

Sociological Impact of Family Engagement on Under-Trial Prisoners: A Mixed-Methodological Approach comparing educated and uneducated

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the societal engagement of families in the lives of undertrial prisoners, exploring the barriers they face in maintaining contact and support, as well as the impact of family engagement on the well-being of prisoners. Through a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and qualitative interviews, the research highlights the logistical, financial, and institutional challenges that families encounter, such as high travel costs, restrictive visiting hours, and limited communication options. Despite these challenges, findings reveal that regular family contact significantly contributes to reducing stress and anxiety among undertrial prisoners, fostering hope, and enhancing motivation for successful reintegration post-detention. However, only a small percentage of families reported frequent visits or access to communication technologies like video calls, with financial and geographical constraints being major barriers. The study also identifies the limited support provided by community organizations and the lack of awareness among families regarding their legal rights. Based on these findings, the study proposes several practical solutions, including improved visitation policies, enhanced access to digital communication, increased financial assistance, and greater collaboration with community organizations and legal aid services. The Preliminary result of the study revealed the importance of family engagement as a critical component of prisoner rehabilitation and calls for policy reforms to support families in maintaining regular contact with undertrial prisoners, thus contributing to better outcomes for both prisoners and their families.

Introduction

The criminal justice system serves as a framework to ensure justice, maintain order, and uphold the rights of individuals. However, undertrial detention, which refers to the incarceration of individuals awaiting the completion of their trial, is a growing concern globally. In India, undertrial

prisoners account for a significant portion of the prison population, highlighting systemic issues such as delayed trials, inadequate legal representation, and socioeconomic disparities (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2022). These conditions not only affect the detainees but

also have profound implications for their families, who often grapple with social, emotional, and economic hardships.

Families of undertrial prisoners frequently face stigmatization, financial strain, and emotional distress as a result of their relative's incarceration (Pratt et al., 2020). Yet, family engagement has been shown to have a stabilizing effect, offering emotional support and fostering resilience among prisoners (Arditti, 2012). Such engagement also plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse psychological effects of incarceration and aiding in the eventual reintegration of prisoners into society (Travis & Western, 2014). Despite this, the involvement of families in the lives of undertrial prisoners remains limited, hindered by institutional barriers, logistical challenges, and societal attitudes.

Research on family engagement in prisons has primarily focused on post-sentencing contexts, leaving the experiences of undertrial prisoners and their families relatively underexplored. Studies suggest that family support during pretrial detention can contribute to better mental health outcomes and reduced recidivism (Hairston, 2009). Moreover, societal engagement in supporting these families can help alleviate their challenges and foster community solidarity, which is crucial for reducing the broader social impact of incarceration (Bales & Mears, 2008).

This study seeks to investigate the societal engagement of families with undertrial prisoners, exploring the challenges they face and the systemic and cultural factors influencing their involvement. It also

examines how family engagement contributes to the well-being and rehabilitation of undertrials, providing insights into how such engagement can be better facilitated. By addressing this gap, the research aims to inform policies that promote a more humane and restorative approach to undertrial detention.

The role of families and communities in supporting undertrial prisoners is critical for fostering a more equitable criminal justice system. Such engagement benefits the detainees and their families and contributes to broader societal efforts to reduce stigma, promote justice, and encourage rehabilitation over punitive measures.

Review of Literature

The role of families in the lives of incarcerated individuals has garnered significant attention in criminological and sociological research. However, much of the focus has been on post-conviction incarceration, with relatively limited studies addressing the experiences of families of undertrial prisoners. The literature highlights critical themes, including the impact of incarceration on families, the role of societal engagement, and the systemic barriers to maintaining familial ties during detention.

The incarceration of a family member has profound consequences on the familial unit, including emotional, financial, and social challenges. Arditti (2012) emphasized that families of incarcerated individuals often face stigma and isolation, which exacerbates their existing vulnerabilities. This impact is particularly pronounced in the context of undertrial detention, where

uncertainty surrounding legal outcomes intensifies the psychological distress experienced by families. Moreover, the lack of institutional support for these families often leaves them to navigate complex legal and correctional systems alone (Hairston, 2009).

Family engagement has been identified as a crucial factor in maintaining the well-being of prisoners. Research by Bales and Mears (2008) found that regular familial contact reduces the likelihood of recidivism and fosters a sense of hope and belonging among incarcerated individuals. While most studies have focused on convicted prisoners, similar benefits can be extended to undertrial detainees. According to Travis and Western (2014), family connections provide emotional support and stability, which are essential for mitigating the adverse effects of incarceration, such as depression and anxiety.

Despite the recognized importance of family engagement, numerous systemic and structural barriers hinder families from maintaining contact with undertrial prisoners. In India, logistical challenges such as the geographic distance between prisons and family homes, limited visiting hours, and financial constraints disproportionately affect low-income families (NCRB, 2022). Furthermore, institutional policies often fail to prioritize the needs of undertrial prisoners, leading to a lack of adequate provisions for facilitating family interactions (Pratt et al., 2020).

The societal perception of families with incarcerated members often compounds their challenges. Families of undertrial prisoners are frequently stigmatized and

ostracized, as they are perceived as complicit in the alleged crimes (Arditti, 2012). This societal disengagement not only isolates families but also limits their ability to advocate for their incarcerated relatives. According to Hairston (2009), addressing societal stigma requires a collective effort to humanize the experiences of families and promote community-based support systems. While existing literature highlights the significance of familial and societal engagement in the context of incarceration, research specific to undertrial prisoners remains scarce. Studies predominantly focus on the post-conviction phase, overlooking the unique challenges faced by undertrial detainees and their families. This gap underscores the need for research that explores the dynamics of familial involvement during pretrial detention and its implications for the broader criminal justice system. The literature establishes the critical role of family engagement in supporting incarcerated individuals and emphasizes the need for systemic and societal efforts to address the challenges faced by families of undertrial prisoners. However, the paucity of research on this specific population necessitates further exploration to inform policies and practices that promote equitable and humane treatment for undertrials and their families.

Research Methodology

The research methodology outlines the systematic approach to investigate families' societal engagement with undertrial prisoners. This study adopts a mixed-methodological approach, combining

qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively understand the phenomenon. The methodology encompasses the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design to examine the nature, challenges, and impacts of family engagement with undertrial prisoners. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative data explore the lived experiences of families and undertrial prisoners, while quantitative data provide measurable insights into the prevalence and patterns of familial engagement.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the socio-demographic status of families of the under-trial prisoners.
- To explore the barriers faced by families in maintaining contact with undertrial prisoners.
- To examine the impact of family engagement on the psychological well-being of undertrial prisoners.
- To compare the impact of family on undertrial educated vs uneducated prisoners
- To identify the role of community organizations and NGOs in supporting families of undertrial prisoners and how these

organizations contribute to family engagement.

- To contribute to the understanding of the importance of family involvement in the rehabilitation process of undertrial prisoners, with a focus on long-term social reintegration and reduced recidivism.

Variable of the study

Dependent Variable: Family Satisfaction, Reintegration Potential, Psychological Well-Being of Under Trial Prisoners

Independent Variable: Barriers of family engagements, Frequency of family contact, family support system.

Universe of the study

The universe of the study was the Tirunelveli city.

Study Population and Sample Size

The study population includes families of undertrial prisoners, undertrial detainees, and prison administrators. A purposive sampling method is used to select participants based on their relevance to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The sample includes:

1. Families of undertrial prisoners: Spouses, parents, siblings, and children.
2. Undertrial prisoners: Male and female detainees across age groups.
3. Prison administrators and social workers: Individuals managing undertrial detention and family interaction policies.

The sample size is determined using saturation principles for qualitative data and statistical adequacy for quantitative data (Guest et al., 2006). The sample includes 30 family members, 20 undertrial prisoners, and 10 prison administrators/social workers.

Sampling Techniques

The researcher used the snowball sampling of the non-probability sampling technique to decide the families of undertrial prisoners, undertrial detainees, and prison administrators/ social workers.

Data Collection Methods

1. Qualitative Methods

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews with families, undertrial prisoners, and prison staff to explore personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to familial engagement (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).
- **Focus group discussions (FGDs):** FGDs with family members to gather collective insights and uncover shared challenges.

2. Quantitative Methods

- **Personal Distribution questionnaire:** Structured questionnaires are administered to family members to gather demographic data, frequency of prison visits, modes of communication, and perceived barriers.

- **Secondary data analysis:** Examination of prison records and reports from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for contextual information on undertrial detention and visitation patterns.

Pilot study

The survey and interview questionnaires were pre-tested with a small sample of respondents (families of undertrial prisoners) before the main data collection. This pilot test helped identify any ambiguities or inconsistencies in the questions, allowing for adjustments to be made to improve clarity and comprehension.

It also helped us to check the reliability and validity of the PDQ and Semi Structured Interview Schedule.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and themes in interview and FGD transcripts. NVivo software is employed for coding and organizing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey data are analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS software. Frequencies, percentages, and chi-square tests are used to identify trends and correlations.

Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Key ethical consideration includes:

- **Informed consent:** Participants are provided with detailed information about the study and their voluntary participation.
- **Confidentiality:** Personal information is anonymized to protect participant identities.
- **Non-coercion:** Undertrial prisoners participate without influence from prison authorities.
- **Ethical clearance:** The study is approved by the institutional ethics committee before data collection.

Limitations

Potential limitations include logistical challenges in accessing prisons, the reluctance of participants to share sensitive information, and biases in self-reported data. These are mitigated by building trust with participants and employing diverse data sources. This research methodology provides a robust framework for examining the societal engagement of families with undertrial prisoners. By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study aims to generate insights that inform policies to strengthen family support systems and promote a humane and inclusive justice process.

Major Findings and Discussions

The findings of the research are categorized into key thematic areas that emerged from the data analysis. These areas highlight the dynamics of family engagement, the

challenges faced by families of under-trial prisoners, and the systemic factors influencing this engagement.

1. Socio- Demographics of Participants

- **Family Composition:** 60 per cent of family members surveyed were immediate relatives (spouses or parents), while 40 per cent were extended family members (siblings, children, or others).
- **Socioeconomic Status:** 70 per cent of respondents belonged to low-income households, with monthly incomes below ₹15,000, indicating a strong link between socioeconomic status and the challenges faced in maintaining contact.
- **Educational Levels:** Approximately 50 per cent of family members had not completed secondary education, affecting their ability to navigate legal and institutional systems effectively.

2. Family Involvement in Legal Awareness and Case Progression

- Family engagement in legal procedures shows substantial disparity.
- Nearly 70 per cent of families of educated undertrial prisoners demonstrated awareness of court procedures, bail provisions, and legal documentation. Around 62 per cent actively followed up with advocates and legal aid authorities,

which contributed to faster case movement.

- Conversely, only 28–35 per cent of families of uneducated undertrial prisoners were aware of basic legal rights. About 58 per cent depended entirely on state legal aid without regular follow-up, leading to procedural delays. Prison administrators reported that nearly 45 per cent of prolonged undertrial detention cases were linked to lack of family-driven legal follow-up, predominantly among uneducated detainees.

3 Economic Impact on Families

- Economic consequences vary sharply across educational groups.
- Among educated undertrial prisoners, around 54 per cent of families reported moderate financial strain, while only 21 per cent experienced severe economic disruption. Families often managed expenses through secondary income sources or savings.
- In contrast, nearly 72 per cent of families of uneducated undertrial prisoners experienced severe financial hardship following detention. Approximately 65 per

cent of uneducated detainees were primary earners, and their incarceration resulted in immediate income loss. About 48% of families reported borrowing money or selling assets to meet daily expenses and legal costs.

4. Psychological Impact on Undertrial Prisoners

Perceived Well-being and Emotional Support

- The findings suggest a clear connection between family engagement and the psychological well-being of undertrial prisoners. Prisoners who received regular visits reported feeling more supported and hopeful, with 80 per cent of them indicating that these interactions positively influenced their emotional state. In contrast, prisoners who had no contact with their families reported significantly lower levels of perceived support and hope, with only 30 per cent expressing positive feelings.
- This differential in perceived well-being can be attributed to the crucial emotional support that families provide. Family visits often serve as a primary source of emotional comfort, which can buffer the negative psychological effects of incarceration, such as feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and despair. Research has consistently shown that maintaining connections with

loved ones significantly improves an incarcerated individual's mental health by providing a sense of continuity and emotional stability (Hairston, 2007). These findings echo earlier studies indicating that the absence of family engagement often exacerbates psychological distress and alienation (Arditti, 2003).

Reduction of Stress and Anxiety

- Around 70 per cent of undertrial prisoners who experienced a reduction in stress and anxiety due to family visits reflect the therapeutic role that family engagement plays in mitigating the negative psychological impacts of imprisonment. Visits often provide prisoners with an emotional anchor, reducing feelings of helplessness and alleviating the stress associated with the uncertainty of their legal situation. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that family support has a buffering effect against the stressors of incarceration, helping to mitigate anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues commonly experienced by prisoners (Bales & Mears, 2008).
- Moreover, regular visits can reinforce prisoners' sense of identity and belonging, which are often undermined in the dehumanizing environment of prison. This sense of connection can be pivotal in coping with the isolation and alienation of incarceration, as

families provide an external reminder of the world outside the prison walls.

Motivation to Reintegrate

- Prisoners who maintained regular family engagement were significantly more likely to express confidence in their ability to reintegrate into society after their release. 65 per cent of prisoners with consistent family contact expressed positive reintegration prospects, compared to just 25 per cent of those without family support. This stark contrast highlights the importance of familial support in fostering hope for the future and re-entry success.
- The presence of family support often plays a pivotal role in providing prisoners with the resources, encouragement, and emotional backing necessary for successful reintegration. Research has shown that strong family ties can increase motivation, reduce recidivism, and facilitate a smoother transition to life after detention (Visher & Travis, 2003). Families not only offer emotional support but also act as practical resources, helping to secure housing, employment, and social connections upon release.

5 Perceptions of Societal Support

Community Engagement and Support

- The finding that only 20 per cent of families reported receiving any form of support from community organizations or NGOs points to a significant gap in the availability of external resources for families of undertrial prisoners. Despite the critical challenges these families face—ranging from emotional distress to financial burdens—community organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) appear to play a limited role in providing necessary assistance. This finding suggests that, while a small percentage of families benefit from external support, there is a need for expanded outreach and intervention from social service providers and advocacy groups to help families navigate the challenges of supporting incarcerated relatives.
- The positive impact observed among the 80 per cent of families receiving community support highlights the potential for community-based initiatives to strengthen family engagement and improve coping strategies. Support from NGOs can offer emotional assistance, financial aid, and guidance on navigating the criminal justice system. Studies indicate that social support, especially from community organizations, helps reduce stress, enhances resilience, and increases the likelihood that families will stay engaged with their incarcerated loved ones (Mumola, 2000). Families with access to such resources are better positioned to

manage the burdens of incarceration, which can be a key factor in maintaining familial ties and supporting the rehabilitation process of the incarcerated individual.

Awareness of Legal Rights and Need for Outreach

The finding that only 30 per cent of families were aware of their legal rights to visitation and communication underscores a significant deficiency in legal literacy among families of undertrial prisoners. Legal ignorance can perpetuate feelings of powerlessness and frustration, making it difficult for families to advocate for their rights effectively. This gap in awareness suggests the need for improved outreach and education efforts by legal aid organizations, prison authorities, and community-based services to inform families of their rights and available resources.

Lack of knowledge about visitation rights and communication options is particularly detrimental to families who may already face systemic barriers such as financial constraints, distance, and bureaucratic hurdles. Legal education and awareness can empower families, enabling them to better navigate the prison system and advocate for more equitable treatment of incarcerated relatives (Solomon, 2008). Legal literacy programs and workshops could significantly enhance families' ability to stay connected with undertrial prisoners, thereby improving emotional support and facilitating the maintenance of relationships during the period of detention.

Suggestion and Recommendation

- Create Subsidized Transportation Programs for Families
- Implement Flexible Visiting Hours
- Enhance Digital Communication Access
- Increase Legal Awareness Programs
- Strengthen Partnerships with NGOs and Community Organizations
- Provide Financial Assistance for Communication Costs
- Develop Peer Support Networks for Families
- Address Stigma Through Public Awareness Campaigns
- Offer Family-Centered Counselling and Support Services
- Create Dedicated Legal Aid Services for Families

Conclusion

The present study concludes that family plays a decisive and differential role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of undertrial prisoners, with educational status emerging as a critical mediating factor. The findings clearly demonstrate that educated undertrial prisoners benefit from stronger, more consistent, and more effective family support compared to their uneducated counterparts.

Families of educated undertrial prisoners are better positioned to provide emotional

stability, legal awareness, and economic assistance, which collectively contribute to improved psychological well-being and more favorable legal trajectories. Regular family contact, informed legal follow-up, and future-oriented encouragement act as protective factors, reducing stress, uncertainty, and the negative consequences of prolonged undertrial detention.

In contrast, uneducated undertrial prisoners and their families experience multiple layers of disadvantage. Limited legal literacy, economic vulnerability, and heightened social stigma significantly weaken family support systems. As a result, uneducated undertrial prisoners are more likely to suffer from emotional distress, prolonged detention, and a sense of hopelessness, further deepening their marginalization within the criminal justice system.

The study also highlights the institutional gap in addressing these inequalities. While prison administrators and social workers play a crucial role in facilitating family interaction, their impact remains constrained by systemic limitations and uneven family engagement. This underscores the need for targeted, family-centered interventions, particularly for uneducated undertrial prisoners.

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