



Social Support as Psychological Survival Among Persons Deprived of Liberty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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Persons deprived of liberty experience persistent psychological stressors, including social isolation, loss of autonomy, and restricted interpersonal contact. While social support is widely recognized as a protective factor for mental health, existing literature largely assumes its accessibility and stability—conditions that are often absent in correctional settings. This study reconceptualizes social support as a survival-oriented process shaped by structural constraints within incarceration.

Using a qualitative design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve incarcerated individuals in a Philippine detention facility. Data were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to capture how participants make sense of their experiences. Findings revealed four interrelated



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themes: (1) social support as emotional survival, (2) selective trust and guarded relationships, (3) institutional constraints on support-seeking, and (4) resilience through limited but meaningful connections. The findings suggest that social support in incarceration is not merely a buffering resource but a survival-oriented and dynamically negotiated system embedded within structural limitations. This study advances the concept of a constrained social support ecology, highlighting how support is selectively reconstructed and accessed within restrictive detention environments. The findings contribute to correctional mental health literature by reframing social support as a psychologically adaptive survival process rather than a consistently available protective resource. Practical implications highlight the need for correctional policies and psychosocial interventions that strengthen meaningful social connections, peer support systems, and family communication as foundations for psychological survival, rehabilitation, and reintegration among persons deprived of liberty.

INTRODUCTION

Social support has long been recognized as a crucial determinant of psychological well-being, influencing how individuals cope with stress, adversity, and life challenges. It encompasses emotional, instrumental, and informational resources obtained through interpersonal relationships. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that social support contributes to improved mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety, enhanced resilience, and better overall psychological functioning (Harandi et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2020). Social support has also been associated with improved quality of life and reduced depressive symptoms across various populations (Alsubaie et al., 2019). Family support has been identified as an important protective factor for maintaining positive mental health during stressful conditions (Li & Xu, 2022). From a psychological perspective, social support functions as both a buffering mechanism against stress and a resource that promotes adaptive coping and emotional regulation.

Within correctional settings, however, the structure and accessibility of social support are fundamentally altered. Persons deprived of liberty (PDL) experience multiple psychological stressors, including social isolation, loss of autonomy, and disruption of established relationships. These conditions limit access to traditional support systems such as family and community networks, thereby reshaping how support is sought, received, and interpreted. Despite these constraints, prior research suggests that social support remains a critical coping resource among incarcerated individuals, contributing to psychological adjustment and well-being (Kao, 2014; Solbakken & Wynn, 2022; Laboy et

al., 2014). In such environments, support may emerge not only from external sources but also from internally constructed relationships within the correctional setting. Mental health concerns are widely recognized as significant issues within correctional settings, with studies across several Asian countries reporting elevated levels of psychological distress among incarcerated populations. Research conducted in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka identified high prevalence rates of psychological and emotional difficulties among persons deprived of liberty (Arafat, 2024). Similarly, incarcerated populations in Thailand and China were found to experience substantial levels of emotional distress and psychosocial difficulties associated with incarceration (Sunpuwan, Thaweessit, & Tangchonlatip, 2024; Zeng et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the psychological well-being of incarcerated individuals in many Asian correctional settings remains significantly vulnerable.

Several environmental and psychosocial conditions within detention facilities may contribute to these mental health difficulties. Local correctional studies similarly highlight how institutional conditions within detention facilities affect the well-being of incarcerated individuals. Research involving female inmates in a Philippine provincial jail identified concerns related to sleeping conditions, jail facilities, environmental quality, and access to health-related services, suggesting that structural limitations within detention settings may negatively affect both physical and psychosocial well-being (Neri, 2025). These findings further support the view that restrictive institutional environments shape not only health outcomes but also the emotional and interpersonal experiences of persons deprived of liberty. These include overcrowding, lack of privacy, poor sanitation, inadequate ventilation, loss of autonomy, separation from family members, fear of violence, uncertainty regarding legal proceedings, prolonged confinement, worries about post-release life, inactivity, and limited access to educational, vocational, or recreational opportunities (Enggist, Møller, Galea, & Udesen, 2014). Within such restrictive environments, social support may become increasingly important in helping incarcerated individuals cope with chronic stress, emotional strain, and the broader psychological demands of incarceration.

Despite the recognized importance of social support in correctional contexts, existing literature has largely focused on its outcomes—such as reduced stress, improved mental health, and successful reintegration—rather than on how it is subjectively experienced by incarcerated individuals. Much of the research is quantitative and tends to emphasize external support systems, particularly family connections, while overlooking the internal social dynamics that develop within detention facilities. As a result, there remains limited qualitative understanding of how PDL interpret and negotiate social support within the constraints of

incarceration.

This gap is particularly significant in the Philippine context, where detention facilities are often characterized by overcrowding, limited resources, and restricted access to consistent social contact (Conde, 2016). Recent Philippine correctional studies further emphasize how institutional limitations, disrupted family relationships, and limited community reintegration opportunities affect the psychosocial experiences of persons deprived of liberty. Prior findings suggest that weakened social ties and insufficient support systems contribute to emotional distress, adjustment difficulties, and reintegration challenges among incarcerated populations (Onsat & Brea, 2023). In addition, recent reports on severe jail congestion in the Philippines further highlight the structural pressures that shape the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals (GMA Integrated News, 2023). These regional findings support the present study's argument that social support within detention settings is shaped by structural constraints and survival-oriented adaptation, particularly within overcrowded and resource-limited correctional environments. These structural conditions influence not only the availability of support but also the ways in which it is experienced and valued. While incarceration universally affects psychological well-being, the specific institutional realities within Philippine detention settings create a distinct environment that shapes social interactions and support systems. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for developing culturally and structurally appropriate mental health interventions.

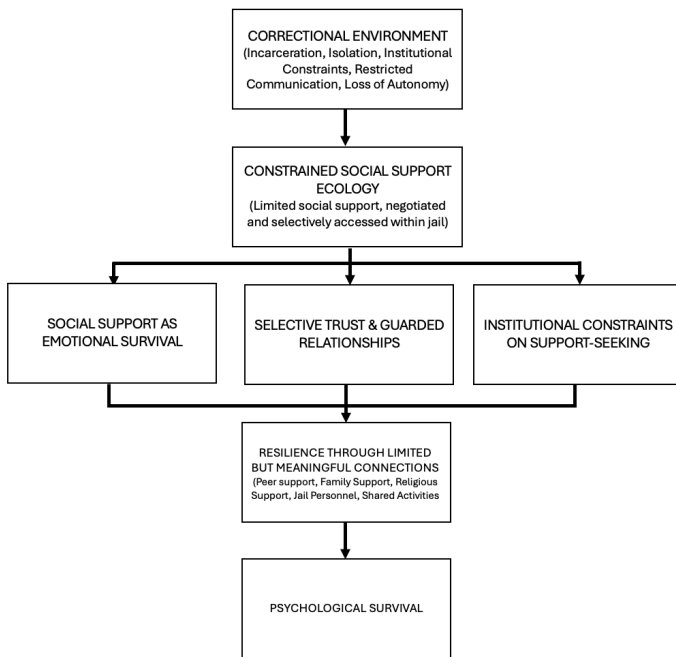
FRAMEWORK

The study is primarily anchored on Social Support Theory, which emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in promoting psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping during stressful life experiences (Kort-Butler, 2018). Social support is understood as a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, instrumental, and informational forms of assistance obtained through social relationships. Existing perspectives suggest that social support functions as a buffering mechanism against psychological distress and contributes to resilience and mental well-being, particularly when support is perceived as meaningful and needed (Melrose et al., 2015). Within correctional settings, however, the accessibility, stability, and meaning of social support become significantly altered due to institutional restrictions, social isolation, and disrupted interpersonal relationships.

Emerging organizational and institutional literature likewise emphasizes that administrative and structural systems significantly influence long-

term sustainability, coordination, and human outcomes within constrained environments. Recent studies suggest that institutional structures, governance mechanisms, and system alignment shape the effectiveness of support processes, accountability, and adaptive functioning within organizations (Clenuar et al., 2025). In restrictive institutional environments such as detention facilities, these structural conditions may similarly influence how social support systems are accessed, maintained, and negotiated among persons deprived of liberty.

Figure 1. *Constrained Social Support Ecology Framework of Psychological Survival Among Persons Deprived of Liberty*



Guided by this perspective, the present study reconceptualizes social support within incarceration as a constrained social support ecology, wherein support is not consistently available but dynamically negotiated within restrictive environments. The framework explains how persons deprived of liberty adapt to institutional limitations through emotional survival, selective trust and guarded relationships, institutional barriers to support-seeking, and resilience through limited but meaningful connections. These interconnected processes demonstrate

that psychological well-being in incarceration is shaped not only by the presence of support, but also by the structural and relational conditions that influence how support is accessed, interpreted, and sustained. Through this framework, social support is viewed not merely as a protective resource, but as an adaptive and survival-oriented process within correctional environments.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study explores the lived experiences of persons deprived of liberty (PDL) in relation to social support and psychological survival using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Anchored on Social Support Theory, the study views social support as a multidimensional process involving emotional, instrumental, and interpersonal forms of assistance that contribute to coping and resilience. While previous research primarily conceptualizes social support as a protective factor for psychological well-being, the present study reconceptualizes it within correctional settings as a survival-oriented and adaptive process shaped by institutional limitations and disrupted social relationships. It further introduces the concept of a “constrained social support ecology,” highlighting how support is restructured and negotiated within incarceration environments. Specifically, this study aims to (1) describe the sources and forms of social support among PDL and (2) examine how they make sense of these experiences in relation to their psychological survival within incarceration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how persons deprived of liberty (PDL) experience and make sense of social support within the context of incarceration. IPA was selected for its suitability in examining lived experiences and capturing the meanings individuals attribute to significant life conditions, particularly within restrictive environments (Alase, 2017). Phenomenological inquiry emphasizes understanding experiences from the perspective of individuals who have directly lived them (Neubauer et al., 2019). Data analysis followed IPA procedures. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to achieve immersion, followed by initial coding of significant statements. Codes were iteratively clustered into emergent themes, reflecting both shared patterns and individual variations consistent with qualitative thematic analytic procedures (Lochmiller, 2021). Reflexive bracketing was employed throughout the analysis to minimize

researcher bias and maintain focus on participants' lived experiences.

Research Site

The study was conducted in a municipal jail facility in Cavite under the supervision of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP). The setting was selected due to its relevance in reflecting local detention conditions, including overcrowding, restricted movement, and structured routines that shape social interactions and access to support.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich and relevant accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be male, aged 18 to 40 years, and to have been incarcerated for at least three years. The age range was selected because early adulthood is a developmental period characterized by heightened social, relational, and identity-related responsibilities, making disruptions in interpersonal support systems particularly psychologically significant within incarceration. In addition, individuals within this age range are more likely to actively negotiate social roles, emotional adjustment, and adaptive coping in response to confinement (Wood et al., 2017). The minimum incarceration period of three years was established to ensure sufficient exposure to the correctional environment and the development of relatively stable social and adaptive experiences within detention settings. Research suggests that prolonged incarceration significantly reshapes social networks, interpersonal relationships, and patterns of social support over time, indicating that extended confinement is necessary to understand how incarcerated individuals reconstruct and negotiate support systems within restrictive environments (Daquin et al., 2023). Thus, selecting participants with longer incarceration experience allowed the study to capture deeper reflections on social support, relational adaptation, and psychological survival within incarceration. A total of twelve participants were recruited with institutional approval.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guide which interview last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted individually in local language to facilitate clarity and authentic emotional expression. The interview guide focused on participants' perceptions, sources, and meanings of social support before and during incarceration. Content validation was conducted by professionals in psychology and criminal justice to ensure the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. Field notes documenting non-

verbal cues and contextual observations were also maintained to support data interpretation.

Research Ethics Protocol

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of De La Salle University–Dasmariñas. Permission to conduct the study was secured from the detention facility administration and the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study, including their rights to voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal from the study at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were assured that their responses would not affect their legal status or institutional standing.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were utilized solely for language enhancement, grammar refinement, manuscript organization, and limited brainstorming assistance during the preparation of this manuscript. AI tools were not used in the generation, fabrication, manipulation, or analysis of research data, nor in the formulation of findings and interpretations. All analytical interpretations, conclusions, and intellectual contributions were developed by the authors. The researchers remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and scholarly quality of the manuscript in accordance with principles of academic honesty, research ethics, and responsible scholarship.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted in a private setting within the detention facility to ensure confidentiality and encourage open expression of experiences related to social support and psychological survival during incarceration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed four interrelated themes that characterize how persons deprived of liberty (PDL) experience and negotiate social support within the detention environment: (1) social support as emotional survival, (2) selective trust and guarded relationships, (3) institutional constraints on support-seeking, and (4) resilience through limited but meaningful connections. These themes reflect not isolated experiences, but a dynamic system through which support is reconstructed under conditions of constraint.

Social support as emotional survival

Table 1
Tabulated themes of social support as emotional survival among PDL

Superordinate Themes		Subthemes
1. Social Support as Emotional Survival	1.1	Emotional reassurance from family
	1.2	Support reduces emotional distress
	1.3	Support promotes emotional stability
	1.4	Emotional encouragement as coping
	1.5	Feeling remembered despite incarceration

Participants consistently described social support as essential to their ability to cope with the emotional challenges of incarceration. Rather than being viewed as an optional resource, support was perceived as necessary for maintaining emotional stability and psychological functioning. Many participants emphasized that support from family members provided a sense of security and continuity despite their confinement.

One participant shared, “*The support that I genuinely felt was from my family... they supported me for a long time.*” Another participant highlighted the importance of emotional reassurance, stating that words of encouragement such as “*stay strong*” and “*don’t forget to pray*” helped them endure difficult moments.

In addition to family support, participants also identified fellow PDL as important sources of emotional support. Within the dormitory, relationships were often described in familial terms, with participants referring to one another as a “family” who provide mutual care and assistance. This sense of belonging contributed to emotional regulation and reduced feelings of loneliness.

Participants’ narratives further suggest that social support within incarceration functions as a mechanism for emotional regulation and psychological stabilization. One participant explained that support helped prevent him from “*thinking negatively*” and allowed him to feel that his “*mind becomes clearer,*” indicating how emotional connection contributed to cognitive and emotional clarity during confinement. Another participant shared that “*somehow, I still feel supported by my family even while I am inside,*” reflecting how continued family support preserved a sense of emotional security and relational continuity despite incarceration. These experiences suggest that social support within detention settings extends beyond reassurance and becomes deeply connected to sustaining emotional functioning and psychological survival under restrictive conditions.

Selective trust and guarded relationships

Table 2

Tabulated themes of selective trust and guarded relationships among PDL

Superordinate Themes		Subtheme
2. Selective trust and guarded relationship	2.1	Loss of trust due to betrayal
	2.2	Emotional self-protection
	2.3	Fear of ridicule and conflict
	2.4	Trust formed through shared experiences
	2.5	Selective reliance on trustworthy others

Despite the presence of social support, participants expressed the need to be cautious in forming relationships within the detention environment. Trust was described as selective and conditional, shaped by the risks associated with interpersonal interactions in a confined setting.

Participants reported that not all individuals within the facility could be trusted, leading them to carefully choose whom to rely on for support. While some relationships developed into meaningful connections, others remained superficial or transactional. This guarded approach to relationships reflects an adaptive strategy to navigate the social complexities of incarceration.

Participants' experiences further revealed that support within incarceration is psychologically ambivalent. While interpersonal connection was perceived as necessary for emotional survival, emotional vulnerability simultaneously exposed individuals to potential ridicule, betrayal, misunderstanding, or interpersonal conflict. Several participants described intentionally withholding emotional concerns from others, preferring to internalize distress rather than risk becoming the subject of jokes or arguments within the dormitory environment. One participant shared, "We do not usually open up about those things. We just keep them to ourselves," while another explained that when someone shares personal problems, "they might joke about it, which can lead to conflict." Others also expressed diminished trust in relationships, with one participant stating, "I lost trust in other people." In this sense, guarded relationships functioned not only as emotional withdrawal but also as a form of self-protection within an environment where trust was uncertain and relational safety could not always be guaranteed.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that trust develops gradually through shared experiences and consistent interactions. Those who demonstrated

reliability and empathy were more likely to be included in participants' support networks.

Institutional constraints on support-seeking

Table 3

Tabulated themes of institutional constraints on support-seeking among PDL

Superordinate themes		Subthemes
3. Institutional constraints on support-seeking	3.1	Limited visitation and family contact
	3.2	Financial burden affecting support
	3.3	Delayed legal processes
	3.4	Dependence on institutional systems
	3.5	Emotional pain from restricted support

Participants identified several structural and institutional barriers that limited their access to social support, particularly from external sources. One of the most frequently mentioned constraints was the restriction on visitation and communication with family members. Participants noted that over time, support from the outside tended to decrease due to financial constraints, personal responsibilities, and limited opportunities for contact, consistent with research indicating that social support networks among incarcerated individuals often become unstable over prolonged confinement (Fahmy, 2021).

One participant explained, "As time goes by, the support gradually lessens... friends and family become busy, and the support disappears." Another participant expressed emotional distress related to limited visitation, stating that seeing others receive visits while they did not was particularly painful.

In addition, institutional systems such as scheduled visitations and resource limitations restricted the consistent provision of support. While basic needs such as food were provided by the facility, participants did not always interpret these as sufficient forms of support, especially when compared to the emotional value of family presence.

Narratives revealed that support could simultaneously evoke comfort and emotional pain. While family support remained deeply meaningful, some participants expressed guilt and sadness over receiving care while incarcerated, particularly when family members experienced financial hardship or traveled long distances to visit. One participant shared that "it is painful because their support should not have to be given to me here," reflecting feelings of regret

and altered meanings attached to care and support within confinement. Others described how visits and communication gradually became infrequent, with one participant stating that visits became “rare,” while another observed that “as time goes by, the support gradually lessens.” Some participants also described the emotional difficulty of witnessing others receive visits while they remained unsupported, expressing that “seeing others receive visits while they did not was painful.” Rather than experiencing support solely as reassurance, participants sometimes interpreted it through feelings of shame, dependency, and perceived burden toward loved ones. These experiences demonstrate how institutional restrictions reshape not only access to support, but also the emotional meanings attached to receiving it.

Resilience through limited but meaningful connections

Table 4

Tabulated themes of resilience through limited but meaningful connections

Superordinate theme		Subthemes
4. Resilience through limited but meaningful connections	4.1	Fellow PDL as surrogate family
	4.2	Mutual aid and shared survival
	4.3	Guidance from jail personnel
	4.4	Spiritual and religious support
	4.5	Adaptive meaning-making and self-growth
	4.6	Maintaining hope despite incarceration

Despite the challenges and constraints they faced, participants demonstrated resilience by finding ways to establish and maintain meaningful connections within the detention environment. Fellow PDL often became primary sources of support, providing assistance in the form of shared resources, advice, and companionship.

Participants described engaging in shared activities such as games, conversations, and communal support practices that helped alleviate stress and boredom. These interactions fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding, which contributed positively to their psychological well-being, consistent with findings that emotional support promotes resilience during stressful conditions (Hu et al., 2022).

Additionally, support from institutional figures such as jail personnel and religious groups was also recognized. Participants acknowledged that guidance,

structure, and spiritual activities provided a sense of direction and emotional relief. For some, faith-based support played a significant role in helping them cope with their situation.

Overall, participants demonstrated the ability to adapt to their environment by reconstructing support systems within the limitations of incarceration. These internally developed networks served as important sources of emotional and psychological strength.

Participants' experiences suggest that resilience within incarceration is not solely an individual process, but a relationally constructed adaptation sustained through limited yet meaningful interpersonal connections. Fellow PDL were frequently described using familial language, with one participant stating that "we are like a family here inside the dormitory," reflecting the reconstruction of belongingness within detention environments. Shared meals, conversations, emotional reassurance, and communal assistance functioned as forms of mutual survival within conditions of deprivation. One participant explained that "whoever has a problem, we help them," illustrating how mutual aid became an important coping mechanism within confinement. In several cases, jail personnel and religious groups were also perceived not merely as institutional actors, but as emotionally supportive figures who provided guidance, structure, and psychological stability. Participants particularly valued spiritual support, with one participant describing religious volunteers as "church people who never get tired of teaching us." These findings suggest that resilience within incarceration emerges through adaptive reconstruction of emotionally significant social systems despite structural limitations.

Discussion

This study reconceptualizes social support in incarceration as a survival-oriented and context-dependent process rather than a stable protective resource. While existing literature positions social support as a buffering mechanism against stress, the findings suggest that in highly restrictive environments, support assumes a more fundamental role in sustaining psychological functioning.

The identification of social support as emotional survival extends prior research by highlighting its essential, rather than supplementary, function in conditions of deprivation. Similar findings have been reported among incarcerated populations where perceived social support was associated with psychological adjustment and coping within detention settings (Dadi et al., 2019). In contrast to traditional models that assume accessibility and consistency, participants' experiences demonstrate that support is actively negotiated and unevenly distributed. This shift underscores the need to reconsider prevailing

assumptions about the universality of social support processes across contexts.

The first theme, social support as emotional survival, highlights the central role of support in maintaining psychological stability. Consistent with prior research emphasizing the buffering role of social support (Harandi et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2020), participants described emotional reassurance, encouragement, and presence—particularly from family—as essential in coping with the distress of incarceration. However, the findings suggest a deeper function beyond stress reduction. In a setting characterized by deprivation and isolation, social support becomes necessary for sustaining emotional functioning, indicating that its role shifts from protective to essential. This supports the idea that in highly restrictive environments, the absence of support may not only increase distress but also undermine individuals' ability to cope altogether. Previous research similarly found that family and social support play an important role in reducing psychological distress among incarcerated individuals (Small, 2019).

The second theme, selective trust and guarded relationships, reflects the complexity of interpersonal dynamics within detention facilities. While social support is valued, participants reported exercising caution in forming relationships, suggesting that trust is conditional and gradually developed. This finding aligns with relational perspectives on social support, which emphasize that the quality and reliability of relationships are critical determinants of their effectiveness. In the context of incarceration, where vulnerability may carry social risks, selective trust emerges as an adaptive strategy that allows individuals to balance the need for connection with the need for self-protection. This challenges simplistic assumptions that increased social interaction necessarily leads to better support, highlighting instead the importance of perceived safety and trustworthiness in support networks.

The third theme, institutional constraints on support-seeking, underscores the structural limitations that shape access to social support. Participants described declining contact with family members over time, restricted visitation schedules, and limited opportunities for communication. These findings are consistent with research indicating that incarceration disrupts external social ties and reduces access to traditional support systems (Kjellstrand et al., 2022; Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). Similar institutional challenges have been observed in Philippine detention facilities, where overcrowding, limited visitation opportunities, and restricted psychosocial resources affect the maintenance of social support systems among incarcerated individuals. Regional correctional studies likewise suggest that prolonged detention and unstable support networks contribute to emotional distress and reintegration difficulties among persons deprived of liberty (Onsat & Bрева, 2023). However, the present study further demonstrates how these

constraints actively reshape the meaning and experience of support. Support is no longer consistently available or predictable, but becomes intermittent and contingent upon institutional rules and external circumstances. This reinforces the need to understand social support not only as an interpersonal resource but also as a phenomenon shaped by structural conditions and shifting social network dynamics associated with incarceration (Sentse et al., 2022).

The fourth theme, resilience through limited but meaningful connections, illustrates how PDL adapt to these constraints by reconstructing support systems within the detention environment. Fellow PDL, jail personnel, and religious groups emerged as important sources of support, providing emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance. These internally developed networks reflect a process of adaptation, where individuals reconfigure available relationships to meet their psychological and practical needs. This finding aligns with research on coping and resilience, which suggests that individuals in adverse environments actively seek alternative resources to maintain well-being. Notably, peer relationships within the detention setting were not solely sources of risk, but also functioned as meaningful and supportive connections, challenging dominant narratives that portray inmate relationships as primarily negative.

Taken together, these findings support the conceptualization of a constrained social support ecology, where social support is shaped by institutional limitations, restricted access to external networks, and the necessity of adapting to available social resources. Within this ecology, support is not static but dynamic, negotiated, and context-dependent. The constrained social support ecology emerges through the interaction of emotional dependence, guarded relational negotiation, institutional restriction, and adaptive reconstruction of support systems. Rather than functioning independently, these processes dynamically influence one another within incarceration environments. Participants' need for emotional survival increased the importance of social connection, while institutional limitations and interpersonal risks simultaneously constrained how support could be accessed and sustained. As a result, persons deprived of liberty continuously negotiated between vulnerability and self-protection, dependence and autonomy, isolation and belongingness. This interactional process reflects how social support within incarceration becomes structurally constrained yet psychologically indispensable. This conceptual contribution extends existing social support theory by emphasizing the role of structural constraints in shaping both the availability and meaning of support, particularly in highly controlled environments such as detention facilities.

The findings of this study have several implications for correctional practice and policy. First, the importance of social support as a mechanism for psychological

survival suggests the need to strengthen programs that facilitate meaningful social connections within detention facilities. This may include structured peer support programs, group-based interventions, and activities that promote positive social interaction among PDL.

Second, given the decline in external support over time, correctional institutions may consider implementing more accessible and consistent communication channels, such as expanded visitation schedules or alternative forms of contact, to help maintain family relationships.

Third, the role of jail personnel and religious organizations as sources of support highlights the importance of fostering supportive institutional environments. Training programs for personnel that emphasize humane interaction, emotional support, and psychological awareness may enhance the overall well-being of PDL.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that within the constraints of incarceration, social support operates not merely as a protective factor but as a necessary condition for psychological survival among persons deprived of liberty (PDL). The findings revealed that social support within correctional settings is experienced through emotional survival, selective trust and guarded relationships, institutional constraints on support-seeking, and resilience through limited but meaningful connections. These experiences suggest that support within incarceration is not stable or consistently accessible, but rather continuously negotiated and reshaped by institutional limitations, disrupted communication, and complex interpersonal dynamics.

The findings further support Social Support Theory by demonstrating that the meaning and function of social support change within restrictive environments. While conventional perspectives describe social support as a buffering resource that promotes psychological well-being, the present study shows that within incarceration, support becomes survival-oriented and structurally constrained. Through the introduction of the concept of a constrained social support ecology, the study highlights how incarcerated individuals actively reconstruct support systems and selectively engage in relationships to sustain emotional functioning and psychological survival despite deprivation and isolation.

From a practical standpoint, the findings emphasize the need for correctional systems to move beyond custodial functions and toward the intentional development of psychologically responsive support systems. Interventions that strengthen peer support, maintain family communication, and foster

supportive institutional interactions may help stabilize the psychosocial and emotional experiences of incarcerated individuals. Since individuals operating in psychological survival mode may experience difficulty fully engaging in rehabilitation programs, meaningful social support may serve as a necessary foundation for behavioral change, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The findings suggest that incarcerated individuals who experience stable and meaningful support systems may be better positioned to participate in rehabilitation programs, develop adaptive coping strategies, and sustain prosocial behavioral changes during incarceration. In contrast, the absence of support may intensify emotional distress, hopelessness, and social withdrawal, potentially limiting engagement in rehabilitative interventions. Furthermore, maintaining supportive interpersonal connections may contribute to smoother reintegration by preserving social bonds, strengthening emotional stability, and reinforcing individuals' sense of belonging and future orientation upon release. Thus, strengthening social support systems within detention facilities may not only promote psychological survival but also improve incarcerated individuals' capacity to participate meaningfully in correctional interventions and personal development programs.

While the present study focused on male persons deprived of liberty to maintain depth and contextual consistency within the selected detention setting, future studies may explore the experiences of female incarcerated populations to examine possible gender-specific variations in social support, relational adaptation, and psychological survival within correctional environments. Expanding participant representation may further strengthen the applicability of the constrained social support ecology framework across diverse detention contexts.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of this study may be translated into the development of a correctional psychosocial support framework that strengthens meaningful social connections among persons deprived of liberty (PDL). Anchored on Social Support Theory and grounded in the concept of a constrained social support ecology, the proposed framework may guide the creation of structured peer-support programs, supportive group activities, and psychosocial interventions that address the emotional and relational realities of incarceration. Since participants described social support as essential for psychological survival rather than merely a protective resource, correctional institutions may benefit from implementing programs that intentionally foster trust, belongingness, emotional expression, adaptive interpersonal relationships, and sustained social connectedness within

detention facilities.

The findings further suggest that individuals operating in psychological survival mode may experience difficulty fully engaging in rehabilitation and intervention programs due to emotional distress, relational instability, and survival-oriented coping (Burbach et al., 2024). As such, psychosocial stabilization through meaningful social support may serve as a necessary foundation for effective rehabilitation, behavioral change, and reintegration. Jail administrators and mental health professionals may utilize these insights to strengthen family communication, promote psychologically responsive approaches to inmate care, and develop support systems that enhance incarcerated individuals' capacity to participate meaningfully in correctional programs. Through these applications, the study contributes to the development of evidence-based correctional mental health practices that recognize social support as a critical component of psychological survival and rehabilitation within incarceration.

The findings may also inform broader Southeast Asian correctional policy discussions, particularly in detention systems experiencing overcrowding, limited psychosocial resources, and restricted access to mental health services. The concept of a constrained social support ecology highlights the importance of developing culturally responsive and institutionally sustainable support systems that prioritize interpersonal connectedness as part of rehabilitation efforts. Scalable interventions such as structured peer-support programs, faith-based psychosocial activities, family communication initiatives, and collaborative partnerships with community and mental health organizations may provide cost-effective and sustainable approaches to strengthening inmate well-being across resource-limited correctional facilities. By embedding these interventions within existing correctional structures, institutions may enhance long-term psychosocial support while promoting rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes among incarcerated populations.

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Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions involving incarcerated participants but may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with institutional permission.

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

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