social support.

When most of us are having a stressful day we are likely to turn to others as a means of coping. The support we get from other people is called social support. Sidney Cobb has defined social support as the receipt of information from others that one is cared for and valued. Several different forms of social support exist. Practical support includes providing someone with material goods or useful advice and information. In the prison environment this might involve telling a fellow inmate which member of staff they need to speak to about visiting arrangements. Emotional support includes offering reassurance or providing a shoulder to cry on. Social support can come from different sources including family, friends and intimate partners. You might have someone you will go to when you need a solution to a problem, whereas you may go to someone else if you just want a sympathetic ear.

Non-custodial studies such as those conducted with health workers and students have demonstrated that social support can reduce psychological distress. In the prison environment, fostering social support would therefore seem to be a good way of addressing the psychological distress experienced by some prisoners. This raises the question of where prisoners can seek social sup- port. In theory, they could seek support from prison staff (such as prison officers, or prison guards as they are also called, psychologists or the chaplain), fellow prisoners and their friends and family outside the prison. Some prisons have also set up schemes, such as the Listener Scheme, where inmates serving long sentences can be trained in listening and counselling skills. Such prisoners can offer confidential support to other prisoners.

However, this is all in theory. In reality because of some of the factors we have discussed above, such as the inmate code, one can see how it might be quite difficult for prisoners to access these sources of support. Prisoners have reported an unwillingness to approach prison officers for help, perhaps as a result of the inmate code, although some will seek practical support from officers. We could question how easy it is for prison officers to offer social support to prisoners, keeping in mind their potentially conflicting roles. Although prison officers must contain the prisoners, they must also protect them and may have a rehabilitative role. Prison officers, as well as prisoners, are exposed to the environmental stressors of prison on a daily basis and it is quite possible that the psychological and physical consequences of this might affect their ability to offer support to inmates.

With the enforced distance between prisoners and intimate partners and friends outside the prison, the briefness of prison visits and the potential breakdown of these relationships, prisoners may find that their only source of support is other prisoners. However, prisoners may be wary of seeking support from other inmates should they appear weak and leave themselves open to exploitation. Hence, they might also limit themselves to seeking practical forms of support from fellow inmates. If prisoners feel unable to seek social support from other prisoners and prison officers, schemes such as the Listeners Scheme could therefore be of great importance.

Despite these obstacles, several studies have indicated relation- ships between social support from these various sources and reduced psychological distress, self-harm and suicide in prison. However, there have also been conflicting findings and it is likely that the obstacles outlined above may go some way to explaining these inconsistencies.

Having considered the experience of prisoners in general, the last part of this chapter turns to consider the experiences of two particular populations of prisoner; women and prisoners serving life sentences.

the experience of female prisoners.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, the percentage of prisoners who are women ranges from 26.6 % to 0 % depending on the country. In some countries, a substantial minority of the prisoner population will therefore be female.

With this in mind, you may find it surprising that, in comparison to male prisoners, little research has been conducted with women prisoners. Researchers have recently begun addressing this disparity. When considering how women experience imprisonment researchers have suggested that prison has a more negative effect on women than on men. This was concluded from their higher levels of psychological distress, which did not seem to be explained by environmental factors.

In 1997, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons interviewed numerous female prisoners, the majority of whom reported that prison had had a negative effect on them. The explanations for this varied. Some explained that prison had merely taught them to be better criminals and increased their knowledge of committing crimes whereas others referred to their emotional feelings. For example, some women explained that imprisonment had resulted in them feeling very angry or depressed.

The belief that female prisoners suffer more than male prisoners might be, in part, explained by women’s roles as mothers. The same 1997 study found that two-thirds of female prisoners were mothers. Similarly, the US Department of Justice found seventy- nine per cent of women prisoners were mothers and frequently they were single parents. Separation from their children was given as female prisoners’ greatest concern along with maintaining con- tact with other family members, who might be caring for their children. In addition, women prisoners reported being worried about the health of relatives, about their children being taken into permanent social care and their finances. In another study, imprisoned mothers also reported concern about their child’s care in their absence and whether their child would stop thinking of them as their mother. In line with these concerns, women prisoners who are mothers have been found especially to suffer from poor psychological health. Female prisoners who are mothers, rather than female prisoners in general, might therefore be at greater risk of psychological distress.

The paths by which women enter the criminal justice system also suggest reasons for why women prisoners suffer greater psychological distress. As outlined by the US Department of Justice, a substantial number of women prisoners enter prisons with histories of being physically and sexually abused. It is therefore quite likely that some women prisoners will not only already be suffering from psychological distress prior to incarceration but may also therefore be more vulnerable to negative imprisonment factors.

With regard to social support, in a survey of women prisoners Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons found that over fifty per cent of the women prisoners interviewed reported having received no help after being imprisoned. In particular, seventy-five per cent of those who were drug abusers reported receiving no help to overcome their addiction. Substance abuse seems to be a greater problem for women prisoners than it is for men, as reported by the US Department of Justice in 2005. Such findings are therefore a concern since women’s offending is also more likely to be drug- related. It would thus seem important to aid women prisoners in overcoming their drug habits if we are to prevent them reoffending when released.

When comparing female and male prisoners some of the difficulties they experience appear to be quite similar, however, women’s roles as mothers and primary caregivers appear to put them at greater risk of psychological distress. To reduce this distress as much as possible, prison regimes may need to be developed with women prisoners’ roles as mothers in mind. For example, the US Department of Justice has suggested arranging visiting times that coincide with out- of-school hours to enable children to visit their mothers.

Another group of prisoners who also appear at greater risk are those serving a life sentence.

experiencing life imprisonment.

Prisoners serving a life sentence are sometimes referred to as ‘lifers’. To receive such a long sentence, the types of crimes they have committed are typically serious, for example, murder. Such crimes are less common than others and therefore the number of lifers in prisons reflects this. In England and Wales in 2003, nine per cent of all prisoners were serving a life sentence. Similarly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in Australia in 2004, four per cent of sentenced prisoners were serving a life sentence.

What is meant by ‘life sentences’ can vary between countries. In some it literally means that the individuals will be imprisoned for the rest of their lives: in other countries it can mean periods of imprisonment of more than ten years. The Home Office reported that in England and Wales in 1999 the average length of sentence served by lifers was 15 years.

Research with lifers has found that compared to short-term prisoners, lifers experience a different set of stressors. Whilst damage to external relationships might be a concern for most prisoners, lifers have the added concern of whether their relation- ships with those outside prison can last for the long period of incarceration. They may experience difficulty coping with the gradual deterioration of these relationships and, because of the high turnover of short-term prisoners, they can experience further problems in forming bonds inside the prison. Lifers have reported concerns about losing their sense of identity due to the enforced passivity of prison and the lack of personal control. The stability of their environment can also be a concern. The indeterminate nature of life sentences may well be particularly stressful for some life-sentence prisoners because it causes them uncertainty, which is precisely what they seek to avoid. A study of the reasons for suicide by life-sentence prisoners also highlighted a number of these concerns, including disrupted relationships, the reality of the long sentence and failed appeals against their sentences.

As with much of the research with prisoners, research findings about the psychological distress experienced by life-sentence prisoners is mixed. Her Majesty’s Inspector of Prisons did find elevated levels of psychological distress amongst this population. However, the report made the good point that inflated levels of disturbance in this population might not be a result of imprisonment. Instead, psychological disturbance could have contributed to the types of crimes life-sentence prisoners have committed. In other words, the psychological disturbance existed before their imprisonment, rather than being a result of it. The guilt experienced by some prisoners relating to their offences might also affect their psychological well-being.

This raises the question of how criminal psychologists and other prison staff can help life sentence prisoners cope with their specific stressors. In relation to dealing with uncertainty, Her Majesty’s Inspector of Prisons suggested that lifers require long- term projects to give them a sense of stability. Alternatively, taking up a job in the prison that offers responsibility can help. Considering the apparently elevated rate of psychological distress in this population, their mental health needs might be greater and provisions may need to be made for this.

Conclusions.

Psychology has been able to make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the experience of being imprisoned. The unique physical and social environment in prison does seem particularly prone to causing stress. However, prisoners are individuals, and vary in the stressors they experience and how they try to cope with these. The prison environment also seems to limit the means by which prisoners can cope with stress. This is something researchers should be mindful of when making recommendations. Finally, we have seen that there are some populations of prisoners who suffer particular stressors: life-sentence prisoners and prisoners who are mothers. There are other vulnerable populations within the prison population who have not been considered here. However, it is hoped that this chapter has given you an insight into the psychological difficulties these individuals can face and the obstacles criminal psychologists and other prison staff may face when trying to help them.