**Subject: Growing Old in Prison: The Incarceration Experience from the Perspective of Elderly Prisoners Incarcerated for the First Time**

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In recent decades, reports from some Western countries have emerged concerning the growing prevalence of elderly inmates among the general inmate population. This growth is partially attributed to aging populations and rising crime rates among older people. At the same time, this aging population includes criminals incarcerated for the first time, who in some cases account for more than half of the elderly prisoners (Sodhi-Berry et al., 2015). In conjunction with the rest of the Western world, the prisoner population in Israel is also growing older. Further, there is a significant rise in the number of elderly prisoners in Israel. For example, during the years 2001–2011, the number of criminal prisoners aged 55 and above saw a 191% increase, almost tripling itself. This can be compared to a rise of 40.5% in the number of younger criminal prisoners (Davidescko & Walk, 2012). The Israel Prison Service report for 2020 reveals that between 2010 and 2020 there was an ongoing increase in the number of prisoners aged over 55, with the biggest increase being among prisoners aged 65 and above. Whereas in 2010 there were 153 prisoners aged over 63, it increased to 275 by 2020 (Israel Prison Service, 2021).

The literature classifies older criminals using a typology that consists of three groups, based on the individual’s criminal history. These are: 1) elderly prisoners who committed their first offence in the later stages of life; 2) recidivists, who are ordinary criminals who have grown old while repeatedly committing crimes; and 3) life prisoners serving long term sentences (Aday, 1994; Goetting, 1984; Maschi et al., 2013; Uzoaba, 1998). The ambiguity of these categories has led to the formation of a fourth category, intended to differentiate those who were convicted of their first crime before belonging to the “elderly” category from other older criminals (Goetting, 1984). However, all these categories are mainly related to classification and correction, rather than the crimes that were committed. At the same time, the literature does recognize that in Israel most of the older male prisoners are incarcerated for homicide, sex crimes, or drug-related crimes, whereas female prisoners are likely to be incarcerated for homicide or drug-related crimes (Aday, 2003; Aday & Krabill, 2011).

Wahidin and Aday (2010) identified several “incarceration pains” characteristic of elderly prisoners, with an emphasis on those who committed their first crime after the age of 50:

1. They often suffer from shock or difficulty with coping with incarceration late in life;
2. They can be alienated from their family due to violent crimes they committed against family members;
3. They may suffer from depression and anxiety issues related to the loss of family, friends, and life on the outside;
4. They may be experiencing intense guilt over sex crimes or murders they committed against family members;
5. They may be experiencing increased fear related to being incarcerated late in life—fragile and vulnerable prisoners are particularly susceptible to this;
6. They may isolate themselves from the broader social environment and spend a lot of time in their cell;
7. They may experience suicidal thoughts—this is more prevalent among prisoners who enter prison with pre-existing mental issues;
8. They may develop unrealistic expectations of the prison healthcare services, often comparing them to their experiences on the outside.

Moreover, incarceration limits the interaction with their family members, causing older prisoners to often lose touch with the outside world. Prisoners who have committed sex crimes or crimes against family members can be in conflicted relationships with their families, having little or no visits from close friends or family members (Maschi et al., 2013).

Until the 1970s, the scientific discussion on the issue of elderly prisoners received practically no attention in the public or scientific discourse in Israel, as with the topic of the elderly population in general. While several studies have been conducted since then, they have been very limited in scope and their findings have not always been congruent with one another. The first pioneering study in the field of elderly prisoners in Israel was published in the early 1970s when the issues of delinquency and the punishment of elderly prisoners were beginning to raise some interest. The paper was written by criminologists Bergman and Amir (1973), who spearheaded the field by examining the social and cultural difficulties faced by elderly prisoners (aged 60 and above). They argued that the number of elderly prisoners was relatively small, as these enjoyed lenient and considerate treatment from the judiciary authority. In all matters on elderly prisoners, Bergman and Amir presented a realistic position of weakness and dependence and claimed that the physical and mental state of elderly prisoners quickly deteriorated in prison. They described the elderly prisoners as being at the mercy of the younger ones, who were more aggressive and frightening, and who threatened or humiliated the elderly prisoners. According to this description, the elderly prisoners were depressed and dependent on the protection provided by the prison guards and authorities and ultimately suffered from a lack of friends, occupation, and reasonable living conditions.

The next study conducted in Israel was that of Silfen et al. (1977), which was based on interviews with 15 prisoners aged 50 and above. The researchers focused on how elderly prisoners adjusted to their prison sentences. The findings contradicted the previous claims made by Bergman and Amir. Silfen et al. found that most of the elderly prisoners adjusted well to life in prison. Moreover, the elderly prisoners appeared to be healthier and seemed younger than their physical age and that contrary to Bergman and Amir’s claims, did not suffer humiliation or injury at the hands of younger prisoners—but rather the opposite—they were respected and even assisted by them. Furthermore, when the elderly prisoners had functional issues, the prison authorities were flexible and tried to help them by allowing them certain leniencies. This was not done as part of an overall policy but was the product of the daily dynamics of prison life.

In the 1990s, another two important studies were conducted. Barak et al. (1995) focused on analyzing the mental state of elderly prisoners incarcerated for the first time. Their findings revealed that about half of the elderly prisoners suffered from a neuropsychiatric disorder and of these, about half suffered from dementia and personality disorders. The study, which was descriptive in nature, was based on the general prisoner population sentenced to Israeli prisons during 1992–1994. The descriptive findings of this study presented, for the first time in Israel, a comprehensive picture of elderly prisoners on a very broad spectrum of variables. It is interesting to note that ultimately the study only presented descriptive findings and that despite its broad scope, it avoided the attempt to identify research relationships beyond the descriptive aspects.

In 2006, Doron conducted a qualitative study to try to understand, learn, and become familiar with the world of independent elderly prisoners incarcerated at Maasiyahu Prison (Doron 2006; Doron, 2007). Twelve prisoners from the elderly or hospital wings in Maasiyahu Prison participated in the study, most of whom were recidivists who had been incarcerated before. The study presented a dual experience of aging prisoners. On the one hand, they described their conditions as “heaven” compared to those of other prisoners. Their conditions were not rigid and they could spend time outdoors or take part in activities on the lawn, giving them the illusion that they had nothing to worry about. On the other hand, it was still a prison—a place that took away their freedom and did not allow them to meet with family members or live their life as they wished. This dual attitude toward the prison experience describes Maasiyahu Prison as a haven within the confines of the Israel Prison Service. Thus, the elderly wing at Maasiyahu Prison is a unique incarceration facility: it is not “heaven” nor is it “hell”, yet it has elements of both. It is a shelter and a refuge that protects a unique group of prisoners, providing them with a safe and relatively free environment they would not have been able to find in other, regular, incarceration facilities. Therefore, the findings of this study indicate that any attempt to describe the incarceration experience in old age as a one-dimensional concept, i.e., as “heaven” or “hell”, will not be true to reality, as it is complex and combines aspects of both characteristics. This creates a unique incarceration experience, evident from the voices brought forth in the study, which presents the elderly wing in Maasiyahu Prison as a unique incarceration facility.

The older prisoner population is characterized by the intersection of weakness, age, and incarceration factors. The term “intersectionality” refers to a research field that is currently gaining momentum in academic discourse. It describes the intersection of social association categories and points out the prevalence of discrimination and exclusion of marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1991). The term stems from the recognition that various weakening factors are not separate entities but can coexist as a complex phenomenon that shapes many phenomena of social inequality (Collins, 2015; Luna, 2018).

A review of the literature on aging in prison in Israel reveals that very few studies have been conducted on the topic, despite the rising rates of older prisoners. The incarceration experience of prisoners incarcerated for the first time at an old age is an issue that has barely been addressed in research literature both in Israel and globally.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the incarceration experience among the older population of prisoners incarcerated for the first time, from the perspective of the prisoners themselves. This includes the coping mechanisms they develop, their main difficulties and concerns, and examining solutions that may help this unique population adjust, to thereby enable the creation of customized intervention and rehabilitation programs for them both in prison and after their release.

**Method**

**Participants**

About 15–20 authorized parolees who were incarcerated for the first time at the age of 55 or older, whose details can be obtained from the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority.

**Tools**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by a research assistant specializing in the fields of both incarceration and gerontology.

**Research timeline:** October 2002 to September 2023: obtaining approval and collecting data.

October 2023 to June 2024: data analysis and writing the report.

**Budget specifications:**

Research assistants: 500 hours, NIS 17,000

Travel expenses: NIS 3,000

Translation and editing:

Publishing a research report on aging in prison and the mental wellbeing of older prisoners: NIS 15,000

Purchasing printing equipment (printer, ink, paper): NIS 2,000

Traveling to an international conference and presenting the research findings (2 researchers): NIS 10,000

Total: NIS 51,000

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