities for rehabilitation may contribute to feelings of isolation, helplessness, and emotional exhaustion (Haney, 2018). Under such conditions, incarcerated individuals may struggle to employ adaptive coping strategies, increasing the likelihood of maladaptive responses such as self-harm and suicidal ideation (Dear et al., 2001). Self-harm behaviours in correctional settings are often conceptualized as attempts to regulate overwhelming emotional distress or to regain a sense of control within a highly restrictive environment (Klonsky, 2007). Hopelessness has been identified as a central psychological construct in understanding suicidal behaviour. It is characterized by persistent negative expectations about the future, diminished motivation, and a perceived inability to change one's circumstances (Beck et al., 1974). Research has consistently demonstrated that Hopelessness is a strong predictor of suicidal ideation and intent, often exceeding the predictive value of depression alone (Beck et al., 1985; Ribeiro et

al., 2018). Within correctional settings, Hopelessness may be reinforced by lengthy sentences, delayed judicial processes, and the social stigma associated with criminality (Fazel et al., 2017).

Cultural and gender issues have been found to play an important role in determining the psychological experiences of convicts in Pakistan. Pakistani culture is largely collectivistic and patriarchal, with certain culturally defined expectations of men to be emotionally tough, dominant, and authoritative (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Qureshi, 2019). Masculinity is often linked with strength, control, and dominance, while emotional expression and seeking help are often discouraged in men (Courtenay, 2000; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). These cultural ideologies may impact the experience of psychological distress in prison settings. Imprisonment may directly conflict with the culturally defined masculine roles. Loss of liberty, dependence on the authorities, inability to meet familial and economic responsibilities, and loss of social status contribute to a man's crisis of identity and self-esteem (Haney, 2018). Masculine identity is related to higher levels of psychological distress, such as Hopelessness and suicidal thoughts (Cleary, 2012; Oliffe et al., 2016). In the Pakistani setting, where male identity is inextricably linked with dominance and provision, imprisonment may exacerbate feelings of shame, Hopelessness, and emotional repression, thus increasing the risk of self-harm and suicidal intentions. Given the limited empirical research on prison mental health in Pakistan, particularly regarding the interrelationships between Hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and self-harm within a cultural framework, there is a clear need for systematic investigation. The present study aims to investigate the interrelationships among Hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and self-harm among incarcerated individuals in Peshawar Central Prison. By incorporating cultural and gender perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature and to inform the development of culturally appropriate and gender-responsive mental health interventions within Pakistan's correctional system.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study's research design was cross-sectional and correlational.

Sample

The sample of the study was comprised of 80 criminals (male 40, female 40). A purposive sampling technique was used to collect the required sample. Prisoners were collected from Central Prison of Peshawar and Central Prison Haripur. The age range of respondents were from 18 to 50 years. Criminals with psychological disorders and under 18 years or over 50 years of age were excluded.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet

The researcher designed demographic information sheet to collect relevant information i.e. age, gender, education, marital status, socioeconomic status, type of criminal offense, and time served in the prison.

Beck Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974)

BHS is a 20 item self-report inventory. It is a True/False scale designed for adults, age 17-80. It assesses the feelings of Hopelessness in people specifically by looking at three major aspects of Hopelessness; a person's expectations towards life, their feelings about the future and the loss of motivation. The internal reliability coefficients are reasonably high 0.82 to 0.93 and reliability coefficients are modest 0.69 to 0.66) (Beck et al., 1974).

Self- Harm Inventory SHI (Sansone et al., 1998)

It consists of 22 item self-report questionnaire with dichotomous responses, aimed at examining an individual's Self-harming history. The SHI serves multiple purposes, such as. Recognizing the lifetime predominance of 22 self-injurious ways of behaving, evaluating for Marginal Behavioural conditions, and anticipating the degree of past emotional well-being.

Suicidal Intent Scale (Beck, Schuyler, & Hermen 1974)

The SIS comprises 15 dichotomous items evaluated on an ordinal size of 0, 1, or 2, bringing about an all-out score that reaches from 0 to 30. The scale is partitioned into 2 areas, self-destruction and self-report of inner idea of aim .The scale is reliable with $r=0.95$ g (Beck, Schuyler, Herman,1974).

Procedure

The study initially secured ethical approval from the institutional review board to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. A formal approval letter was obtained to facilitate cooperation from the relevant authorities, specifically the Inspector General of Prisons in Peshawar and Haripur. Participants were recruited from Central Prison Peshawar and Central Prison Haripur, with assistance from prison staff, who provided potential participants with information about the study and the opportunity to join. Self-report questionnaires were distributed to a sample of prisoners who had previously indicated experiences of self-harm or suicidal thoughts. Due to literacy constraints of certain prisoners, the questionnaires were administered through verbal dictation. The researcher read each item aloud ensuring clarity and neutrality in delivery. Prisoners then provided their responses verbally, which

were recorded accurately. These questionnaires included standardized tools such as the Self Harm Inventory (SHI), Beck’s Suicidal Intent Scale (SIS), and Beck’s Hopelessness Scale (BHS).

Results

Table 1

Demographic Information

Age Group (Years)	Male (n / %)	Female (n / %)	Total Respondents (n / %)
18–25	12 (15.0%)	16 (20.0%)	28 (35.0%)
26–30	5 (6.2%)	6 (7.5%)	11 (13.7%)
31–35	7 (8.5%)	7 (8.5%)	14 (17.0%)
36–40	8 (10.0%)	10 (12.5%)	18 (22.5%)
41–45	3 (3.8%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.8%)
46–50	5 (6.2%)	1 (1.2%)	6 (7.5%)
Total	40 (50.0%)	40 (50.0%)	80 (100%)

Table 2

Correlations between Hopelessness, Suicidal Intent and Self-harm

Variables	1	2	3
1 Hopelessness	-	.34**	.46**
2 Suicidal Intent		-	.70**
3 Self-harm			-

Note: **p < 0.01

A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationships among Hopelessness, suicidal intent, and self-harm. Result shows that Hopelessness was significantly positively correlated with suicidal intent, $r = .34$, $p < .01$, and self-harm, $r = .46$, $p < .01$, suggesting that higher levels of Hopelessness are associated with greater suicidal intent and more self-harming behaviours. Suicidal intent and self-harm were strongly positively correlated, $r = .70$, $p < .01$, reflecting that individuals with greater suicidal intent are more likely to engage in self-harming behaviours.

Table 3

Gender differences in hopelessness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts among male and female inmates.

Variables	Males(n=40)		Females(n=40)		t	p	95% CI	
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL
Hopelessness	9.10	2.63	8.55	2.85	.89	.37	-.67	1.77
Self-harm	5.90	4.90	4.50	5.23	1.23	.22	-.85	3.65
Suicidal Intent	9.03	6.94	6.58	6.53	1.62	.10	-.55	5.45

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in Hopelessness, self-harm, and suicidal intent among males and females. There were no significant gender differences in Hopelessness, $t(78) = 0.89$, $p = .37$; self-harm, $t(78) = 1.23$, $p = .22$; or suicidal intent, $t(78) = 1.62$, $p = .10$. These findings suggest that there were no significant gender differences in levels of Hopelessness, self-harming behaviours, or suicidal intent in this sample.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationships between Hopelessness, Suicidal thoughts, and Self-harm among incarcerated population and to explore gender wise variation among these variables. Results of the study show that Hopelessness is significantly correlated with suicidal intent, $r = .34^{**}$, $p < .01$, and self-harm, $r = .46^{**}$, $p < .01$, suggesting that higher levels of Hopelessness were associated with greater suicidal intent and self-harm behaviors. Suicidal intent was positively associated with self-harm $r = .70$, $p < .01$, reflecting that individuals with greater suicidal intent are more likely to engage in self-harming behaviors.

In developing country like Pakistan incarcerated population is often neglected in terms of mental health and hence the study focused to fill the gap and get a better understanding of criminals' and the psychological issues they experience behind the bars. Culture and gender have been found to play an important role in determining the psychological experiences of convicts in Pakistan. Pakistani culture has defined expectations of men to be emotionally strong, dominant, and authoritative (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Qureshi, 2019). Masculinity in Pakistani culture is linked with strength, self control, and dominance, while those who show emotional expression and seek mental help are often considered weak (Courtenay, 2000; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). These cultural stigmas impact the experience of psychological distress in prison settings. Loss of liberty, dependence on the authorities, inability to meet familial and economic responsibilities, and loss of social status contribute to a man's crisis of identity and self-esteem (Haney, 2018). Research has found that a threat to masculine identity is related to higher levels of psychological distress, such as Hopelessness and suicidal

thoughts (Cleary, 2012; Oliffe et al., 2016). Hopelessness, Depression and Suicide Ideation were significantly higher among the prisoners with a history of self-harm (Palmer & Connelly 2005). The findings of the present study are supported by research conducted by Ahmed (2024), indicates the prevalence and positive association of Hopelessness, depression and self-harm among Pakistani prisoners.

The study also hypothesized that female criminals will score higher on the Hopelessness, Self-harm and Suicidal thoughts than male criminals. The findings of the study does not strongly support the study assumption, Hopelessness in Males ($M = 9.10$, $SD = 2.63$) had slightly higher scores than females ($M = 8.55$, $SD = 2.85$), and this difference was not statistically significant, $t(78) = 0.89$, $p = .37$. Self-harm: Males ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 4.90$) scored higher than females ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 5.23$), but the difference was not statistically significant, again, $t(78) = 1.23$, $p = .22$. Suicidal thoughts: Males ($M = 9.03$, $SD = 6.94$) scored higher than females ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 6.53$). Although the difference appears large, it was statistically insignificant, $t(78) = 1.62$, $p = .10$.

Moore, et al., (2021), examined the impact of stressful life events on mental health outcomes like depression, loneliness, Hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts among male and female prisoners. The study revealed no gender differences in Hopelessness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. Male and female prisoners experienced similarly high levels of mental health outcomes, supporting the idea that the prison environment mitigate the different psychological impacts of incarceration. It is documented that shared stressful experiences like separation, loss of control, and violence causes similar levels of Hopelessness and suicidal thoughts among prisoners. The study concluded that gender-specific factors influence mental health outcomes in the general population, the distinct stressors of the prison environment intensify these differences.

The findings of the current study were supported by the empirical study, conducted to investigate the prevalence and risk factors of suicide and self-harm among male and female prisoners in the UK. The study concluded that female prisoners had a significantly higher prevalence of self-harm and suicidal thoughts than their male counterparts. To be more precise, the study highlighted that female prisoners were 20 times more likely to have self-harming behaviours and suicidal thoughts than the general population, whereas male prisoners were five times more likely (Perry & Horton, 2020).

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships among hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm among criminals in custody, and further examined potential gender differences. The findings indicate that hopelessness is significantly and positively associated with both suicidal thoughts ($r=.34, p<.01$)($r = .34, p < .01$)($r=.34, p<.01$) and self-harm ($r=.46, p<.01$)($r = .46, p < .01$)($r=.46, p<.01$). In other words, inmates who reported higher levels of hopelessness were more likely to experience suicidal ideation and engage in self-harming behaviors. Moreover, suicidal thoughts showed a strong positive relationship with self-harm ($r=.70, p<.01$)($r = .70, p < .01$)($r=.70, p<.01$), suggesting that inmates experiencing suicidal thoughts are also more prone to self-harm.

Regarding gender differences, the study found no statistically meaningful variation between male and female inmates in levels of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, or self-harm. Although males recorded slightly higher mean scores across all three constructs, these differences were not significant. Overall, the results suggest that the prison environment is characterized by loss of freedom, identity disruption, social stigma, and restrictive cultural expectations which influence psychological distress in both men and women in comparable ways.

These outcomes reinforce existing evidence that prison conditions contribute to elevated psychological distress irrespective of gender and underline hopelessness as a key predictor of suicidal thoughts and self-harm among prisoners in Pakistan. The findings therefore highlight the urgent need for gender-responsive mental health interventions in correctional settings, alongside efforts to address cultural stigma surrounding emotional expression and help-seeking.

Recommendations

The study provides important insights, it also indicates the necessity for future research to adopt a broader explanatory framework by examining additional factors that may shape these interrelationships, including substance use, prior physical or emotional trauma, socioeconomic background, and the institutional climate of correctional facilities. Given that many incarcerated individuals may enter prison with pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities, often intensified by traumatic life experiences, comprehensive mental health screening and targeted psychosocial support are essential to reduce hopelessness and prevent self-harm.

Future Implications of the Study

The study results of this research briefly indicate the relationship between mental health and criminal behaviour is not only significant but also deeply intricate, influenced by a wide range of interconnected factors. The findings suggest that psychological distress, including Hopelessness, self-harm tendencies, and suicidal ideation, has a vital part in influencing the outcomes and behaviours of incarcerated individuals. However, mental health issues do not exist in isolation; they are often compounded by various socio-economic,

environmental, and personal circumstances that contribute to both criminal behaviour and psychological distress.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of these interconnections, it is essential for future research to explore additional influencing factors such as substance abuse, history of physical or emotional trauma, socioeconomic background, and the overall institutional environment within correctional facilities. Many incarcerated individuals have pre-existing psychological disorders that may have been worsened by distressing life events, including childhood abuse, domestic violence, or exposure to extreme stressors. These factors not only increase vulnerability to criminal behaviour but also intensify psychological distress once individuals enter the prison system.

Moreover, the correctional environment itself can further deteriorate mental health by imposing harsh conditions, social isolation, and limited access to adequate psychiatric care. Prisons are often not equipped to provide proper psychological support, which can result in a vicious loop of deteriorating mental wellbeing and relapse. Identifying and addressing these underlying issues could prepare the ground for creating more impactful, comprehensive, and humane approaches to mental health care within correctional settings. By implementing targeted mental health interventions, rehabilitation programs, and counselling services, correctional institutions can significantly improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals, helping them reintegrate into society more successfully and reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

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