

Research Paper

## Psychological Impacts of Incarceration & the Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Male Adult Criminality: Meghalaya, India

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined the psychological impacts of incarceration and the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences on male adult criminality on a sample of 31 male prison inmates (experimental group; N=31) (life imprisonment and rape convicts) and 30 non-prisoners (control group; N=30) aged between 25 – 60 years from Meghalaya, India. The tools used were Adverse Childhood Effects Questionnaire (ACE), Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB), Rosenberg's Self Esteem Questionnaire and Basic Needs Satisfaction questionnaire. Four hypotheses were tested using independent two-paired T-test. Needs satisfaction, psychological well-being and self-esteem showed no significant difference between the two groups. This has been corroborated by recent research stating that prisoners have higher self-esteem, psychological well-being & needs satisfaction than community members owing to their illusion of autonomy & superiority. The results obtained also showed significant difference among the prisoners and non-prisoners concerning the role of ACE in male adult criminality - the control group showed a higher mean ACE score than prisoners, hence suggesting that ACE does not necessarily lead to criminality. The demographic sheet indicated that 95% inmates belonged to lower societal class with divorced or single parent families and an educational level of being below Grade 10 as compared to the control group. The age-old concept of ACE leading to criminality is contradicted and debunked, as sociological theories like Chicago school and Anomie reinforce this study's results, showing how one's environment leads to human criminality.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Well-Being, Needs Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Adult Criminality*

**I**ncarceration is an age-old practice deemed to serve as deterrent to criminal acts. Today, at a glance, incarceration plays a bigger role of not only serving justice, but also rehabilitation & restoration of both the convict and the victim. However, with closer

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inspection we see how incarceration acts out as the perfect example to the inequalities in employment, access to education & health, family structure and economic backwardness of the incarcerated lot (Wakefield, 2010).

The causation of crime is a multifaceted subject matter which revolves around biological, environmental, societal and individual factors that influence behavior. Curing or preventing something that has a known, specific origin or cause is easier than something that is so broadly clubbed. Yet, various researchers have conducted studies to determine or pin point the origin of criminogenic behavior in human beings. This study aims at understanding if the origin of male adult criminality is adverse childhood experiences and the role of education & family structure in influencing criminal behavior. It also aims at measuring the psychological impacts of incarceration, in terms of Self-esteem, Psychological Well-being & Needs Satisfaction. ACEs are a significant risk factor for substance use disorders and deviant behaviors. These are stressful or traumatic events including abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence or growing up with family members who have substance use disorders. Recent research by Smith (1995) suggests a link between childhood maltreatment and later involvement in delinquency. The results also suggest that continued extensive maltreatment is related to higher rates of delinquency. Another study also demonstrated that ACE is associated with a range of negative outcomes in adulthood including physical and mental health disorders and aggressive behavior (Reavis, 2013). Child rearing without proper supervision and monitoring contributes largely to delinquency than other familial structural matters (Wilson, 2010)

Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall subjective emotional evaluation of his or her own worth (Rosenberg, 2015). Traditional view holds that poor self-esteem leads to aggressiveness; hence it is assumed that prisoners would have a low self-esteem rate. However new research contradicts this. Although some violent people often have high self-esteem, many non-aggressive people also have high self-esteem, therefore newer conceptions like narcissism and unstable self-esteem are the most effective predictors of aggression. The link between self-regard and aggression is best captured by the theory of threatened egotism, which depicts aggression as a means of defending a highly favorable view of self, against someone who seeks to undermine or discredit that view (Roy & Bushman, 2000) .

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in *Psychological Review*. Maslow used the terms "physiological," "safety," "belonging and love," "esteem," and "self-actualization" to describe how human motivations generally move. In a study conducted by John (1999), support was found for the hypotheses that healthier attitudes correspond with greater program participation, and more frequent visitation. Prisons in India do emphasize on recreational activities, religious practices, indoor & outdoor games, provide books & newspaper, television sets, guitar & music player to the prison inmates – (NCRB, 2019)

### **Prisons**

“Prison” means any jail or place used permanently or temporarily under the general or special orders of a State Government for the detention of prisoners and includes all lands and buildings appurtenant thereto – (Prisons Act, 1894) . The usage of prisons dates back to the emergence of the state as a social institution. The Code of Hammurabi, created in Babylon circa 1750 BC, is the most well-known of these early legal rules. The punishments

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for breaking Hammurabi's Codes were almost entirely based on a retributive system, in which people were punished as a form of retribution, often by the victims themselves (Renger). The utilitarian and rationalism ideals recommended that prisons should be utilized as a more effective alternative to corporal punishments such as whipping and hanging. Deterrence theory asserts that the fundamental objective of prisons is to be so cruel and terrible that they dissuade individuals from committing crimes because they are afraid of going to prison. The second, now more commonly accepted notion saw prisons as a type of rehabilitation or moral reform, based on religious ideas that associated crime with sin, and saw prisons as a place to teach inmates morality, obedience, and right behavior, with the goal of giving them a fair second chance at life (Balhara, 2021)

### ***Indian Prisons***

The management and administration of prisons fall exclusively in the domain of the State governments, and is governed by the Prisons Act, 1894 and the Prison manuals of the respective state governments. Prison conditions in India are bad and unhealthy and they do not meet the necessary standards. Prisons are overcrowded with an occupancy rate of 115.1% (actual capacity - 3,91,574 vs total number of prisoners - 4,50,696) as of 2017 and 118.5% (actual capacity - 4,03,739 vs total number of prisoners - 4,78,600) as of 2019. The educational profile of the Prison inmates - Among the 4,78,600 prisoners as on 31st December, 2019 the highest number of prisoners were having education Below Class X (41.6%, 1,98,872) followed by Prisoners with No Education (27.7%, 1,32,729) and prisoners with education Class X And Above but Below Graduation (21.5%, 1,03,036) (NCRB, 2019)

### ***Statistics of crime & Prisons in North East India (Meghalaya)***

Meghalaya is a tribal state following a more agrarian society. It follows a matrilineal societal system. Studies reveal that married women who belong to patrilineal groups are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women from matrilineal societies, according to Asiedu (2014). Another Indian study also showed that Matrilineal society appears to be less abusive than a patrilineal one (Karim, 2021).

This might be one of the reasons why there is a minimal rate of crime against women in Meghalaya as compared to other states of the country. The rate of criminal behavior has remained almost the same from 2017-2021 in Meghalaya. A total of 3951 cognizable crimes were reported in Meghalaya in 2017 out of which 569 are crime against women and 379 are crimes against children and in 2021 the total number of cases reported were 2476 (Meghalaya Police, 2022).

The prisons in Meghalaya are not as advanced or equipped as compared to the other states in the country. It is currently facing an overcrowding situation. Among the States, Uttar Pradesh has reported the highest overcrowding (167.9%) followed by Uttarakhand (159.0%) and then Meghalaya (157.4%) (NCRB, 2019). The major prisons in Meghalaya are as follows: 1) Shillong Prison 2) Tura Prison 3) Nongpoh prison 4) Jowai Prison.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Objectives***

1. To find out whether there is a significant difference between group of prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of certain selected variables like adverse childhood experience, self-esteem, psychological well-being and needs satisfaction.

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2. To determine whether there are any significant differences between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of parents' marital status.
3. To determine whether there is a significant difference between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of educational qualification and its impacts.

### ***Hypothesis***

1. There is no significant difference between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of parents' marital status
2. There is no significant difference between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of educational qualification.
3. There is no significant difference in adverse childhood experience between prisoners and non-prisoners.
4. There is no significant difference in self-esteem between prisoners and non-prisoners.
5. There is no significant difference in psychological well-being between prisoners and non-prisoners.
6. There is no significant difference in needs satisfaction between prisoners and non-prisoners.

### ***Sample***

The sample of study consists of two groups – Experimental group of 31 Prisoners who are incarcerated with life imprisonment (Sec 302, 376 of IPC & POCSO) and a control group of 30 non-prisoners, both between the ages of 25-60. The samples were selected using simple random sampling. All samples were males. The samples were collected from prisons in Meghalaya namely, - Jowai, Shillong, Tura and Nongpoh. Informed consent was obtained from the subject before the data collection. Tools used for the study are as follows:

1. Adverse childhood experience (American health maintenance organization Kaiser Permanente and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention)
2. Rosenberg's self esteem scale (Rosenberg, M. (1965))
3. Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB) (Ryff's 1989)
4. Basic Psychological Needs Scales (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

### ***Procedure***

The authorities of the prisons department were contacted, and permission was taken from the DG of Prisons Meghalaya, under special request. Only prisoners who were in prison under life imprisonment for murder and rape of adults and minors were taken for the study (Sections 302, 376 of IPC & POCSO). A data sheet of all the prisoners who fell under the sample criteria was provided for the study in the Prison's interrogation room. All participants were personally met and their willingness to participate in the study was sought by collecting the 'Informed Consent' forms from them before proceeding with the data collection. The subjects were given assurance that the data collected would be used only for research purpose and that the information obtained from them would be kept confidential. The information schedule containing the socio-demographic details of the subjects was filled up during the initial session. After establishing good rapport with the patients, they were assessed using Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire, Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale, Ryff's Psychological Wellbeing Scale and Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale. For comparison, a representative sample of males aged between 25-60 was selected from the general population of Shillong district as the control group. The control group consisted of non-prisoners who shared similar socio-demographic backgrounds. The data were collected

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by providing them with the questionnaires. Rest intervals were provided to them to fill the forms for sustaining the motivation and data was collected. The coding of data was done using SPSS where T-test statistical analysis was used to determine and analyze the data.

### RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Details of difference in educational qualification between prisoners and non-prisoners are tabulated in Table 1.

*Table 1. Difference in educational qualification between prisoners and non-prisoners.*

Groups	Educational qualification		
	Below10 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	Above 12 <sup>th</sup>
Prisoners	27	2	2
Non-prisoners	5	4	21

We can see from Table 1, that the educational qualification is exceptionally poor in terms of prisoners as compared to non-prisoners. Out of 31 prisoners, there are only 2 subjects who have an educational qualification above 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 2 till 12<sup>th</sup> grade and 27 below 10<sup>th</sup> grade, which even includes no education at all. Whereas among non-prisoners we have 21 subjects above 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 4 till 12<sup>th</sup> and only 5 below10<sup>th</sup> grade. This difference in terms of educational qualification explains a lot. Education plays a vital role in the development of an individual's behavior, morals and understanding the differentiation between right & wrong. Lack of proper education and nurturing from childhood may result in indifferent behavior. Census and FBI data shows that schooling significantly reduces the probability of incarceration and arrest (Lochner, 2004). Another study presented new evidence on the crime-reducing impacts of a high-quality, intensive early childhood educational program with long-term follow-up (Garcia, 2019). Therefore, it can be concluded that education plays a very important role in criminogenic behavior.

Parents' marital status acts as a very effective indicator of family structural influence on criminal behavior. Out of the data collected it was seen that 22/31 prisoners came from broken families, raised by single mothers, whereas in the control group, only 1/30 came from a broken family. This strongly indicates that there is a significant difference in the behavior of an individual coming from a broken family and from one, which is not. Children who grow up in broken families tend to display more hostile and criminal like behavior than those compared with children who grow up in proper stable families, especially boys raised without their father figure. A recent study stated that having a father at home might be crucial to prevent susceptible boys from becoming criminals, as this facilitates the transmission of the honesty trait against criminal behavior. (Benzin, 2018). Hostile behavior, aggression and physical abuse of the parents at home, lays an impact on the children as they grow up. Several studies have found an association between broken homes and delinquency and adult criminal behavior (Giller & Rutter, 1983)(Rankin, 1991) (Wilson, 1985). Poor supervision and monitoring are also associated with the development of criminal behavior (Gault, 1951).

Details of t-test done on mean scores of ACE scores obtained from prisoners and non-prisoner samples has been tabulated in Table 2.

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**Table 2. t-test mean scores on ACE scores obtained from prisoners and non-prisoner samples.**

Sl no.	Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Significance
1.	ACE	Prisoners	31	0.74	0.815	-3.426	0.001
		Non-prisoners	30	2.03	0.1903		

From Table 2., it can be seen that there is a significant difference between the two group in terms of adverse childhood effects. The mean score (prisoners=0.71; non-prisoners=2.03) reveals that non-prisoners have higher ACE score than the prisoners group. The difference is significant at 0.001 levels ( $p < 0.001$ ). The results suggest that the control group, non-prisoners, has a greater ACE score than the prisoners. This indicates that criminal behavior is not purely based on adverse childhood experiences or a bad childhood. Most of the prisoners had a very normal childhood whereas the non-prisoners seemed to have a more difficult and adverse childhood. Hence, from this study it can be understood that adverse childhood experiences are not the only reasons for displaying aggressive or criminal like behavior. Most children with bad childhood experiences do not grow up to be adult criminals (Robins, 1978). Growing up in a neighborhood or an environment where criminal behavior is rarely seen or certain residential areas where the use of drugs or alcohol is very minimal can positively influence children. A study by McGavock (2016) on “Children exposed to domestic violence” show that we are not in a position to know whether domestic violence was the primary reason for delinquent behavior or not.

Details of t-test done on mean scores of self-esteem scores obtained from prisoners and non-prisoner samples.

**Table 3. t-test on mean scores on self-esteem scores obtained from prisoners and non-prisoner samples.**

Sl no.	Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Significance
1.	Self-esteem	Prisoners	31	26.87	5.110	-0.733	0.467
		Non-prisoner	30	27.70	3.621		

From Table 3., it can be seen that there is no significant difference between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of self-esteem. This is not surprising as new research has found that prisoners have higher self-esteem than community members (Jan Vargas). The “better than average” effect applies to everyone, whether the smartest, or the most sensitive. Research has found that being behind bars for heinous crimes does nothing to change the perception. In fact, it enhances it with prisoners believing they have more “pro-social” characteristics than people on the outside. It has been long believed that criminals may suffer from low self-esteem but recent research indicates the opposite. Criminals and prisoners have higher levels of self-esteem, and indeed narcissism than community members. Perhaps illusions of superiority constitute one reason for prisoner’s overconfidence about not re-offending which is generally inaccurate, because approximately half of them re-offend within a year of release from prison. High self-esteem people tend to have little self-control when things are not going their way. Abusers have a high self-esteem level. A study shows the highest self-esteem scores come from people in prison. They appear to have no respect for anyone else (Roy & Bushman, 2000). Traditionalists regard crime to be associated with low self-esteem. A second body of literature suggests a rival hypothesis supporting a relationship between crime and high self-esteem. A prison program of 134 prison inmates was conducted in two

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medium prisons. Also, inmates who were emotionally stable, who are less open to novel experiences, who have participated in counseling or education during incarceration manifest higher levels of self esteem (Oser, 2006).

**Psychological Well-being & Needs Satisfaction-** The results show that there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of Psychological Well-being & Needs Satisfaction. However, the sub scale, positive relation with others, under PWB scale is very less among prisoners as compared to non-prisoners. This is because prisoners feel very lonely and do not like to maintain close relationships within the prison. Bruce & Lawreh (2017) conducted a study which showed that there was a positive correlation between psychological well-being and self-esteem of inmates. As seen earlier in the study, self esteem was seen to be high among prisoners which might be the reason why the PWB is also high. Also, there was a significant positive relationship between needs satisfaction and psychological well-being. In another study by John (1999), support was found for the hypotheses that healthier attitudes correspond with greater program participation, and more frequent visitation. This study recommends that more psychosocial interventions should be provided to promote the mental health of inmates. The prisons in Meghalaya also emphasize on Indoor & outdoor games like Ludo, Chess, Chinese Checker, Carrom Board, Volleyball, Football etc. Books & newspaper, television sets, guitar & music player were also available to the prison inmates for recreational activities – (NCRB, 2018)

### ***Major findings***

1. It was found that parent's marital status plays a major role in the development of a child. As seen in this study most prisoners come from broken families where their parents were divorced or fathers left the home. Being raised by single parent especially if they are mothers, has a major impact in the development of the child and increases chances of deviant behavior.
2. It was found that the educational qualification plays a crucial role in the development of a child. Most of the prisoners had almost no or very little educational qualification as compared to non-prisoners. Hence, stating the importance of education in proper positive development of a child.
3. It was found that the Adverse Childhood Effects is higher among non-prisoners than prisoners which indicates that criminal behavior is not purely based on adverse childhood experiences or a bad childhood. Most of the prisoners had a very normal childhood whereas the non-prisoners seemed to have a more difficult disturbing childhood. Hence, from this study it can be understood that bad childhood experiences are not the only reason for displaying aggressive or criminogenic behavior.
4. It was found that the self esteem score had no difference between prisoners and non-prisoners. It has been long believed that criminals may suffer from low self-esteem but recent research indicates the opposite. Criminals and prisoners have higher levels of self-esteem and narcissism than community members do. High self-esteem people tend to have little self-control when things are not going their way. Abusers have a high self-esteem level. A number of studies have been stated in this research supporting the statement that highest self-esteem scores come from people in prison. They appear to have no respect for anyone else.
5. It was found that the sub scale, positive relation with others, under PWB scale is very less among prisoners as compared to non-prisoners. This is because prisoners feel very lonely and do not like to maintain close relationships within the prison. It was

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also found that there was no difference in needs satisfaction between prisoners and non-prisoners.

### CONCLUSION

There are multiple studies in the area of adverse childhood experience and criminal behavior. Which have provided new insight into the life of prisoners and criminal behavior. The present study was conducted to find out the relationship between prisoners and non-prisoners in terms of adverse childhood experience, self-esteem, psychological well-being and needs satisfaction.

The study aimed at examining the psychological impacts of incarceration and the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences on male adult criminality on a sample of 31 male prison inmates (life imprisonment and rape convicts) and 30 non-prisoners aged between 25 – 60 years from Meghalaya, India. Four hypotheses were tested using independent two-paired T-test. The results obtained showed significant difference among the prisoners and non-prisoners concerning the role of ACE in male adult criminality - the control group showed a higher mean ACE score than prisoners, hence suggesting that the age old concept of adverse childhood experiences leading to criminogenic behavior is not always the case. In the results, Needs satisfaction, psychological well-being and self-esteem showed no significant difference between the two groups. This has been corroborated by recent research stating that prisoners have higher self-esteem, than community members owing to their illusion of autonomy & superiority. The demographic sheet indicated that 95% inmates belonged to lower societal class with divorced or single parent families (raised by their mothers) and an educational level of being below Grade 10 as compared to the control group. The age-old concept of ACE leading to criminality is contradicted and debunked, as sociological theories like Chicago school and Anomie reinforce this study's results, showing how one's environment leads to human criminality. Both school- and neighborhood-level factors were associated with increasing crime rates among adolescents (Limbos, 2008) .

The author suggests further study, which may be conducted incorporating additional variables and increasing the sample size. Studies can be conducted among women in prisons also. It may be recalled that this study was conducted upon a sample selected from only the state of Meghalaya. The study may be replicated on identical populations in other states with different social and cultural backgrounds to determine whether there is a cross-cultural relationship or linkage among inmates who are convicted for similar offences.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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