

The Forgotten Few: Voices of Persons Deprived of Familial Contacts in a Correctional Institution

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) who have been without familial contact for five years or more, focusing on the emotional, psychological, and social challenges they face, as well as the coping mechanisms they employ. A descriptive phenomenological research design was utilized, involving twelve male PDLs from the Bureau of Corrections–Davao Prison and Penal Farm. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the participants' accounts and identify recurring themes and patterns across the data. Findings revealed that prolonged absence of family contact leads to extreme loneliness, weakened family ties, and emotional withdrawal. Participants reported feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and a lack of motivation. The lack of familial support also contributed to adverse health conditions, including sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and emotional distress, alongside difficulties in social interaction. Despite these challenges, PDLs demonstrated resilience through coping mechanisms such as unceasing prayer, peer support, and engagement in recreational activities. Shared experiences and mutual support among fellow inmates emerged as vital sources of emotional relief. The study highlights the critical role of family connection in the well-being and rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. It underscores the need for correctional policies and programs that promote family visitation and alternative support systems to mitigate the negative effects of social isolation, ultimately aiding reintegration and reducing recidivism.

Keywords: Criminal Justice, Persons Deprived Of Liberty, Familial Contact, Mental Health, Coping Mechanisms, Social Support, Incarceration

INTRODUCTION

The Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL), before serving their sentences inside the jail facilities, were once a father or a mother, a husband or a wife, and a son or a daughter, each holding a meaningful place in their families. As they serve their sentence, there is an immediate shift in their environment from being with their loved ones to living with strangers, further burdened with limitations as they are locked inside their cells. This shift may eventually lead to emotional and psychological challenges that could result in anxiety and depression. Visits are an opportunity to preserve family ties and reduce isolation, but not all prisoners receive visits from their loved ones while being incarcerated (Burns et al., 2024) [9]. The emotional, psychological, and social well-being of PDLs remains a critical area concerning law enforcement and psychology. As societies perceived the complex nature of imprisonment, highlighting the limitations of access to the life they used to have: the education, work, or business they left outside,

it is necessary to understand the factors that contribute to the emotional, psychological, and social health of the prisoners. Family visitation is one of the significant aspects that promotes support towards persons deprived of liberty that can motivate them during the process of rehabilitation. The lack of access to familial support, particularly through visitation, exacerbates these challenges, as it limits their ability to maintain connections with loved ones, which is crucial for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Bayer et al., 2023) [6].

Empirically, studies have shown that regular family visitation positively impacts the mental health and rehabilitation outcomes of incarcerated individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and support. Theoretically, attachment theory suggests that maintaining strong familial bonds is essential for emotional stability and resilience during periods of stress. If these issues are not addressed, the consequences could be serious; PDLs could experience deteriorating mental health, leading to increased recidivism rates, further straining the criminal justice system, and perpetuating cycles of incarceration that affect not only the individuals but also their families and communities.

By providing a nuanced, qualitative understanding of the lived experiences of prisoners who are deprived of familial contact, an understudied group in correctional research, the study advances existing knowledge by illuminating distinct emotional, psychological, and social struggles that are not fully captured in broader studies of prison life. It reveals the emotional, psychological, and structural dimensions of family absence and offers grounded insights that can inform more compassionate, responsive correctional policies.

The importance of conducting this study is anchored in its potential to highlight the critical role of family visitation to the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of persons deprived of liberty. In countries like the USA, UK, Canada, the Netherlands and, the Philippines, it showed that some prisoners or families chose not to meet in prison. It also exposed the detrimental effects of limited family contact, including increased loneliness and depression from both the PDLs and the family members (Burns et al., 2024) [9].

These findings emphasize the need for empowering family visitation as a means of supporting the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of incarcerated individuals. This study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on criminal justice reform by advocating for practices that prioritize the mental health and rehabilitation of the PDLs, thereby benefiting not only them but also their families and the community.

In most nations, incarceration is a common form of punishment, with the dual purposes of prevention and retribution (Meijers et al., 2023) [20]. However, only a few countries allow private conjugal visits between a prisoner and their community living partner while they are incarcerated, affecting not only the prisoner but also their family and intimate relationships (Vladu et al., 2021) [23].

One important way to mitigate the negative effects of incarceration is through visitation, which functions as a form of social capital that helps lessen social isolation (Anderson et al., 2020) [3]. More specifically, visitation has been found to influence inmate behavior in complex ways. The strongest effects were found for official and family visits, when the risk of infractions after visits returned to average levels when inmates are visited frequently (Berghuis et al., 2022) [8].

Beyond incarceration, social support plays a significant role in helping recently released individuals adjust and succeed in multiple areas of life (Kjellstrand et al., 2021) [17]. Studies have shown that individuals with strong social ties are more likely to find employment after incarceration, maintain better

mental health, exhibit less hostility, desist from criminal activity, and avoid recidivism (Kjellstrand et al., 2022) [18].

Family support, in particular, has been identified as a critical protective factor that promotes health and reintegration success among formerly incarcerated individuals. Incarceration is linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes, which often become apparent during reentry, especially in the immediate period following release. Logistic regression models indicate that strong instrumental family support predicts better mental health, while strong emotional family support is significantly associated with better self-rated physical and mental health one month after release (Fahmy & Testa, 2025) [13]. These results demonstrate the critical role that instrumental and emotional familial support networks play in creating and mitigating health inequalities and advancing equity among populations affected by the justice system.

Notably, high family emotional support correlates strongly with physical health, whereas moderate emotional support does not reach statistical significance. Positive mental health is linked specifically to high emotional social support from family, rather than moderate support (Fahmy & Testa, 2025) [13]. Given these findings, family support emerges as one of the most crucial elements for successful community reintegration. It is suggested that better self-rated physical and mental health during the critical first weeks after release is linked to higher levels of family social support reported just before release.

In addition, a hybrid model approach found that within-individual changes in family emotional support were significantly related to decreased self-reported recidivism and reincarceration over time. External factors such as family support and perceived neighborhood quality also influenced reentry outcomes (Alward et al., 2020) [3].

Social support has a strong and long-lasting effect on people's health, well-being, and longevity. Having a solid social network and social support is particularly crucial for people coming out of prison, as they are often left with few or no interpersonal relationships after release, which affects their general health. If a person's support system is inconsistent or unstable, they may not be able to reintegrate successfully. Results show that among a group of recently incarcerated men, positive self-assessments of mental health, but not physical health, require stable emotional and instrumental social support from friends and family (Fahmy, 2021) [11].

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many participants reported that lockdowns and the ensuing isolation from loved ones inside and outside of the prison were harmful to their physical and mental health (James et al., 2022) [16]. While not all inmates receive visits from friends or family while incarcerated, visits offer inmates a chance to maintain family relationships and lessen feelings of isolation (Burns et al., 2024) [9]. Qualities linked to volunteer visitors included increased self-esteem, improved mood, and personal growth; loneliness and depression were extensively described as consequences of not receiving visits. The experiences of adult men incarcerated without family or friend visits indicate that visiting is impacted by more than just the practical challenges of incarceration; barriers imposed by inmates themselves, family and relationship dynamics during incarceration, and the emotional impact of prison visits on both inmates and their families would all benefit from more research (Burns et al., 2024) [9].

In line with family visitations, prison volunteer programs also have the potential to enhance the psychological well-being of inmates as well as offer a number of potential advantages to both volunteers and penal systems (Wu et al., 2023) [24]. Utilizing one's social capital and social networks, especially

through family, has been shown to be effective in securing stable employment after incarceration. However, the social connections that are required, maintained through prison visitation, are frequently weakened as a result of long-term incarceration and multiple prison stints (Fahmy et al., 2021) [12]. Finally, the balance of evidence regarding conjugal visiting is positive because stable family relationships have been linked elsewhere to a deterrent to crime. Maintaining sexual relationships was positively associated with health benefits, according to the only study on the subject (Vladu et al., 2021) [23].

This study is anchored with the Ecological Systems Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1970, which is concerned with the interaction and interdependence of individuals with their surrounding systems and encourages social workers to take a holistic view by assessing how individuals affect and are affected by such physical, social, political, and cultural systems (Teater, 2024) [22]. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, a person's growth is influenced by a variety of interrelated environmental systems, ranging from their immediate environment, such as their family, to larger societal structures, such as culture (Guy-Evans, 2025) [15].

The theory developed into the Bioecological Model, which emphasizes that continuous, intricate interactions between people and their environments (proximal processes) are the primary drivers of development. Development is not solely dependent on individual characteristics but also on how people interact with their families, schools, communities, and society. Subsequently, Bronfenbrenner extended his theory into the bioecological model, emphasizing that the real drivers of development are proximal processes, or the continuous interactions between an individual and their surroundings; he also recognized the significance of time, acknowledging the ways in which historical events and life transitions influence growth; and more recently, scholars have suggested the inclusion of virtual microsystems to reflect the influence of online environments, such as social media, on contemporary development (Guy-Evans, 2025) [15].

This study is anchored with the Social Capital Theory of Pierre Bourdieu in 1986, where social capital is considered the advantage of being social. The fundamental tenets of social capital are that "relationships matter," social networks are a valuable resource, and being social and cooperating are significant and worthwhile (Claridge, 2024) [10].

In addition to offering a comprehensive review of the literature on interpersonal attraction and the maintenance of close relationships, not just romantic relationships, but friendships, sibling relationships, and parent-child relationships as well, this theory focuses on a theme that the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of love can be understood in terms of a fundamental drive to grow as a person (Aron & Aron, 1986) [5].

In the research title "The Forgotten Few: Voices of Persons Deprived of Familial Contacts in Correctional Institutions", the term "Forgotten Few" refers to those Persons Deprived of Liberty who have not received family visits for a period of five years or more since their imprisonment. Moreover, *Familial Contact* is the process of maintaining family connections between the offenders and their families through visits.

Most research conducted focused largely on the lived experiences of the PDLs, overcrowding in jail facilities, and the impact of rehabilitation programs. While there have been numerous international and national studies conducted exploring the impact of the absence of family visits during incarceration, this study represents its kind, conducted in Davao City. This study aims to fill a critical gap in providing

localized insights into how the absence of familial contact affects the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of PDLs.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the untold stories of the PDLs in their experience of prolonged separation from familial contact during incarceration. This study aims to reach those persons who have incarcerated family members whom they have not had the opportunity to see since imprisonment. The study aims to shed light on the emotional, psychological, and social impact of such separation on both PDLs and their families.

Specifically, this study is guided by the following objectives: 1) To explore the lived experiences of PDLs deprived of familial contact, 2) To identify the emotional, psychological, and social challenges they face due to a lack of family support, and 3) To examine the coping mechanisms employed by PDLs in dealing with separation from their families.

This study is related to the Sustainable Development Goal No. 3 - Good Health and Well-Being, as it promotes health and highlights the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of the incarcerated individuals. Social support through family visits impacts their mental health and overall well-being. Additionally, it aligns with SDG No. 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions as it ensures that prisoners have the right to maintain family relations in accordance with the principles of human rights and dignity.

Furthermore, this research will benefit various stakeholders such as the Bureau of Corrections, Persons Deprived of Liberty who have not received family visitations, their family members, and future researchers. The Bureau of Corrections, being the correctional institution in Davao del Norte housing thousands of prisoners, will gain insights from this study regarding the effects of limited familial contacts on PDLs. This knowledge can help them develop intervention programs to encourage family members to visit their incarcerated relatives.

The Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL), as the primary subjects of this study, will also greatly benefit from this study. This research aims to highlight their untold stories of loneliness and depression stemming from a lack of familial contact since their incarceration. Given that they have limited access to social media and any other platforms where they will be able to reach out to their families, this study will provide valuable information to both the jail facility and the families of the PDLs. Moreover, the family members of the prisoners will find this study enlightening, as it will raise awareness about the burdens their loved one's face inside jail facilities, compounded by the absence of familial contact. Lastly, future researchers studying similar issues will benefit from this study by gaining insights into the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of PDLs who have not received family visits since their incarceration.

The scope of this study is specifically focused on persons deprived of liberty imprisoned at the Bureau of Corrections in Davao del Norte who are incarcerated for not less than five (5) years in prison. This study aims to gain insights from the seven (7) PDLs who are purposely selected regarding their lived experiences inside the correctional institution, the emotional, psychological and social challenges brought about by lack of familial contact, and their coping mechanisms in dealing with the separation. Additionally, the data that will be gathered from the participants will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

METHOD

This study explored the impact of no familial contact on the PDLs serving in prison for five (5) years or

more. In this section, the research study participants, research design and procedure, and the materials and instruments that were used in conducting the study were discussed.

Study Participants

The target population of this study was the Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) convicted with final judgment at the Bureau of Corrections in Davao del Norte for not less than five (5) years in prison and who were never visited by a family member since their incarceration. Moreover, the study involved twelve (12) respondents; five (5) respondents were interviewed individually, while the remaining seven (7) respondents participated in a group interview. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was particularly relevant for interviewing incarcerated individuals who were not visited by their family members because it provided a supportive environment where they could openly share and reflect on their experiences of social isolation. In the absence of regular familial contact, participants may feel disconnected or reluctant to express their feelings in individual interviews; the group setting allowed them to relate to others who underwent similar experiences, validated their emotions, and articulated the challenges of being cut off from family support.

Through interaction, participants discussed how the lack of visits has affected their emotional well-being, coping strategies, and perceptions of their social status within the prison. This collective dialogue revealed shared concerns, social dynamics, and psychological impacts that remained hidden in one-on-one interviews.

Moreover, this study employed purposive sampling as its sampling technique, as it allowed the researcher to intentionally select respondents who had specific characteristics relevant to the research questions. Accordingly, the characteristics of a purposive sample are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study (Andrade, 2020).

The participants for this study are Persons Deprived of Liberty confined at the Bureau of Corrections, Carmen, Davao del Norte, who met all of the following characteristics: (1) the respondent must be convicted with final judgment and serving a minimum sentence, with no pending appeal or unresolved legal case; (2) he must have been incarcerated for five (5) years or more and must have experienced no family contact since incarceration, including in-person visits as well as communication through phone calls, social media platforms, letters, or other electronic means; (3) only male PDLs will be included in the study; (4) the participant must be 18 years old and above at the time of participation; (5) the participant must be physically, mentally, and emotionally capable of understanding the research purpose and responding meaningfully to interview questions, as determined through coordination with institutional health or custodial staff; (6) he must be able to communicate in English, Filipino, or Cebuano, which will be used during the interviews; and (7) the participant must voluntarily agree to participate in the study and provide informed consent. Moreover, participants may vary in terms of educational attainment, marital status, length of sentence, and type of offense.

On the other hand, PDLs were excluded from the study if they meet any of the following conditions: (1) the PDL has been incarcerated for less than five (5) years; (2) the PDL has constantly received family visits and maintained communication with any family member; (3) the PDL is female, as the study is limited to male respondents; (4) the PDL is below 18 years of age; (5) the PDL has a diagnosed severe mental illness, cognitive impairment, or medical condition that may limit the ability to give informed consent or participate meaningfully; and (6) the PDL declines or withdraws consent at any stage of the study.

Moreover, participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Thus, the researcher coordinated with authorized BuCor personnel only for the identification of eligible participants and scheduling purposes. However, no correctional officers or authority figures were present during the consent process or data collection in order to prevent undue influence or perceived coercion. Qualified respondents were individually informed about the nature, purpose, procedures, and duration of the study using clear and understandable language. Additionally, they were explicitly advised that: (1) participation is not mandatory; (2) refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study will not affect their legal status, privileges, treatment, or eligibility for parole or benefits; and (3) they may withdraw at any time without penalty or explanation.

Consequently, only those who freely and willingly express their intention to participate, without pressure or inducement, were included in the study. Their willingness to answer the research questions was based solely on their personal choice and understanding of the study.

Prior to participation, each respondent was required to sign a written informed consent form. Specifically, the consent form clearly stated the purpose and objectives of the study; a description of the research procedures (individual or group interviews); assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection; possible risks and benefits of participation; a statement of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time; and the contact information of the researcher and the approving ethics committee.

For respondents with limited literacy, the consent form was read aloud, and comprehension was confirmed before the participant signed or affixed a thumb mark. Thereafter, all signed consent or assent forms were securely stored and appended to the research documentation in compliance with ethical standards for research involving vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, the researcher respectfully requested access only to the minimum information necessary to identify eligible participants, and this was done in strict compliance with data protection and ethical research standards. Moreover, to ensure that participation was fully voluntary and free from any form of coercion or undue influence, the researcher personally explained the nature and purpose of the study and obtained informed consent directly from each participant prior to the conduct of the interviews.

In addition, permission was sought for optional audio recording and photo documentation during and after the interviews; however, these were conducted solely for documentation and research purposes and only with the participants' explicit consent. Furthermore, all photographs were taken in a manner that fully concealed the identities of the Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) as well as any personnel involved. For safety and security purposes, the researcher also requested that two (2) designated personnel from the office be allowed to accompany her during the interview sessions; however, such personnel remained outside of hearing range so that the privacy of the participants was ensured.

Finally, the study locale of this research was at the Bureau of Corrections – Davao Prison and Penal Farm, located at Braulio E. Dujali, Davao del Norte, which is a government institution in the Philippines that ensures the humane safekeeping and rehabilitation of Persons Deprived of Liberty.

Materials and Instruments

This study is a descriptive qualitative study that was conducted using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. To gather insights from the PDLs regarding their lived experiences away from their loved ones, the challenges they face due to the lack of familial support, and their coping mechanisms in dealing with these challenges, this study utilized researcher-made interview questions that underwent validation. During the validation process, the researcher formally submitted a letter to the designated

validators, accompanied by the researcher-made interview questionnaire specifically formulated for this study. Moreso, the letter outlined the purpose of the validation, provided clear instructions for review, and requested feedback to ensure the relevance, validity, and reliability of the instrument in measuring the intended constructs.

Design and Procedure

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design, which enabled the researcher to explore and provide a detailed, in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of PDLs who are deprived of familial contacts. Specifically, this research design allowed the researcher to focus on describing the characteristics and produce a thorough narrative that reflected the depth of their experiences and coping mechanisms. “Descriptive phenomenological research is crucial for understanding individuals' experiences, perceptions, and relationships” (Abraham & P, 2024) [1].

To capture the essence of the lived experiences of the prisoners, this study utilized a phenomenological approach by exploring their insights and perceptions while lacking familial contact. This approach allowed the researcher to examine thoroughly the experiences, emotions, and coping strategies of the respondents. Moreover, this study employed in-depth interviews to allow the respondents to share their stories in their own words. This technique facilitated detailed data that revealed subtle insights into their experiences. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted to encourage interaction among respondents, thereby enriching the data through shared perspectives.

Regarding the typology of this study, in terms of the objective dimension, it was both exploratory and descriptive. It aimed to explore the nature and range of the lived experiences of the PDLs without preconceived hypotheses. At the same time, it sought to systematically describe the emotional, psychological, and social impacts of the lack of family visitation on the PDLs. In terms of the time dimension, this study was cross-sectional, as data collection occurred at a single point in time, interviewed the prisoners once to understand their current experiences.

Before data collection began, the researcher submitted a formal letter to the Bureau of Corrections - Davao Prison and Penal Farm, requesting permission to conduct interviews with selected Persons Deprived of Liberty housed within the facility who met the criteria of the study. To identify potential respondents, the researcher coordinated with correction officers to determine which Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) were incarcerated for five years or more without receiving visits from family members. Based on this information, the researcher then purposely selected the respondents for the study. Additionally, the researcher ensured full compliance with all documentation requirements set forth by the bureau and strictly adhered to the rules and regulations of the jail facility. Prior to conducting the in-depth interview and focus group discussions, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants and emphasized the strict confidentiality of all information gathered throughout the study. In conducting the data gathering process, the researcher carried out the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the selected respondents, following the approved protocols and maintaining ethical standards.

In terms of data analysis, narrative analysis was employed to examine the stories and personal accounts of the PDLs. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher used both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to cross-verify information. While a Focus Group Discussion is a data collection technique frequently used in qualitative research, proper execution of the FGD process can ensure the validity and reliability of data collection in qualitative research. Similarly, an In-depth Interview is a method of collecting personal data in a limited amount to capture detailed information

about the characteristics and performance of individuals or institutions and obtain in-depth information related to new problems (Muhammad et al., 2021) [21].

Moreover, to support the transferability of this study, the researcher clearly defined the criteria in selecting the respondents, enabling the findings to be applied to other contexts. Regarding dependability, this study was reliable as it incorporates focus group discussions in data gathering. Following a group discussion, the percent agreement for all variables increased significantly, which implied that the coded findings were more reliable (Beher et al., 2025) [7]. Finally, to ensure confirmability, the researcher provided transparent documentation to allow the verification of the findings.

The University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee approved this study with Protocol Number UMERC-2026-020. When conducting the research, all ethical concerns were taken into consideration. Informed consent was signed to ensure full permission for data collection, and the researcher also informed the participants that their involvement was recorded confidentially and that the information gathered was used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study are clustered into three categories: the lived experiences of the persons deprived of familial contact in a correctional institution, the impacts of lack of family contact on the study participants’ emotional, psychological, and social conditions, and the coping mechanisms employed by PDLs in dealing with a lack of contact from their families.

Themes on the lived experiences of persons deprived of familial contact in a correctional institution

Table 1 presents the themes and key concepts derived from the participants' responses during the In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), highlighting their lived experiences as persons deprived of familial contact in a correctional institution. The lived experiences of the PDLs are complex and shaped by their social, emotional, and relational circumstances, reflecting the combined effects of separation and confinement. The participants’ responses were systematically clustered through thematic analysis, from which the following themes emerged: extreme loneliness and isolation, family dysfunction, and emotional withdrawal.

Table 1. Themes on the lived experiences of persons deprived of familial contact in a correctional institution

MAJOR THEMES	CORE IDEAS
Extreme loneliness and isolation	Distance from family is very strong. The family's treatment is now different. Being alone in this situation is an everyday battle. Missing my family is an everyday struggle. Communication within the family is limited or nonexistent altogether. Family support is nowhere to be found.
Family Dysfunction	Family connection weakened. The family’s heads seek someone to comfort them. The children are not at all intact; they live separate lives.

The children stopped attending school due to a lack of support.

The family struggles financially.

Emotional Withdrawal

Being hopeless in the situation is a dominant feeling.

The motivation to live is very low.

It is hard to stay focused on the task.

Self-esteem is very low.

Being disinterested in interacting with others is a daily occurrence.

Extreme loneliness and isolation

The sudden transition from living freely in the community to becoming persons deprived of liberty serving sentences in a correctional institution, separated from the families they once lived with, has led to ongoing emotional and psychological struggles. The theme of extreme loneliness and isolation reflects the participants' lived experiences of sustained emotional disconnection, where separation from family is not merely physical distance but is deeply felt as enduring abandonment and loss of support.

Participant relates as he shared,

“Sukad pa sa akong pagkakulong, kay didto gyud nako na-realize kung unsa kabug-at ang pagkawala sa komunikasyon sa akong pamilya. Sa sulod, lain kaayo ang pagbati nga layo ka sa imong mga minahal, ug wala kay direktang balita kung kumusta na sila. Mas mubug-at ang kamingaw labi na kung gabii na ug hilum ang palibot, kay didto mosulod ang mga hunahuna ug pangandoy nga makasulti unta ko nila bisan sa gamay nga panahon. Sa akong pagkakulong, nakasinati ko nga ang kakulang sa komunikasyon dili lang kasakit sa emosyon, apan makaapekto pud sa akong panghunahuna ug paglaum sa kinabuhi.” (FGD-03)

"Since my imprisonment, that's when I truly realized how heavy the loss of communication with my family is. Inside, it feels really different being far from your loved ones, and not having direct news on how they are doing. The loneliness becomes heavier, especially at night when the surroundings are quiet, because that's when thoughts and hopes arise, wishing I could talk to them, even just for a short time. In my time in prison, I experienced that the lack of communication not only hurts emotionally, but it also affects my thoughts and my hope in life."

The participant clearly expressed the emotional burden he experienced while being separated from his loved ones, highlighting how the loss of communication intensified his longing for family contact. From the moment he entered the correctional institution, he began to fully realize the difficulty of being cut off from his family, a situation he identified as one of the most painful aspects of his incarceration. He emphasized that this lack of communication deepens his loneliness, particularly during quiet nights when thoughts of his family become more overwhelming. Beyond emotional distress, he also noted that this separation affects his thoughts and diminishes his sense of hope for the future.

Another participant stated,

“Kadtong nasakit ko lisod kaayo tungod wala pay kuwarta, walay tambal ug gutom kaayo.”

"When I was sick, it was very difficult because I had no money, no medicine, and I was extremely hungry." (IDI-02)

"Sugod pa man gyud sa sugod, halos di nako makaya ang kamingaw kay wala koy dalaw, walay makahatod sa akong mga kinahanglan. Daghan man sad kog mga kinahanglan dire sama sa sabon nako pangligo ug panglaba, unya wala koy komunikasyon sa pamilya, wala sila kabalo nga nagkinahanglan diay ko dire." (IDI-01)

"From the very beginning, I could hardly handle the loneliness because I had no visitors and no one to bring me what I needed. I also had many necessities here, like soap for bathing and laundry, but I had no communication with my family, so they didn't know that I needed these things here."

The participants' shared experiences reveal profound loneliness and deprivation within the correctional institution, particularly during times of illness and need. One participant described the severity of his condition when he became sick, emphasizing the lack of financial support, the absence of medicine, and extreme hunger. Another participant echoed similar struggles, expressing how loneliness was most overwhelming from the beginning of his confinement, especially due to the absence of visitors and the inability of his family to know or respond to his needs.

Both accounts highlight how isolation was intensified by unmet basic necessities, such as food, hygiene supplies, and medical care, compounded by the lack of communication with their families. During these critical moments, when support was most needed, they felt abandoned and left to endure their difficulties alone.

Additionally, another participant expressed his experience, saying,

"sa panahon nga bug-at kaayo akong gibati ug wala koy maistorya sa akong pamilya. Didto nako na-feel ang grabe nga kamingaw ug kakulang sa suporta kay wala koy klaro nga komunikasyon nila." (FGD-05)

"During a time when I was feeling extremely burdened and had no one to talk to in my family, that's when I felt an intense loneliness and lack of support because we didn't have clear communication with each other."

The participant's account reflects intense loneliness and emotional strain experienced within the correctional institution, particularly during moments of personal burden when support from family was most needed. He emphasized how the absence of clear communication intensified feelings of isolation and lack of emotional support.

The participants' narratives illustrate an immediate and profound shift in their emotional and psychological well-being upon entering the correctional institution. From previously experiencing familial love, care, and daily interaction in the community, they were suddenly confronted with separation and weakened family connections. This abrupt transition intensified their sense of loneliness and highlighted the emotional impact of no longer living with and regularly communicating with their families.

Moreover, from the study of Burns et al. (2024) [9], countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Netherlands and Philippines, it showed that some prisoners or families chose not to meet in prison. It also exposed the detrimental effects of limited family contact, including increased loneliness and depression from both of the PDLs and the family members. This finding supports the present results by showing that reduced or absent communication significantly contributes to emotional distress and isolation.

Additionally, one important way to mitigate the negative effects of incarceration is through visitation, which functions as a form of social capital that helps lessen social isolation (Anderson et al., 2020) [3]. This aligns with the participants' experiences, as it highlights how maintaining family contact can serve as a protective factor against the loneliness and emotional strain described in this study.

Family Dysfunction

The prolonged separation of persons deprived of liberty from their families has led to significant family dysfunction marked by weakened emotional bonds and disrupted family roles. Limited communication and absence of support have resulted in children living separate lives, with some discontinuing their education due to financial constraints. These conditions have contributed to ongoing financial hardship and reduced family stability and cohesion.

Participants shared,

“Naminyo ang akong asawa ug ang among mga anak natimbu-ag” (IDI-02)

“My spouse got married to someone else, and our children became scattered.”

“Dakog kausaban ang akong kaugalingon sa nahitabo kanako. Ang akong mga anak nagkatibulaag” (IDI-05)

“There was a big change in me because of what happened to me. My children became scattered.”

Both participants described profound family disruption following their incarceration, particularly the disintegration of family unity. They emphasized that their children became separated and scattered, reflecting a breakdown in familial cohesion. As fathers, they also expressed the loss of their role in holding the family together, as imprisonment created a physical and emotional barrier that prevented them from maintaining or restoring family unity.

Another participants shared,

“Tinuod nausab ang dagan sa akong pamilya. Wala kahuman ug eskwela ang mga anak.” (IDI-05)

“It’s true that the course of my family’s life changed. My children were not able to finish school.”

“Malaki po ang epekto sa aking pamilya financially dahil hindi nakatapos ang aking dalawang ana sa kolehiyo at nagkasakit pa sa hirap nawala ako sa kanila” (IDI-04)

“It had a big financial impact on my family because my two children were not able to finish college, and they even got sick due to hardship when I was no longer with them.”

Both participants revealed that their incarceration led to major disruptions in their families' lives, particularly affecting their children's education. They noted that their children were no longer able to continue or complete their schooling due to financial hardship and lack of support. Their imprisonment brought significant changes not only to family structure but also to the educational and health conditions of their children.

Burns et al. (2024) [9] mentioned that while not all inmates receive visits from friends or family while incarcerated, visits offer inmates a chance to maintain family relationships and lessen feelings of isolation. This is reflected in the participants' experiences, where the absence of consistent family contact contributed to the weakening of their relationships and heightened emotional distress. In some cases, this lack of connection was compounded by financial strain, as the imprisonment of the breadwinner led to difficulties such as children no longer being able to attend school. These challenges

further strained family ties, resulting in diminished communication and, eventually, the cessation of visits.

Emotional Withdrawal

Imprisonment has significantly affected the emotional well-being of persons deprived of liberty, leading to patterns of emotional withdrawal characterized by hopelessness, low motivation, and reduced engagement in daily life. Many participants expressed a diminished sense of purpose, with some describing a lack of motivation to continue living meaningfully and difficulty maintaining focus on everyday tasks. This emotional state is further reflected in their low self-esteem and growing disinterest in social interaction, which has become a frequent part of their daily experience.

One participant described,

“nabati nako nga murag nadaut ang akong mga plano ug mas nibug-at ang akong kahintang. Dako usab ang akong kamingaw nga nakaapekto sa akong pagtan-aw sa akong kaugalingon kay usahay mobati ko nga murag kulang ko ug suporta ug direksyon. Naapektuhan usab ang akong paglaum sa kaugmaon kay lisod magpadayon sa mga plano kung kulang ang koneksyon sa pamilya.” (FGD-01)

“I felt like my plans were ruined and my situation became even heavier. I also experienced deep loneliness, which affected how I saw myself, because at times I felt like I lacked support and direction. My hope for the future was also affected, since it’s hard to continue with plans when there is little connection with family.”

The participant expressed that incarceration led to the disruption of his personal plans and a worsening of his life situation. He described deep loneliness that negatively affected his self-perception, making him feel unsupported and directionless at times. He also noted that the lack of family connection weakened his hope for the future and made it difficult to continue pursuing his plans.

Two participants recounted,

“Wasak ang akong pamilya, namatay ang akong asawa. Dulom pa sa alkitran ang kaugmaon.” IDI-05

“My family was shattered; my spouse died. The future is darker than pitch.”

“Wasak ang tanan pati paglaum ug kaugmaon.” IDI-01

“Everything was shattered, including my hope and future.”

The participants expressed profound emotional distress marked by extremely low self-esteem, particularly following significant personal losses and incarceration. One participant described the shattering of his family due to the death of his spouse, along with a bleak outlook on the future. Another similarly conveyed a sense of total devastation, stating that both his hope and sense of the future were completely shattered.

Another participant narrated,

“usahay mawadan ko og gana ug interes sa akong mga ginabuhat. Mura kog maglisod sa pagpadayon sa adlaw-adlaw nga buluhaton kay naa koy gibati nga kahaw-ang ug kabalaka” FGD-05

“Sometimes I lose motivation and interest in what I do. I feel like I struggle to carry on with my daily tasks because of a sense of emptiness and anxiety.”

The participant reported a frequent loss of motivation and reduced interest in daily activities, which reflects a general withdrawal from engagement with his surroundings. He described difficulty in

continuing everyday tasks due to feelings of emptiness and anxiety. This experience illustrates a persistent disinterest in participation and interaction as part of his daily emotional state.

Moreover, qualities linked to volunteer visitors included increased self-esteem, improved mood, and personal growth; loneliness and depression were extensively described as consequences of not receiving visits. The experiences of adult men incarcerated without family or friend visits indicate that visiting is impacted by more than just the practical challenges of incarceration; barriers imposed by inmates themselves, family and relationship dynamics during incarceration, and the emotional impact of prison visits on both inmates and their families would all benefit from more research (Burns et al., 2024) [9].

This is consistent with the participants’ accounts, as they reported experiencing intense emotional distress after the loss of regular visits from their loved ones, who previously served as their primary source of emotional support during difficult times. Since their incarceration, they have undergone significant changes in their emotional well-being, leading to feelings of isolation and withdrawal. As a coping response, they often prefer to distance themselves from others within the correctional institution in order to maintain inner peace and avoid potential conflicts.

Themes on the impacts of lack of family contact to study participants’ emotional, psychological, and social conditions

Table 2 presents the themes and key concepts derived from the participants’ responses during the In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), providing an overview of their lived experiences as persons deprived of familial contact in a correctional institution. The lived experiences of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) are multidimensional, reflecting interconnected physical, emotional, psychological, and social challenges. The participants’ responses were clustered, resulting in the emergence of the following themes: health conditions (physical, emotional, and psychological) and social interaction (social condition).

Table 2. Themes on the impacts of the lack of family contact on the study participants’ emotional, psychological, and social conditions

MAJOR THEMES	CORE IDEAS
Health (Physical, emotional, psychological)	<p>conditions</p> <p>Loss of appetite and sleep problems affect daily existence.</p> <p>Lack of energy/feeling weak every day affects focus on tasks</p> <p>Physical and emotional stress strike every day.</p> <p>Behavioral changes, such as irritability and mood swings, happen</p> <p>Separation anxiety from family is felt most of the time.</p> <p>The feeling of being worthless, alone, unloved, and self-pity affects daily survival.</p>
Social (social condition)	<p>interaction</p> <p>Find it hard to establish a connection with others in different situations</p> <p>Want to be alone, and overthinking happens most</p>

of the time

Struggle to socialize again but later recover and bounce back.

Health conditions (Physical, emotional, psychological)

Imprisonment has led persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) to experience significant changes in their physical, emotional, and psychological conditions as a result of abrupt lifestyle adjustments and separation from their families. Physically, many reported symptoms such as loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, and persistent weakness, which affected their ability to function on a daily basis. Emotionally and psychologically, they experienced heightened stress, anxiety, mood swings, and feelings of loneliness and worthlessness, often triggered by separation from loved ones and limited social support. Overall, these conditions reflect how incarceration disrupts not only their physical well-being but also their emotional stability and psychological resilience.

Here are their shared statements,

“Mingaw kaayo walay gana ikaon” IDI-02

“Very lonely and no appetite to eat.”

“adunay kausaban sa akong kaugalingon, labi na sa akong lawas ug panglawas. Tungod sa kakulang sa komunikasyon sa akong pamilya, usahay maapektuhan ang akong gana sa pagkaon ug tulog, ug mobati ko og kakapoy o kahuyang. Naapektuhan sad ang akong emosyon ug panghunahuna, nga usahay magdala og stress ug kabalaka. Nausab ang akong pagtan-aw sa kinabuhi, ug nakaamgo ko kung unsa kaimportante ang koneksyon ug suporta gikan sa pamilya.” FGD-06

“There have been changes in myself, especially in my body and health. Due to the lack of communication with my family, my appetite and sleep are sometimes affected, and I feel tired or weak. My emotions and thoughts are also affected, which sometimes leads to stress and anxiety. My perspective on life has changed, and I have realized how important family connection and support are.”

Both participants described experiencing a profound loss of appetite as a result of loneliness and emotional distress within the correctional institution. Their accounts show that the lack of communication and support from their families contributed not only to emotional suffering but also to physical manifestations such as reduced appetite, fatigue, and general weakness. These experiences further indicate that their emotional and psychological struggles are closely interconnected with their physical health. Overall, incarceration has significantly affected both their mental well-being and bodily condition, highlighting the strong link between emotional isolation and physical health deterioration.

Additionally, two participants shared,

“Mas dali ko masuko ug mas mohilom ko kay wala koy komunikasyon sa akong pamilya ug mga hinigugma.” (FGD-04)

“I get angry more easily and I become more silent because I have no communication with my family and loved ones.”

“Init ako ulo ug walay saktong panghunahuna” (FGD-07)

“I have a hot temper and my thoughts are not clear.”

Both participants experienced noticeable shifts in their mood and emotional regulation due to prolonged lack of communication with their families. This emotional disconnection contributed to increased irritability, frequent anger, and tendencies toward withdrawal or silence. One participant described becoming more easily angered and less communicative, while the other reported a “hot temper” accompanied by unclear or disorganized thoughts. Overall, these accounts suggest that sustained separation from family contact negatively affects emotional stability and cognitive clarity.

Additionally, another participant conveyed,

“kaguol ug kamingaw kung wala koy komunikasyon sa akong pamilya. Mabati nako nga murag kulang ko ug kusog ug gana sa akong adlaw-adlaw nga kinabuhi. Nakaapekto sa akong hunahuna” (FGD-03)

“Sadness and loneliness when I have no communication with my family. I feel like I lack strength and motivation in my daily life. It affects my thoughts.”

The participant expressed that the absence of communication with family leads to feelings of sadness and loneliness, which significantly affect his emotional well-being. He further described a decline in strength and motivation in carrying out daily activities, indicating reduced psychological resilience. This emotional state also extends to his cognitive processes, as he noted that it affects his thoughts. Overall, the response reflects how lack of familial contact contributes to emotional distress, diminished motivation, and impaired thinking among persons deprived of liberty.

More specifically, visitation has been found to influence inmate behavior in complex ways. The strongest effects were found for official and family visits, when the risk of infractions after visits returned to average levels when inmates are visited frequently (Berghuis et al., 2022).

Notably, high family emotional support correlates strongly with physical health, whereas moderate emotional support does not reach statistical significance. Positive mental health is linked specifically to high emotional social support from family, rather than moderate support (Fahmy & Testa, 2025) [13].

These literatures relate to the participants’ personal accounts of how limited family contact and emotional support contribute to their emotional distress, psychological strain, and physical health decline during incarceration. They further highlight that consistent and meaningful family support, particularly through visitation and communication, plays a crucial role in maintaining inmates’ emotional stability and overall well-being. This reinforces the idea that strengthening family connections may help mitigate some of the negative health impacts associated with imprisonment.

Social interaction (social condition)

Imprisonment has significantly altered the socialization patterns of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), largely due to the intense sadness and loneliness brought about by separation from their families. This emotional distress has affected their ability and willingness to engage with others, often leading them to withdraw from social interaction. Many prefer isolation over communication, using solitude as a way to cope and seek a sense of peace and emotional stability.

One participant expressed,

“dili ko ganahan makipag-istorya sa uban usahay” (FGD-05)

“I don’t feel like talking to others sometimes.”

He expressed a tendency to withdraw from social interaction, indicating difficulty engaging with others within the correctional institution. This response reflects an ongoing struggle with socialization, likely influenced by emotional distress and a preference for isolation.

Another participant reported,

“usahay mohilom ko ug dili kaayo makig-istorya”FGD-04

“Sometimes I stay quiet and don’t talk much.”

The participant’s tendency to remain quiet and limit interaction reflects the broader pattern of social withdrawal among PDLs. This behavior suggests that emotional distress and loneliness have reduced his willingness to engage with others, aligning with the preference for isolation as a coping mechanism.

Studies have shown that individuals with strong social ties are more likely to find employment after incarceration, maintain better mental health, exhibit less hostility, desist from criminal activity, and avoid recidivism (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). This is consistent with the participants’ experiences, as their limited social interaction and withdrawal reflect weakened social connections that may negatively affect their well-being. It also suggests that the absence of strong social ties during incarceration can hinder both their emotional stability and future reintegration into society.

Notably, positive mental health is specifically associated with high emotional social support from family rather than moderate support, and there is a strong correlation between high family emotional support and physical health, while moderate emotional support does not reach statistical significance (Fahmy & Testa, 2025) [13].

Themes on the coping mechanisms employed by PDLs in dealing with a lack of contact from their families

Table 3 presents the coping mechanisms employed by persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) in dealing with the lack of contact from their families. Despite the loneliness and emotional distress experienced within the correctional institution, they were able to develop ways to manage and cope with these challenges. The participants’ responses were clustered into two major themes: unceasing prayers and support in any form.

Table 3. Themes on the coping mechanisms employed by PDLs in dealing with a lack of contact from their families

MAJOR THEMES	CORE IDEAS
Unceasing prayers	Always have faith. Never lose hope. Prayer is the best weapon. Believe that God is always there.
Support in any form	PDLs to support each other is their way of relief. Engage in sports and other activities to keep busy and tired. Getting strength from each other is a way of coping. Support from the community Sharing of experiences among PDLs lightens the heaviness they feel Try to open up to fellow PDLs just to be heard and listened to, and Ask for advice when needed

Unceasing prayers

One of the key strengths they draw upon inside the correctional institution is their faith in God and their spiritual resilience, which serve as sources of comfort, hope, and inner strength amid their struggles. Through constant prayer, they find a sense of peace, guidance, and emotional relief, allowing them to cope with loneliness and uncertainty. This spiritual connection also helps them maintain hope and develop acceptance of their situation despite the challenges of being separated from their families.

Participants expressed,

“Ang Ginoo usa nga nakatabang kanako inubanan sa pagtuo ug pagbati sa mga kauban nga inmates.” (IDI-05)

“God is one who helped me, together with faith and the support of my fellow inmates.”

The participant highlights the central role of faith in coping with the challenges of incarceration, emphasizing that reliance on God provides emotional strength and guidance. In addition, the mention of support from fellow inmates suggests that spirituality not only fosters personal resilience but also strengthens social connections within the correctional environment.

Another participant shared,

“Malaking naitulong sa aking sarili ang malapit sa Panginoong Diyos. Minsan sa buhay lalo na’t dito sa loob ng bilangguan, hirap na hirap pero sa dulo po ay sarap dahil kasama ko po lagi ang Panginoong Diyos.” (IDI-04)

“Being close to the Lord God has greatly helped me. Sometimes in life, especially here inside the prison, it is very difficult, but in the end it feels rewarding because I always have the Lord God with me.”

This statement reflects how spiritual closeness to God provides the participant with a sense of comfort and perseverance despite the hardships of imprisonment. Although he acknowledges the difficulties of prison life, his faith allows him to reframe these struggles in a more positive light, fostering hope, endurance, and emotional stability.

As they prepare for their release, inmates in minimum security prisons are more likely to look for information about their reintegration back into their communities and are less likely than inmates in other security classifications to identify a need for spirituality-related information (Garner, 2023). In contrast, this study found that PDLs under minimum security highly value spirituality as a mechanism for coping with the loneliness they experience during imprisonment. This suggests that, despite a general focus on reintegration needs, spiritual engagement remains an important source of emotional support for some individuals.

Support in any form

Due to limited support from their families, the PDLs rely on mutual assistance and encouragement from fellow inmates as an important coping mechanism. They support one another in various ways, such as offering emotional encouragement, sharing resources, and providing companionship to help ease daily struggles. This sense of solidarity is further strengthened by the presence and guidance of Bureau of Corrections personnel, who also contribute to their adjustment and survival within the correctional institution.

A participant shared,

“Oo, importante kaayo ang mga kauban kay sila ang akong kasandigan kung lisod ang adlaw, labi na kung walay bisita gikan sa pamilya.” IDI-01

“Yes, companions are very important because they are my support when days are difficult, especially when there are no visits from family.”

“Dito po sa loob ng bilangguan makatulong ang kaibigang marunong tumingin sa sitwasyong ika’y naghirap lalo na ika’y mabait sa kanila. Bigyan pagkain, ulam, pera at damit.” IDI-04

“Inside the prison, a friend who understands your situation when you are struggling can be very helpful, especially if you are kind to them. They give food, viand, money, and clothes.”

Aside from support from their peers within the correctional institution, the PDLs also engage in various structured activities that allow them to interact and participate meaningfully with others. These include active involvement in church services, reading the Bible, and serving in the church as choir members. Such activities provide opportunities for social engagement, emotional support, and spiritual growth while serving their sentences.

Participants relate as they shared,

“Magbasa ug Bibliya ug usahay mag gitara ug magkanta-kanta” (IDI-01)

“Reading the Bible and sometimes playing the guitar and singing.”

“Mag-guitar ug magkanta, labi na kong adunay simba kay mag choir man ko sa Sto. Niño Chapel Church.” (IDI-02)

“Playing the guitar and singing, especially during church services because I am part of the choir at Sto. Niño Chapel Church.”

Both participants shared that they cope with loneliness and intense emotional distress by actively engaging in church activities. This involvement provides them with a sense of purpose, structure, and emotional support through a faith-based community. Being surrounded by people who share similar beliefs helps them feel less isolated and more understood. Additionally, participating in spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, and fellowship offers them comfort and a renewed sense of hope during difficult times.

Beyond incarceration, social support plays a significant role in helping recently released individuals adjust and succeed in multiple areas of life (Kjellstrand et al., 2021) [17]. This is consistent with the participants’ experiences, as their reliance on fellow inmates and correctional staff demonstrates how social support functions as a critical resource for coping and day-to-day survival within the institution. Their accounts suggest that even in the absence of family support, alternative support systems can foster emotional stability and a sense of belonging, which are essential for adjustment both during and after incarceration.

If a person's support system is inconsistent or unstable, they may not be able to reintegrate successfully. Results show that among a group of recently incarcerated men, positive self-assessments of mental health require stable emotional and instrumental social support from friends and family (Fahmy, 2021). This finding relates to the participants’ responses, as their narratives highlight the impact of limited or inconsistent family support on their emotional well-being. In response, they seek stability through peer relationships and shared activities, which help compensate for the absence of family and provide the emotional and practical support necessary to cope with incarceration.

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