

The American prison system is one of the most dangerous environments for the spread of Covid-19. With already cramped cells and cafeterias either at capacity or overcrowded, proper social distancing is impossible. It doesn't help that prisons are chronically understaffed and can refuse to give proper sanitation products to prisoners. Due to these factors, its unfortunately no surprise that Covid-19 has run rampant within our prisons – devastating the prisoners and staff alike. My research is into how prisoners have coped with living in such a stressful environment and the effect said coping has had on their experience of stress, anxiety, and depression.

My name is Sam Beery and I'm a senior psych student here at BG. I started this project after reading reports about the Marion Correctional Facility here in Ohio. For a brief moment last summer, the Marion Correctional Facility had the highest concentration of Covid-19 cases in the country, with more than 80% of the prisoners there being infected. I was furious that our nation could permit such a vile ethical failure to occur on its watch, and ashamed that it happened just an hour away from where I live. I was disgusted when I heard that people were frequently spouting that the high Covid concentrations in prisons were not a concern because prisons were “closed systems”, as if the suffering of prisoners was inconsequential so long as the people outside the prison walls were unaffected.

I have no idea how public discourse around prisoners could be so rotten yet easily accepted. That's where I got the motivation to do research into this population - I figured prisoners could stand to have some more representation. I'm studying to be a psychologist, so I decided to put my discipline's tools into practice. I started talking with some professors I knew, Matt Draper at Utah Valley University and Eric Dubow here at BG, about this idea I had. Both professors gave me the same responses: “That's a wonderful idea for research” and “it would be nearly impossible”.

Getting approval for this project would be incredibly difficult. I learned that when you conduct research on a prison population, in addition to IRB approval you also need DOJ approval. While IRB approval is straightforward, DOJ approval has much more red-tape and requires close cooperation. Paradoxically, to get approval from either organization I would need to present approval from the other simultaneously. I knew it would be difficult to try to conduct this research, but I was prepared for the long haul.

And then I was immediately denied approval from the DOJ. In less than a week of correspondence any hope of working directly with Ohio prisons had been shot down. They were not accepting any research at this time unless its aim was to help prevent the spread of covid. Onto my backup plan: Paul Boxer at Rutgers university spoke with me and said that he conducts his research on prisoners by contacting halfway houses to avoid the red tape. So that's what I decided to do. I reached out to many halfway houses across Ohio and eventually many reentry coalitions as well just to see if they would consider supporting my research. After a handful gave me the affirmative, I had the evidence I needed to assume that this research was viable, and I was good to go ahead with it.

Now that I had sources for getting in contact with prisoners, I needed to develop my questionnaire. Ultimately, I decided to include four different well validated surveys:

The Covid Stress Scale was the first questionnaire I decided to include because it was designed specifically to measure distress caused from the pandemic. It is comprised of 6, 6-question subscales of distress relating to covid: danger, socio-economic consequences, xenophobia, contamination, traumatic stress, and compulsive checking.

The next scale I chose was the Brief RCOPE, a 14-item measure of religious coping by BG's own Dr. Pargament. I am personally very interested in religious thinking, so using religious coping as

a protective factor for distress excited me. Having a connection with the scholarly work from the BG psych department was nice added bonus.

The next scale added to the questionnaire was the Brief COPE, a 28-item measure of general coping. This scale was added to be a comparison with religious coping so that the religious aspect of the Brief RCOPE could be differentiated from the effects of general coping. Up until the addition of these scales my research question was “what is the experience of prisoners in a Covid world?”, but now that I was delving deeper into the coping aspect of their response to the pandemic the question shifted. Now, the question is “how do prisoners cope with the pandemic”.

The last scale added was the Beck Depression Inventory II, a 21-item scale that measures depression. This was included to supplement the anxiety and stress already measured by the Covid Stress Scale.

After I finalized which scales would be included in the questionnaire, I fine tuned the wording of the scales. I ensured that respondents were thinking about distress caused by Covid rather than just general distress, and that the question is about their feelings while they were in prison, not how they feel now. Lastly, I removed questions that might cause distress in the respondents, like questions about thoughts of suicide, and questions that would be inapplicable to life in prison. In total, 8 questions were removed, leaving my questionnaire with a total of 91-questions that should take about 20 minutes to fill out.

I submitted for approval several weeks ago and plan on collecting data from previously incarcerated people through Qualtrics throughout the summer. I'll be contacting many many more halfway houses and reentry coalitions with a goal of getting responses from 100 participants. My hypotheses are that higher levels of stress will be correlated with higher levels of anxiety and

depression; and that more positive religious and general coping will be associated with less stress and depression due to the pandemic. Hopefully, this research will grant us a better understanding of the origins of distress in prisoners and how we can better mitigate this distress in the future.