

# Religion and Mental Health During Incarceration: A Systematic Literature Review

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**Abstract** Religion and spirituality (RS) as a coping resource for facing stressful life events is encountered with increasing frequency in the medical literature. RS is associated with more favourable outcomes among people suffering from mental disorders. Detention is a stressful situation and the prevalence of mental disorders in places of detention is increased compared with the community. This literature review examined the association between RS and the mental health of detainees. PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science and the Internet were systematically searched from inception of each data base to August 1st 2010. Peer reviewed articles that reported primary empirical data about the impact of spirituality on the mental health and behaviour of detained persons were selected. Qualitative studies are also discussed. Twelve empirical studies including a total of 4,823 individuals met our inclusion criteria. RS is associated with lower frequency and severity of depressive episodes. The strongest reported effect of RS on prison life is a reduction of incidents and disciplinary sanctions. Prospective targeted studies are needed in order verify the hypothesis that RS reduces suicide among detainees.

**Keywords** Religion · Spirituality · Prison · Detention

## Introduction

It is estimated that about 9.8 million people are held in penal institutions throughout the world. Almost half of these are in the United States, Russia or China. The US also have one of the highest prison population rates in the world with approximately 750 per 100,000 of the population being incarcerated [1]. Prisons, prison populations and juridical policies differ to a large extent from one country to another [2]. Torture or other forms of human right abuses, length of detention, status of detention (remand versus sentenced) are among

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the factors that should be taken into account when studying prisoners' mental health. Compared with the general population, prison populations are usually younger, with a predominance of males.

Several studies conducted during the last two decades have shown an increased prevalence of mental disorders among prisoners, compared with rates observed in the general population [3]. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2002 concluded that, typically, about one in seven prisoners in Western countries have psychotic illnesses or major depression [4]. Most prevalence studies were conducted in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. For non-Western countries, reliable data is almost non-existent but there are indications suggesting that the prevalence of mental disorders in jails and prisons is similar to what is observed in the West [5–7].

Suicide is an omnipresent preoccupation in detention and numerous studies describe the increased rates of suicide that exist in jails and prisons in several countries [8]. Several studies have shown that age-standardized rates of suicide among male prisoners are between five and eight times higher than in the general population [9], and sometimes as high as fourteen times higher [10]. Suicide in prison has a strong correlation with hopelessness and the impossibility to have recourse to the usual coping mechanisms. For example, a prisoner is not usually able to participate in rituals associated with the funeral of a loved one [11]. The impact of the prison environment on social networks and availability of social support has been underlined [12]. In order to reduce the burden of mental suffering and suicide, it is important to allow or facilitate access to coping resources possibly available in places of detention. Spiritual support is often mentioned as one of them, but there is little empirical data demonstrating its real impact. Behavioural problems or hostility may also be related to mental or personality disorders. In prison, behavioural inadequacy sometimes leads to fights, victimization and periods of restraint for disciplinary motives. Here too, coping mechanisms such as religious involvement may be helpful to prevent this type of problems.

Generally speaking, and despite spectacular advances in technology and sciences, religion as a coping behaviour remains widespread. When people are confronted with severe and chronic medical conditions, religious coping is the rule rather than the exception [13]. Patients with mental disorders, ranging from anxiety to schizophrenia or depression with suicidal ideation, may also benefit from spiritual support [14]. Religion also acts as a protective factor against addictions and substance misuse [15].

The aim of the present paper is to review empirical data on religion, spirituality and mental health or illness in places of detention. A difficulty is that spirituality and religion encompass different phenomena that don't completely overlap. A certain degree of confusion between both concepts sometimes exist in the medical literature [16]. Religion involves beliefs, practices and rituals, whereas spirituality is more personal. However, as proposed by Koenig, we will use the terms religion and spirituality synonymously (referred to as RS), except if otherwise specified.

## Methods

A systematic bibliographic search was undertaken from databases (PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science and the Internet) to identify all articles in English or in French published from inception of each data base to August 1st 2010 that examined RS and mental health in places of detention. Key words used were religion, religiosity, spiritual, spirituality, faith,

prison, jail, detention and detainee. From more than two hundred references, 12 met our inclusion criteria: peer reviewed articles that reported primary data about the impact of spirituality on the mental health and behaviour of detained persons. We excluded from the analysis opinion papers, published thesis, studies which dealt with RS issues only marginally and studies about RS in released detainees living in the community. Six relevant qualitative studies were retrieved and are also discussed.

## Results

### Empirical Studies

Results from the twelve empirical studies are presented chronologically in Table 1. Considering that 661 subjects were included in the two studies by Fernander et al. [17, 18], a total of 4,823 individuals in detention were studied. Among these, 309 (6.4%) were females. Except for the 216 British prisoners included in the study by Adler et al. [19], all subjects were incarcerated in US facilities. Methods and questionnaires were diverse. Regarding the assessment of RS, a total of 11 structured instruments were used. RS was shown to improve coping, reduce depressive symptoms or self-harm in five studies. In 6 studies, RS had an impact on inmates' behaviour by reducing arguments, violence and disciplinary sanctions.

### Qualitative Data

When examining empirical data and narratives, several specific domains emerge, such as religious conversions in prison, RS as a coping mechanism for facing incarceration and RS in the process of psychosocial rehabilitation and re-entry in the community:

Studying religious conversions during incarceration in 63 inmates, Kerley and Copes [20] observed that faith provided a motivation and focus for dealing with the pains of confinement and help them create a self-image. RS did not, however, take away the isolation, deprivation and other problems linked to the prison experience. Using a social context approach, Dix-Richardson showed that conversion to Islam among African American detained women is extremely low, compared with male counterparts [21].

Among a sample of 12 imprisoned battered women, most had what they described as spiritual experiences during their time in prison [22]. This study suggests that RS gave them a way to reconstruct and reinterpret their victimization, perpetration of violence and subsequent incarceration. Using an ethnographic methodology including participant observation and 70 interviews, Dammer discusses the reasons for religious involvement in prison [23]. According to this author, RS serves to mitigate the psychological and physical deprivations created by imprisonment. Whether the inmates are sincere or insincere in belief and practice appears to be an important issue, since they may sometimes join religious programs for the benefit of early parole release. Some others view RS in prison as a symbolic world with its own constitutive rules as being part of the global inmate culture [24]. In a study applying an ad hoc questionnaire for assessing hope after liberation in a sample 271 female detainees in Romania, spiritual values were beneficial and raised the hopes of social reintegration [25].

**Table 1** Located literature

Study, year and setting	N and sample	Focus	Methods	Instruments	Results	Comments
Scamati et al. [26]	27 Male dangerous psychiatric inmates in a residential treatment unit situated in a US jail	Importance of religious support and RS as a part of a bio-psycho-socio spiritual program	Semi-structured interviews	Religious beliefs, practices and personal experiences by Kroll and Sheehan, modified Ad hoc religious survey questionnaire	24 Patients felt that religion provided their life with strength and meaning. 25 reported that religious beliefs had prevented them from harming themselves or others. Aggression, hostility and acting out decreased greatly when patients were involved in religious services	The subjects included had severe mental disorders
Koenig [27]	96 Male inmates older than age 50 in a US state facility	RS and depression	Scales and self-filled questionnaire	CES Depression scale Orthodoxy Index Religious Motivation Scale (IRMS) Religious Coping Index (RCI)	64% Of inmates indicated that religion was very important and for one-third of participants RS was the most important coping mechanism. It is possible that a number of inmates turned to religion as a coping behavior in response to incarceration.	Participants were younger (average 6 years) than in the study by Allen
Pass [28]	490 Male inmates in a US correctional facility	RS and rule violations in prison	Group-administered questionnaire among randomly selected inmates	Religious motivation scale developed by Hodge Ad hoc questionnaire	Muslims were the most religiously intrinsically oriented group. Catholics were more likely to agree that religion gives special privileges. Those with no religious affiliation were more likely to agree that some people join a religious group for protection. Religious affiliation (Muslim and protestant), age (26 or younger), ethnicity (blacks) and education (non-college oriented) predicted violating the rules and receiving an infraction	This study analyzed results according to religious affiliation (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Other and None)

**Table 1** continued

Study, year and setting	N and sample	Focus	Methods	Instruments	Results	Comments
Clear and Sumter [29]	769 Inmates in 20 prisons from 12 US states	Religiousness, adjustment to prison and disciplinary confinements	Survey in a non-random sample using an ad hoc self-report questionnaire	Prisoner Values Survey Wright prison adjustment questionnaire	Religiousness is associated with higher adjustment to prison and fewer confinement episodes	Published in a special issue of the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation
O'Connor and Perreyclear [30]	1,579 Male inmates in a US state facility	Religious involvement and behavioral issues	Retrospective study comparing inmates who attend (49%) and those who do not attend (51%) religious services in prison	List of religious groups and services proposed in detention, socio-demographic and criminal data	The estimated yearly cost of religious services in the facility was inexpensive (150–250 USD per inmate served). The intensity of religious practice was inversely related to the presence of in-prison infractions	Published in a special issue of the Journal of Offender Rehabilitation
Fernander et al. [17]	661 Male drug users inmates (295 blacks and 349 whites) in 4 facilities of a US state	Influence of ethnicity on spiritual well-being and RS in prison	Face to face interviews	Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), adapted 3 ad hoc questions about religiosity information about current criminal conviction	Contrary to expectations, white men reported significantly higher scores of spirituality than black men. The authors postulate that RS inhibits criminal activity among Blacks more than it does among Whites	The 2 studies by Fernander et al., were conducted with the same sample of detainees
Fernander et al. [18]	661 Male inmates in 4 facilities of a US state	RS and characteristics of criminal conviction	Face to face interviews	Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), adapted 3 ad hoc questions about religiosity information about current criminal conviction	Type-of-crime differences were observed in relation to religiosity. Property related and violence related convictions were associated with stronger religiosity than drug related ones	This study takes into account criminalistic variables

**Table 1** continued

Study, year and setting	N and sample	Focus	Methods	Instruments	Results	Comments
Kerley et al. [31]	386 Incarcerated men at a US state facility	Religious participation and arguing or fighting with other inmates	Self-filled questionnaire with a broad range of personal, criminal, emotional and spiritual data	Ad hoc questionnaire	Religiosity, especially belief in a higher power, has a preventive effect on arguing but little effect on physical violence	Arguing and respectively fighting with fellow inmates were the two dependent variables
Lonczak [32]	305 Individuals (80% male 20% female) in a US minimum security facility	Spirituality, religious upbringing, stress and coping	Standardized instruments and semi-opened questions	Religious Coping Activity Scale (RCAS) Life Events Checklist (LEC) Brief symptom inventory (BSI)	Being raised with a formal religion was significantly predictive of both decreased depressive symptoms and reduced hostility. There were significant interactions between religious discontentment and gender for all outcomes. Females with religious discontentment had more depressive and somatisation symptoms, anxiety and hostility compared with males	Religious discontentment had more impact on females' health, compared with males
Adler et al. [19]	216 Prisoners (including 35 women) in a British prison	Prisoners' attitudes toward RS and religious interventions in prison	Comparison of prisoners in a Kainos "religious" wing (N = 107) with matched controls (N = 109) in another part of the prison	Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSORF) Francis Attitudes Towards Christianity Scale Intrinsic subscale of the I-E Age Universal Open-ended questions	The Kainos program attracted prisoners who were already seeking spiritual support. Controls were less likely to retain their religious beliefs in prison. The Kainos community participants were more religious and held more positive attitudes towards Christianity than non-Kainos prisoners, both before and after program completion	This study analyzes a specific religious support program called Kainos

**Table 1** continued

Study, year and setting	N and sample	Focus	Methods	Instruments	Results	Comments
Allen et al. [33]	81 Male inmates older than age 50 in a US state facility	RS, depression and anxiety in older male inmates	Screening with semi-structured interviews, followed by face-to-face interviews	Brief Multidimensional Religiousness and Spirituality Brief symptom inventory (BSI) Hastened Death Scale	There were no racial or ethnic differences in reported RS, demographic characteristics or mental health. There was a positive association between self-reported years of incarceration and experienced forgiveness. Inmates who reported feeling less abandoned by God and having more daily spiritual experiences reported fewer symptoms of depression	Participants were incarcerated primarily for murder and sexual crimes
Levitt and Booker Loper [34]	213 Female inmates in a US state facility	Religious participation and adjustment to life in prison	Large battery of self-report measures	Prison Adjustment Questionnaire (PAQ) Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) Prison Violence Inventory (PVI) List of institutional infractions	Inmates who received high-level support from participation in religious activities reported significantly less depression, recounted perpetrating fewer aggressive acts, and committed fewer serious institutional infractions. Inmates reporting a high level of support through their religious activities reported fewer instances of feeling angry, having arguments with inmates and correctional officers, physical fights, and injury	One of the few studies addressing RS among incarcerated women

## Discussion and Conclusions

There are little systematic quantitative studies on the impact of RS on the mental health of detained individuals. Due to the variety of psychometric instruments used and the lack of methodological standardization, it is not possible to generalize results of published studies. Moreover, there is a lack of international data and information from other countries than the USA, either form empirical or qualitative studies.

Despite previous knowledge that RS is an important coping mechanism in stressful situations, there is no proof that RS significantly reduces suicide in prison. This could be due to the absence of study addressing specifically this question. From available data, there are however indications showing that RS is associated with lower frequency and severity of depression. The strongest reported effect of RS on prison life is a reduction of incidents and disciplinary sanctions.

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