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## Prisoners' Use of Social Support

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### Acknowledgments

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## Structure of Thesis

This thesis has been prepared as two separate manuscripts that were prepared in accordance with the instructions for contributors to the journal of “Criminal Justice and Behavior”. The first manuscript is a literature review and the second reports an empirical study. Each manuscript has its own title page, running head, abstract, and references and each is numbered from page one. A photocopy of the instructions for submitting publications to “Criminal Justice and Behavior” is located in Appendix A. United States spelling was used in both manuscripts as per the criteria for publication in “Criminal Justice and Behavior”. The thesis has its own separate appendices that follow the second manuscript. These appendices present material that is required by the University but that would not normally be included in a journal article.

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Maintenance and Establishment of Supportive Relationships

During Imprisonment

Gaynor S Hobbs

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### Abstract

It is generally acknowledged that prison is often a stressful environment, yet little is known of the coping processes employed by prisoners. This paper aims to examine the question of what facilitates and frustrates prisoners' use of social support whilst imprisoned. This question is examined with regards to both informal (family and friends, other prisoners) and formal sources of support (professional support services, peer support prisoners, prison officers). The conclusion that was drawn from this review of the literature is that the role of social support in correctional environments is largely unknown and current thinking is based primarily on anecdotal evidence. Future research should examine prisoners' evaluations of support sources so that services can be directed to best meet prisoners' needs.

## Maintenance and Establishment of Supportive Relationships

### During Imprisonment

Since prison is a stressful environment, the availability of social support is likely to be a significant factor in a prisoner's capacity to adapt to his circumstances. However, the significance of social support in prison environments is largely unknown due to the lack of research on prisoners' perceptions of social supports and their use of supports whilst in prison. The purpose of this paper was to review prisoners' use of social supports in order to determine what facilitates and frustrates prisoners' access to social supports. This review examined both informal (family and friends outside of prison, other prisoners) and formal sources of support (professional support services, peer support prisoners, prison officers). These sources of support are discussed from a system perspective (the prison) and an individual perspective (prisoners). Problems for prison administrators in facilitating access to those supports that prisoners perceive as effective to meet their needs are also discussed.

### What is Social Support?

The concept of social support is complex and there are many different ways of conceptualising and defining it. Hart (1995) defined social support as "interpersonal ties that are rewarding and protective of an individual" (p. 68). However, Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason (1983) refer to social support as the "existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value and love us" (p. 127). Unlike the first definition, this refers to an individual's access to the support, or indeed, if anyone exists in their social environment. McColl, Lei & Skinner (1995) add another dimension to the definition of social support, "the perception that one is cared for and esteemed by others, who could be called upon should the need arise" (p. 395). This definition highlights the individual's perception of being cared about and that the individual himself / herself seeks out

the support. What is not addressed by any of these definitions is the diversity in the reasons for why the support is sought and what needs are being met by the individual.

For the purposes of this review, social support will be defined as any form of assistance that may be sought from or provided by another person or persons in order to meet one's needs (e.g., advice). The individual does not necessarily have to actively seek the support, but may be assisted merely through the perception that support is available should it be pursued.

There have been two main hypotheses discussed in the literature about the relationship between stress and social support : buffering and main effect. The buffering hypothesis suggests that the role of social support is to protect an individual from the "influence of stressful life events" (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 310). This suggests that in times of stress, those individuals who lack social support would demonstrate a greater decrease in well-being than would those individuals who are well supported (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1994). Conversely, the main effects hypothesis suggest that an individual's social resources will have a positive effect, regardless of whether or not the individual is experiencing stress. Therefore, the availability to relationships that are caring and supportive to an individual is related to his/her overall well-being and would enhance his/her quality of life (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe). Both of these theories have received empirical support (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe), however support for the buffering hypothesis is less consistent (Krause, 1995).

Social support is a useful aspect of coping, but is not necessarily the only option. For example, some individuals may choose to cope alone. Some may argue that the notion of support is in the eye of the beholder, whereby "support is not actually supportive unless the individual perceives it to be" (Dingle, 1993, p. 36).

In most theories of social support it is assumed that all sources of support are actually supportive (Pagel, Erdly & Becker, 1987). This assumes that the primary function of

supportive relationships is actual support, thereby ignoring the fact that all social relationships can entail both costs and benefits to the provider and the recipient (Larson & Lee, 1996). In addition, little is known about what aspects or conditions of the support makes it protective, harmful or beneficial.

There can be incongruence between the support received and the support sought by an individual (McColl, Lei & Skinner, 1995). An individual, who is isolated or has limited contact with a support, can maintain a 'sense of being supported'. Cohen & Wills (1985) suggest that the most effective support is provided and received within normal daily interactions, where it is not asked for, and the provider and recipients are not unduly affected by these interactions. Moreover, an individual can receive beneficial support but be unaware of this process.

Actions that are intended to be supportive and helpful can result in negative consequences (Wilcox & Vernberg, 1985). For a recipient of social support there is an implied assumption that support is actively sought and gratefully received. However, the costs and risks involved could create a situation whereby the recipient avoids or rejects any assistance offered or prevents initiating any contact. Factors such as appearing weak, expected reciprocity, embarrassment and fear of potential rejection could influence an individual seeking support (Blanchard, Ruckdeschel, Grant & Hemmick, 1995 ; Robertson, Elder, Skinner & Conger, 1991 ; Schuster, Kessler & Aseltine, 1990 ; Thoits, 1986).

The process of care-giving may also be perceived as a burden, especially when it is not reciprocated (Robertson, Elder, Skinner & Conger, 1991). Concerns for creating dependency may prevent assistance being offered in the reality of having scarce resources already and the likelihood of support continuing over a long period. This is important especially among those individuals serving long terms of imprisonment.

The remainder of this paper is discussed in two main sections : Informal and Formal sources of support. Informal sources of support are those that occur naturally in our environment and include family and friends outside prison and other prisoners. Formal sources of support are specifically set up within the prison environment and have a specific support role to prisoners. Formal sources of support include professional support services, peer support prisoners and prison officers. Each of these sources will be discussed in terms of how the prison environment facilitates and frustrates prisoners' use of that source of support.

### Informal Sources of Support

#### Family and Friends Outside Prison

Imprisonment indicates a significant break in the individual's contact with the outside world. Even though social bonds can be maintained to some extent with visits and telephone access, imprisonment might significantly alter an individual's perception of important relationships and the capacity of those relationships to give and receive support. Maintaining these relationships is also shaped by the prison environment.

Separation and isolation from the family can be very stressful for the prisoner. Adams (1992) commented that the process of separation and isolation can create burdensome problems that may lead to prisoners responding in extreme ways (e.g., self-harm). In a Western Australian study on self-harm prisoners, Dear, Thomson, Hall & Howells (1998), found that 19.7% of self-harm prisoners reported the stress of being isolated from family was their most significant stressor in prison compared to 7% of the comparison group. Separation from family, friends and relatives is considered one of the hardest factors to endure in prison (Adams, 1992). Zamble & Porporino (1988) conducted a study on the coping resources used by prisoners in a Canadian prison. These 133 prisoners had sentences or more than two years and were interviewed twice, the second interview being 16 months later. At the time of entering prison, the most frequently stated difficulty for inmates was being separated from

family and friends (82%). Zamble & Porporino also indicated that further interviews (conducted a year later) produced similar results regarding the difficulties experienced. Therefore, these stressors appear to endure.

Maintaining relationships with people who are outside prison can be especially challenging for prisoners serving long sentences. Homer (1979) stated that “strong social ties between an inmate, his family and friends are remarkably resistant to the expected eroding influences of time spent in prison” (p. 48). However, recent research is inconsistent with this. A family might be willing to support and wait in the short term (two to three years) but is less likely to wait ten to twenty years which might create barriers such that the marriage will not survive (Carlson & Cervera, 1992 ; Flanagan, 1980a). Holt and Miller (1972, cited in Carlson & Cervera) found that the proportion of prisoners currently in a marital relationship decreases with time spent in custody, especially after the second year of imprisonment. After three years, it was reported that less than 25% of inmates who were married when they entered prison continued to receive visits from their wives.

Sapsford’s (1978) study of 50 long-term prisoners found that as time in custody increased involvement with people outside the prison decreased. Interestingly, this study found that after five years, almost all long-term prisoners no longer had contact with girlfriends or wives. On the other hand, contact with parents, siblings and children continued for longer periods of time (although the frequency of this contact varied between family members). However, these findings are not conclusive, given the small sample and the exclusion of prisoners over the age of 47 years, that half of the sample were serving life sentences, and that all had received convictions of homicide.

The research cited spans almost 20 years. During this time, rules surrounding visits have experienced considerable changes. Where visits were once the exception, they are now more available and this can facilitate a relationship continuing. In addition, prisoners



(depending on their security rating) are more likely to be incarcerated as close to their family supports as possible, again with the aim of facilitating contact. Therefore, making comparisons between these studies is difficult, as there may be many other variables to consider (such as the length of the relationship prior to imprisonment).

Although an individual may have support available from family or friends, some individuals remain either unwilling or unable to make effective use of that support (Thoits, 1986). There are several reasons for this. The prisoner may feel that his/her family does not understand and can't sympathise about life within the prison and is therefore not able to provide any help (Flanagan, 1980b). The lack of knowledge about inmate codes and prison environments can make the prisoner's problems on a daily level seem "quite trivial and relatively uncomplicated" to those outside prison (Dingle, 1993, p. 27). Information about life outside and family can lead to feelings of anxiety and helplessness, and some prisoners may sever all external contacts to avoid such stress. Conversely, some family members communicate selectively with the prisoners, reducing their frustrations and anxieties in not being able to help or provide formal assistance (Dingle).

There is some evidence that prisoners on average have cognitive processing deficits where they have difficulty interpreting the actions and intentions of other people (Robinson & Porporino, in press). These deficits might also encompass poor planning ability and limited perspective taking. Even though prisoners have supports that they can access, since they are not likely to solve problems in problem-oriented approach, they might not access those supports. As a result of these deficits, they might not access those supports that are available to them.

#### System Factors and Maintaining Contact with People Outside Prison

Carlson & Cervera (1992) suggested that maintaining contact with spouses, children, friends and extended family can help the prisoner to adjust to prison. Family solidarity and

feelings of closeness may be maintained during imprisonment by the prisoner having frequent contact with family and friends on the outside. However, prisoners have limited means of maintaining ties with the outside (Carson & Cervera), the main methods being mail, telephone and visits.

Visits can be difficult to maintain for several reasons. A family travelling to a regional location in order to visit a family member may occur less frequently (due to the financial burden of the journey and the time required) (Dingle, 1993). This is particularly evident for foreign nationals, imprisoned outside their home country where visits are least likely to occur (Richards, McWilliams, Batten, Cameron & Culter, 1995). As Fishman & Alissi (1979) state, the family must learn to cope with a frightening system in order to maintain contact with the prisoner. Family members may be subjected to property and body searches. Although this is done on a random basis, some individuals are searched each time they visit if they have previously breached visit guidelines (such as possessing contraband items). In situations such as this, the prisoner might discourage visits, thereby losing this avenue for contact.

In prison, visits are held in designated restricted areas within the prison. The environment of visits is closely monitored making communication difficult due to the lack of privacy (Dingle, 1993). This can be quite intimidating to the visitor and awkward to the prisoner if he or she wanted to reveal information about the prison environment. Therefore, communication is guarded, with neither party disclosing the full realities of their problems (Dingle, 1993).

The irregularity of, or time between, visits can be frustrating for the prisoner. Schafer (1978) suggested that limiting the length and frequency of visits impacts upon the prisoner. Restrictions on the length and frequency of visits are likely to be more severe in larger prisons where there is a high demand for limited visiting facilities. The times at which visits are

allowed by prison systems might not facilitate visits, such as only on weekdays or not on public holidays.

Other than face to face contact there are other forms of contact available to prisoners, such as mail and telephone calls. However, these forms of contact are also constrained by prison procedures (e.g., monitoring), which may effect its use by prisoners (Morris, 1965). The exchange of letters is considered a major contact point between friends and family and the prisoner (Brodsky, 1971). However, many prisoners have poor literacy skills and they may be too embarrassed to seek any skills to use letters as a form of contact (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Given a prisoner's knowledge of the content of letters being monitored may decrease its effectiveness with prisoners limiting self disclosures and expressing themselves (Martin & Webster, 1971).

Currently for Western Australian sentenced prisoners, the prison will incur the cost of postage on 12 letters per year (16 per year if serving seven years or more). Letters being written or received are subject to monitoring by prison staff. Matters in relation to the content of letters will only be acted on if it is a threat to a person or the order of the prison. Any packages sent to the prison are thoroughly searched prior to being given to the prisoners (Director General's Rules, 1999 ; Prisons Act Western Australia, 1981). However, this is the Western Australian experience and these conditions may not apply to other prisons, which may be specified for prisoner's needs or more detrimental to facilitating contact. The rules governing the censorship of mail received or written is conducted in the interests of the best practices of the prison and security. However, focusing on best practices and security does not facilitate prisoners' use of this form of contact, such as encouraging and teaching skills to use letters as a form of contact.

Telephone contact involves direct communication with immediate feedback, which can be recorded unobtrusively (Howard League for Penal Reform, 1979). Use of the

telephone can be rather expensive and the length of calls may be regulated (Carlson & Cervera, 1992). Times available to access phones can create difficulties especially when making calls to family overseas in different time zones (Richards, McWilliams, Batten, Cameron & Cutler, 1995). Small numbers of phones available in the prison might not match the demand. Queues and lack of privacy (open locations) lead to conversations being less intimate than they would otherwise be.

In Western Australia, while prisoners have unrestricted access (outside lock down times), the Director General's Rules (1999) state that the use of the telephone is a privilege and not a right. Therefore, security restrictions, management control and disciplinary action can regulate use of the telephone. All telephone numbers must be approved before making calls. All parties to a telephone conversation are informed at the start of the call that it will be recorded and monitored. Calls are paid for by the prisoner's pre-paid account, unless it is of a compassionate nature or special circumstances, in which the prison incurs this cost. Those who are not able to receive visits can (if approved by the Superintendent) on stated times and days, receive international or regional telephone calls (Director General's Rules ; Prisons Act Western Australia, 1981).

Family and friends outside prison are important sources of support, in prisoners' adjustment to prison and where separation is reported as a significant source of stress for prisoners. Even though the role of family and friends outside prison has been researched in many ways, the research is incomplete in nature. However, it appears to make intuitive sense. All forms of contact with individuals outside prison are directed and controlled by the prison. Although, as a consequence of this it can create difficulties and potentially threaten a prisoner's relationships. This can be seen through limited disclosures due to being monitored, visitors subjected to body searches and infrequent visits. There is probably no one factor which facilitates or frustrates prisoners contact with these sources outside prison. Even

though on face value it appears that the prison system frustrates prisoners access to these supports, working in conjunction with best prison practices and security this seems a natural consequence. Although it may not, in itself threaten the relationship.

### Other Prisoners

When an individual first enters prison, attempts are made to orientate him/her. For many, this may require establishing ties. However, not all prisoners have close friends in prison. Other prisoners maintain the maxim within a prison that inmates should 'do their own time' (Flanagan, 1980b). For some prisoners, one of the worst parts of 'doing your time' is the individuals with whom you have to share your imprisonment. There are several factors that facilitate and frustrate prisoners receiving support from other prisoners.

Choosing friends in prison is not always voluntary or entered into in a haphazard manner (Larson & Nelson, 1984). Those prisoners sharing the same living unit, treatment program or work environment will usually gravitate towards each other (Slosar, 1978). Individuals with similar experiences, problems and goals are attractive and comfortable to have in one's presence. Thoits (1986) suggested that those who have dealt, or are dealing, with the same stress and are handling it, may be sought for support. Therefore, it may be assumed that those who have experienced the same situation may be perceived as most likely to understand and provide empathy.

Hart (1995) stated that men generally tend to do their own time. Conversely for women, primary ties are formed in prison and they establish networks of support with other prisoners. Whilst many prisoners do socialise, these relationships are very often not close (Zamble & Porporino, 1988). This may be a consequence of the prison environment and who individuals share their imprisonment with. Zamble and Porporino also suggested that many prisoners felt they had no one to confide in when experiencing problems, only 40% or less of the 133 prisoners sampled (using questionnaires) had no friends in prison.. Similar findings

were reported by Liebling & Krarup's (1993) study where the general prison population expressed the feeling of "being on their own in prison" (p. 81), having difficulty mixing socially with other inmates. These prisoners may feel unable to maintain a friendship in prison, and may not associate a prison environment with the formation of close friendships, therefore they avoid establishing friendships.

Not all individuals have a confidant, nor are individuals' attempts to seek support always successful (Larson & Lee, 1996). Some individuals choose to cope alone and to not rely on others. Flanagan (1980b) reported that with almost every problem situation encountered by prisoners, the preferred coping strategy was dealing with the problem themselves. Zamble & Porporino (1988) stated that even though most prisoners spent most of their spare time with friends (established in prison), they did not feel they had someone to confide in when they had a problem. Furthermore, strategies such as self-reliance were strong preferences in prisoners coping (Adams, 1992). As Larson and Lee suggest, those individuals who choose to be alone, to appraise situations and restore emotions, regardless of their relationships with others are likely to be able to cope effectively with stress. However, for those who do not choose solitude voluntarily, it can be associated with pain and loneliness. In a prison environment, individuals' normal coping mechanisms are altered. It may be assumed that a prisoner who has always preferred to cope alone may cope better than a prisoner who feels forced to cope alone or to find new coping mechanisms to handle the stressors of imprisonment.

Socialisation and social networks in prison can be described as a direct consequence of the individual or the prison environment. Once imprisoned, the individual is now faced with a series of deprivations (freedom, autonomy, heterosexual relationships) and individuals react depending on the extent to which this is felt by him/her. Therefore, in response to these deprivations, smaller groups are created whereby attempts are made to reallocate resources,

and maintain the prisoners social identity and self-image. This refers to the deprivation model of inmate social systems outlined by Slosar (1978). Those friendships that are established fulfil a purpose or need for the prisoner in order to alleviate the deprivations experienced.

The friends that an inmate has in prison can create special problems, as it can mean responsibilities towards that person. Receiving support can mean providing it to other inmates in the form of physical support (in fights and altercations) which may lead to disciplinary action (Adams, 1992 ; Flanagan, 1980a). As a result of this, many inmates will limit the number of friends that they have. For some inmates, especially long-term prisoners, friendships are considered transient. With prisoners being release from day to day, the friendship and companionship dissolve (Flanagan, 1980a). Companions for long-term inmates are usually those prisoners serving similar long sentences, ensuring some limited continuity in the relationship. Zamble & Porporino (1988) stated that prisoners who have problems and share those problems with other prisoners only serve to amplify the same problems or deprivations that they are experiencing. This may prompt an inmate to choose solitude, withdrawing from others and declining to share his/her problems with others.

Apart from those sharing cells and formal work or treatment programs, there is little formal time for social interaction (Biggam & Power, 1997). It occurs more as a consequence of routine (during meals, muster). Moreover, in those hours where socialisation is possible, there are few other alternatives. Therefore, the prison regime forces interaction (Zamble & Porporino, 1988), yet limits it with little or no privacy to establish friendships (Biggam & Power). This may be an exaggeration, as many prisoners do establish bonds and friendships during imprisonment. Establishing ties does not seem dependent on the time available.

The research presented appears to support the prison maxim of 'do your own time'. Many prisoners seem to cope alone or have limited numbers of friendships, rather having associates / acquaintances in the prison environment. It is difficult to ascertain from the

literature what facilitates and frustrates prisoners use of other prisoners as support. However, it can be assumed that the prison environment shapes these relationships. Rather than facilitate socialization, the prison appears to allow this to occur as a consequence of other circumstances (e.g., sharing a cell).

### Formal Sources of Support

#### Professional Support Services

Professional support services are established in most prison environments. These can include psychologists, social workers, welfare officers and chaplains. Unlike a prison officer, professional service providers do not maintain a custodial role in the prison. Sundt & Cullen (1998) studied the role of the prison chaplain and found that their role included not only religious services but also counselling.

Formal prison based supports such as psychologists, can assist prisoners in a personal crisis, adjustment difficulties and counselling. The effectiveness and use of these supports are dependent on other factors. First, the means by which these supports are accessed. If prisons are overcrowded there may be long waiting times, which are not conducive to the amelioration of their problem. Secondly, the range of facilities that are available for individuals with limited, or no, command of the English language. Thirdly, whether or not prisoners are aware of the formal prison based support staff.

There is an obvious lack of research in this area. Whilst the establishment of these supports facilitates prisoners' individual problems being addressed, we are unaware of what frustrates access. Though anecdotal, it could be assumed if the prison has limited experienced professional support staff and the prison is overcrowded, these frustrations would be evident.

#### Peer Support Prisoners

Some prison systems around the world (e.g., Western Australian secure prisons, some prisons in the United Kingdom) have established formal peer-support programs. These



programs generally involve a team of prisoners within the prison who befriend and listen to other prisoners who are in distress or experiencing difficulty coping. There is no published research in evaluating this program or data pertaining to prisoners' perceptions of the program's effectiveness.

The use of this support will be determined by a prisoner's willingness to approach other prisoners. Although distressed prisoners might be more open to discussing their problems with a peer-support prisoner than other prisoners in general. Also, the limitations of prisoner to prisoner support discussed earlier in this paper might also apply to peer-support prisoners. Excluding a prisoner's membership to this program, he or she remains a prisoner under the same conditions as other prisoners. They may be perceived as holding no more control over their environment or the problem they are experiencing than do other prisoners.

### Prison Officers

The relationship between staff and inmates is a vital aspect of secure environments, such as a prison or prison-hospital (Ben-David & Silfen, 1994). In every aspect of a prisoner's daily life he or she is dependent on prison officers. This can range from access to a telephone to replacing a light globe. Even though the importance of this relationship is recognised, research on the interrelationships between inmates and prison officers is limited and the matter remains "poorly articulated, unmeasured and taken for granted" (Liebling & Price, 1998, p. 6).

Liebling & Price (1998) stated that a prison officer has four main roles : maintain security, provide care (with humanity), allow opportunities to address offending behavior and assist with daily management in the prison environment. For many officers, initiating contact with a prisoner is based on the officer's knowledge of the individual. In addition, the officer may take into account a prisoner's reputation, attitude, sincerity and reality of the problem (Lombardo, 1989). The establishment of Unit management facilitates officers being

permanently assigned to a specific living unit, providing the opportunity to spend time and gain individual knowledge of the prisoners. This is especially important in the identification of prisoners at risk of self-harm (Adams, 1992). A study by Hobbs & Dear (2000) found that prisoners rarely sought support from prison officers and were less likely to seek support for problems associated with self-harm risk.

In some prisons, prison officers regulate prisoners' access to other sources of support (both inside and outside of prison). That is, the request, problem or question is taken to a prison officer first. An inmate bringing a problem to an officer is based on trust, and breaking that trust is condemned by other officers and perceived as potentially dangerous to the prisoner (Lombardo, 1989). There are several reasons why prisoners are reluctant to interact and seek support from prison officers. Flanagan (1980b) highlighted that approaching an officer is seen as 'crossing the line', that defines separation between officers and inmates. Approaching officer may also be seen, as previously mentioned, challenging the 'do your own time' maxim maintained by prisoners. As Toch (1992) stated, inviting harm, compromising their self image and disapproval by others are all potential consequences for a prisoner in approaching an officer. There is also the risk of being labelled as a 'rat' or 'snitch' in establishing an interpersonal relationship with an officer (Biggam & Power, 1997).

Lombardo's (1989) study of prison officers highlighted that prison officers can deliberately limit interactions with prisoners. This can be observed in the level of social distance being maintained between the prisoners and the officers. It was reported by Lombardo that prison officers felt that officers were a preferred option for prisoners as someone to confide in about personal matters, rather than inmates. However, as Hobbs & Dear (2000) study reported, prisoners rarely sought support from prison officers and were less willing to seek support for emotional problems. Lombardo also found that 40% of prison officers preferred inmates brought their problems to officers, rather than officers initiating any

interaction. It was indicated though, that there are times when officers must determine if a prisoner is having any concerns, thereby initiating interactions.

A problem relating to the prison environment for an inmate becomes a problem for the prison officer also. As Lombardo (1989) states, “minor problems can become major concerns” (p. 80) for prisoners. When a prisoner approaches a prison officer with a problem there are three alternatives that the prison officer can take (Lombardo). First, the prisoners may be instructed to fill in a request sheet or be ignored. Second, the prisoner may be referred to a senior officer or other allied prison staff. Third, the prison officer may handle the problem or contact another member of staff (psychologist) who can take over the problem. It is clear from this that the last alternative requires the most personal involvement and took direct action at handling the situation. Prison regimes (such as overcrowding) and regulations may encourage the first two alternatives, possibly against the preference of the officer themselves.

Whilst there is some research of factors which facilitate and frustrate a prisoner’s access to prison officers, there are other factors worthy of discussion. What remains unknown is the true extent of the influence of the prison environment upon prison officers themselves. It might not be a lack of skills but rather the inability to use these within the prison environment. This may be evident in larger, overcrowded prisons, whereby the prison officer ratio to prisoners is high, stretching the utility of the prison officer’s role. A theme which is evident in the research is the frustration in the over-riding prison culture of ‘us verses them’ maxim. Not only does this maxim not support a prisoner approaching an officer but also emphasises the perceived costs in doing so.

### Management in Prisons

Prison systems, both within and across countries differ significantly in policy and procedures. In relation to supports, as the Western Australian Ministry of Justice (1998)

states that, facilitating contact with external support sources and family is a priority without threatening the regime of prison management. This is also important, as family members should be encouraged to raise concerns with prison staff about a prisoner in distress or at risk of self-harm (Ministry of Justice).

Unit management facilitates close interaction between prisoners and unit staff, through close contact with permanent staff, allowing early identification of problems in their increased personal knowledge of individual prisoners (Smith & Fenton, 1978). However, successful implementation of unit management is difficult to achieve if positive relationships are not maintained between prisoners and staff. As previously stated, prisoners do not seek support from officers, and are reluctant to tell them if they are experiencing problems. With the current staffing levels in Western Australian prisons, and limited availability of permanent unit staff, prisoner-staff relationships lack continuity. This also limits the exchange of information and reduces time spent engaging with prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 1998). As the Victorian Office of Corrections (1990) states, those officers intermittently based with a group of prisoners are not able to have a knowledge or understanding of the unit or individual prisoners.

### Conclusion

There have been many factors discussed which both facilitate and frustrate a prisoners access to social support. Perhaps the most important issue to emerge from this review is that our knowledge is largely anecdotal. The research that is cited in this review is limited and inconclusive, and this makes it difficult to generalize beyond the specific sample of the study.

It is imperative that further research is conducted into prisoners' perceptions of social support. Prisoners need to be surveyed to determine how they perceive support that is available from various sources both inside and outside prison. In addition, try to gain a greater understanding of why prisoners do or do not use available sources of support.

Overall, it is difficult to establish what facilitates and frustrates prisoners access to informal and formal sources of support. However, they all operate within and are shaped by the prison environment. This is an inevitable influence, however it is important to appreciate the costs and benefits that are produced.

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Running Head : PERCIEVED QUALITY OF SUPPORT

**Prisoners' Perceptions of the Quality of Support that is Available  
to Them Whilst Imprisoned**

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### Abstract

Obtaining support is an important aspect of coping with stress. The purpose of this study was to determine whether prisoners' perceptions of the quality of support differed across support sources. Seventy male sentenced prisoners provided ratings of a perceived support for each of nine potential sources of support. Family members were perceived as providing the highest quality of support with prison officers the lowest. Family members were most often used for support and were perceived as the most helpful. Support from other prisoners, family, and workshop instructors were perceived as the most accessible. The data support the intuitive notion that prisoners' access to family is crucial. The data also question the viability of unit management.

## Prisoners' Perceptions of the Quality of Support that is Available to Them Whilst Imprisoned

Imprisonment is a particularly challenging event. Some prisoners choose to form ties in the prison environment with other inmates, while others choose to cope alone (Adams, 1992 ; Hart, 1995). However, the role and significance of social support in correctional facilities is largely unknown. For example, why are particular supports chosen over others and what do they provide that other sources of support do not?

Although there are different conceptualizations of social support, Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason (1983) stated that it consists of two main elements. First, the individual has a number of others available to turn to, and second, the individual will be satisfied with the support provided. While this conceptualization of social support defines it as a real entity, more recent conceptualizations have focused on perceptions of support. An individual's perception of social support pertains to "the extent to which an individual believes that people are available to meet their needs for support, information and feedback" (Bussey, 1993, p. 41). Dingle (1993) provides a clarification of Sarason et.al's second element, in stating that "support is not actually supportive unless the individual perceives it to be" (p. 36).

The social network that individuals establish and maintain can affect their ability to adjust to situations, their well-being and their ability to cope with stress (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1994 ; Rook, 1984 ; Thoits, 1985, 1986). Positive effects rely on a congruence between the needs of the individual and the support that is received. Not all supports are always supportive (Pagel, Erdly & Becker, 1997), although it is difficult to determine what it is about a support that makes it harmful, beneficial or protective (Thoits, 1986).

Individuals can also be constrained in their access to others with whom they can interact. This is particularly relevant if your only source of support available is the source of the stress that is being experienced.

### Prisoners' Families as Providers of Support

Research on prisoners' families has focused on the marital relationship and children, ignoring the influence of extended families. The significance and role of siblings, grandparents, parents and other relatives is unknown (Paylor & Smith, 1994). Although imprisonment does not sever all contact with family, it can alter the prisoner's perceptions of important relationships and of the capacity of family members to give and receive support. Separation can also be stressful for prisoners. Isolation from family is a frequently cited precipitant of self-harm by prisoners (Dear, Thomson, Hall & Howells, 1998) and it is considered to be one of the most difficult problems to overcome in prison (Adams, 1992). Furthermore, as the Western Australian Ministry of Justice (1998) stated, in addition to isolation and separation, the prisoner has to cope with family problems in isolation from people from whom they would normally give and receive support.

Maintenance of family relationships can be especially difficult for long-term prisoners. Where a family might support a prisoner through a short-term imprisonment (several years), many family members are not able (or not willing) to persevere with a relationship for the duration of a 10-20 year prison term (Flanagan, 1980a). Sapsford (1978) found that with male prisoners the longer the amount of time spent in custody, the less investment is made in involvement with outside contacts, particularly partners (wives

and girlfriends). Contact with children, parents and siblings continues longer than with partners (although intermittently) (Sapsford, 1978).

While contact with the outside can help the inmate adjust to prison, maintaining established relationships with people who are outside prison is difficult. Prisoners keep in contact with their family and friends outside prison in three main ways ; visits, telephone and mail. Although these are available for the prisoners to use, there are several difficulties (such as finances) encountered for both the prisoner and the family member.

Visits might be difficult for the family to maintain through the costs and inconvenience of travelling to the prison (Dingle, 1993), inconvenient times at which visits are available and lack of privacy during visits. The prisoner might not encourage his or her family to visit, not wanting to expose them to the humiliation of the prison environment or the possibility of body searches. Irregularity of visits and time between visits can create difficulties for prisoners such as inmates' expectations of visits or relying on visits for money or information (Schafer, 1978). This is likely to be particularly evident in larger prisons, especially those that are overcrowded, stretching the demands of the visit facilities. Bennett (1988) observed that research on visits is limited, therefore little is known about the role of visits or their affect upon adjustment in prison, their role in sustaining relationships (marital or otherwise) through imprisonment, and their impact on post-release adjustment.

More distant communication is maintained through telephone and mail. Telephones allow immediate feedback, are recorded unobtrusively and are relatively cheap (Howard League of Penal Reform, 1979). Lack of privacy can prevent intimate

personal information being disclosed by prisoners'. Long-distance calls can be expensive, leading to less regular contact (Richards, McWilliams, Batten, Cameron & Cutler, 1995). In Western Australia, prisoners have access (outside lockdown periods) to telephones, although calls are regulated by security restrictions, disciplinary action and the prisoner's financial resources (Director General's Rules, 1999).

Letters are a major form of contact for the prisoner (Brodsky, 1971). McEvoy, O'Mahoney, Horner & Lyner's (1999) research on political prisoners in Ireland found that 80% of partners wrote to prisoners, with 50% writing at least once a week. However, it is unclear as to whether or not these results generalise to mainstream prisoners.

Many prisoners have low levels of literacy. A prisoner with poor literacy might resist assistance to write a letter through humiliation or embarrassment and might cease this form of contact (Carlson & Cervera, 1992). Censorship may prevent intimate disclosures and prohibit certain disclosures (e.g., about prison conditions) (Howard League of Penal Reform, 1979). There are few data of relevance to policy development or reform because previous research has been restricted to examining the amount written by prisoners or the amount received in prison.

#### Other Prisoners as Sources of Support

Primary ties can be established in the prison, replacing lost ties on the outside, although interpersonal relationships in prison are not always established (Hart, 1995). Moreover, while social relationships with other prisoners are prevalent, those relationships are not always close (Zamble & Porporino, 1988) and establishing interpersonal relationships challenges the prison culture maxim 'inmates should do their own time' (Flanagan, 1980b).



Prisoners sharing the same work environment, treatment program or living unit will usually form friendships due to the amount of time that they spend together and possible commonalities of experience (e.g., both being mechanics outside prison) (Slosar, 1978). However, having friends in prison can create problems. These problems can consist of responsibilities to that person that might mean providing support (e.g., in fights) that leads to disciplinary action (Adams, 1992 ; Flanagan, 1980a). Friendships for long-term prisoners are transient as companionship disappears when one member of the friendship is released. Therefore, long-term prisoners tend to form friendships with other individuals who are serving long sentences. Zamble & Porporino (1988) observed that other prisoners have their own problems and that sharing one's problem with another inmate might increase the stress that both prisoners are experiencing.

#### Prison Officers as Sources of Support

In every aspect of daily life, prisoners are dependent on prison officers, ranging from replacing a faulty light bulb to arranging visits. Research on the relationship between prison officers and inmates is limited and the area "remains poorly articulated, unmeasured and taken for granted" (Liebling & Price, 1998, p. 6). Initiating contact with a prisoner is based on the officer's knowledge of the inmate. According to Lombardo (1989) the officer also takes into account factors such as the reputation, sincerity, and attitude of the inmate when deciding to initiate a conversation with that prisoner.

Prison officers regulate a prisoner's access to sources of support (both inside and outside prison). Therefore, all questions, problems and requests are taken to a prison officer first. However, there are many reasons proposed as to why prisoners are reluctant to seek support from and interact with officers. Approaching an officer is seen as

‘crossing the line’ and challenging the maxim ‘do your own time’ (Flanagan, 1980b). Prisoners also risk inviting harm, compromising their self image, being labelled a ‘rat’ or ‘snitch’ and disapproval from other inmates (Biggam & Power, 1997 ; Toch, 1992). As officers regulate prisoners’ access to other supports (through making requests for appointments or visits), this might decrease the likelihood of support being sought as a consequence of having to approach and interact with officers in order to achieve this.

Hobbs & Dear (2000) examined the willingness of 209 prisoners to seek support from prison officers. They found that prisoners rarely seek support from prison officers, however were more willing to seek practical assistance than emotional support. The prisoners were least likely to seek support for problems associated with self-harm risk. This study was limited as it had a low response rate (55.3%), missed low literacy prisoners, was based on one prison and the reported behavior by prisoners might not represent their behavior if they were distressed.

The Hobbs & Dear (2000) study suggested that prisoners do not use prison officers for support but it left many questions unanswered. From whom do prisoners seek support? Why do prisoners avoid prison officers as sources of support? Does this avoidance extend to other sources of support based in the prison? What aspect of the support provided by valued supports is not gained from other supports? The current study focused on both prison-based and external sources of support that prisoners potentially could use. The study aimed to determine whether prisoners’ perceptions of the quality of support differed across sources of support. It also examined the number of prisoners who had used each source of support. It was hypothesised that informal sources of support (e.g., family outside prison) will have a higher perceived quality of

support than formal sources (e.g., prison officers) and have been used more often. It was also hypothesised that those sources perceived to provide a higher quality of support would also be considered more helpful.

## Method

### Participants

A selection procedure that approximated random sampling was employed. An alphabetized list of all prisoners' names was obtained and every fifth prisoner on the list was selected. Those selected prisoners' who were available at the time were called to an interview room by prison staff. The researcher introduced herself and information was provided regarding the type of data that were being collected, anonymity, informed consent and voluntary participation. Prisoners who consented to being interviewed signed a consent form.

One hundred and two male sentenced prisoners (general population and protection) were selected from the total prison population of 325. Twelve prisoners were excluded from the sample as they were declared (by management) to be high risk to female staff. Seventy of the remaining 90 prisoners were interviewed. Eleven potential participants were not available at the time that they were called as they had been transferred to another prison or placed into a punishment cell, did not speak English, were participating in treatment programs, were ill or were attending court. Another nine prisoners refused to take part in the research.

Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 60 years ( $M = 28.67$ ,  $SD = 8.66$ ). These were 16 (22.9%) Aboriginal and 54 (77.1%) non-Aboriginal participants, consistent with the race breakdown in Canning Vale with 81 (24.9%) prisoners being Aboriginal and 244

(75.07%) non-Aboriginal. Participants were serving sentences of 3 months to 25 years ( $M = 4.7$  years,  $SD = 4.312$ ), this excludes seven participants serving life sentences at the Governor's Pleasure (indeterminate sentences). Forty two (60%) were serving sentences less than five years (short-term) and 28 (40%) serving sentences greater than five years (long-term). The amount of time already spent in custody ranged from 1 month to 26 years ( $M = 2$  years,  $SD = 3.518$ ), with 30 (42%) being in custody for less than 12 months and 40 (57.1%) having been in prison for 12 months or longer. The majority of participants, 53 (75.7%) had previously been in prison, with 17 (24.3%) experiencing their first period of imprisonment. At the time of entering prison, 20 (28.6%) were not in a relationship, 7 (10%) married, 12 (17%) were in a relationship, but not living together and 31 (44.3%) were in a defacto relationship. Of the 50 participants in relationships, 23 (46%) relationships had continued during imprisonment, and 25 (54%) had ended whilst in prison. Seven (10%) of the participants reported having self-harmed in prison and 11 (15.7%) reported having self-harmed outside of prison. Overall, 13 (18.6%) of the participants reported a history of self-harm, with 5 reporting having self-harmed both inside and outside of prison.

### Procedure

The questionnaire was administered orally as a structured interview, taking 20-30 minutes. Participants were provided with a copy of the questions and the response options (the rating scale). Once the interview was completed the participant was thanked and the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the research. The participant was also informed of the procedure through which he was selected. Participants were asked to be

general in their discussion of the research to other prisoners in order to decrease potential contamination effects. All interviews were conducted over a two-week period.

Those prisoners who refused to participate were free to return to the unit or workshop and the next participant called. Prison staff were informed that prisoners were being screened for potential participation in research. As a result, participants were free to decline without fear of disapproval from prison staff for leaving the interview room earlier than expected. Provisions were made with support staff (nurses, psychologists) to be available to assist any prisoner who becomes distressed during or immediately following the interview. Prison administration was contacted about one prisoner who became distressed during the interview, due to the interviewer's concern that he could be at risk of self-harm.

### Measures

Quality of Support. Quality of support was measured by the Perceived Quality of Social Support scale (PQS) that is based on Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley's (1988) Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). Like Zimet, et al's. measure, the PQS requires participants to respond to items about the type of support provided to them by particular sources. The PQS was constructed specifically for the prisoners in this study (aimed at a grade six literacy level) and was administered orally. The scale was designed for prisoners to rate aspects of a potentially supportive relationship that could be used when experiencing problems. A rating is obtained for eight aspects of the support relationship that the literature has identified as important for assessing the perceived quality of support sources. The eight aspects of support are ; (1) understanding, (2) caring, (3) good advice and information, (4) tries to help me, (5)

listens, (6) trust, (7) expressing thoughts and feelings and (8) provides help and support.

An example of one of the items in the questionnaire is; “I trust x with the information that I give them”, where “x” would be replaced with the name of the support (e.g., prison officers, workshop instructors). Each item is rated on an 11-point scale (0-10) and each of these scores is summed to give a total PQS score. PQS scores therefore range from 0 to 80, with high scores indicating valuable support.

The PQS was completed for each of nine potential sources of support available to prisoners : (1) Family outside (FAM) refers to any family member who is related to the prisoner, is not in prison and is perceived by the prisoner to be supportive; (2) Friends outside (FRO) refers to any friends the prisoner has outside prison who they consider to be supportive; (3) Other prisoners (OPR) related to fellow inmates who the prisoner could go to for support; (4) Unit Staff (US) also known as a prison officer is the equivalent to an American ‘corrections officer’ or ‘prison guard’; (5) Peer Support Team (PST) is an established group of trained prisoners who befriend and listen to fellow inmates experiencing difficulties; (6) Forensic Case Management Team (FCM) is a multidisciplinary team (social workers, psychologists) who are designed to assist prisoners in crisis, and to reduce incidence of deliberate self-harm; (7) Nursing staff (NUR) refers to the nurses and medical practitioners who provide medical and health services to prisoners; (8) Workshop instructors (WSH) are uniformed non-disciplinary officers who instruct and supervise prisoners in their prison work placements (laundry, kitchen, cabinet making); and (9) the Prisoner Support Officer (PSO) is an Aboriginal welfare officer who is responsible for maintaining and managing the PST program and ensuring that it is culturally appropriate for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

prisoners. Half of the participants were administered the PQS for each of the nine sources of support in the order that these supports were listed above and the other half of the participants were administered the PSQ in the reverse order, so as to eliminate ordering effects. The nine support sources can be divided into two categories: informal and formal. Formal support sources include Unit Staff, Peer Support Team, Forensic Case Management Team, Nursing staff, Workshop Instructors and Prisoner Support Officer. Informal sources include Family, Friends (outside prison) and Other Prisoners.

Accessibility of Support. A single item was used to measure prisoners' perceptions of their ease in accessing the source of support. For each source of support, participants rated on an 11-point scale (0 = They are never around when I need them, 10 = They are always around when I need them) how accessible this source of support is perceived to be.

Effectiveness of support. A survey self-report question (yes/no) was used to determine if the prisoner had used each support during their term of imprisonment. For those support sources that had been used, participants rated on an 11-point scale (0 = not at all helpful, 10 = extremely helpful), how helpful they found that support source when last used.

Demographics. Demographic information was also collected such as race, age, relationship status (current status and status prior to imprisonment), length of current term of imprisonment, time already served, previous imprisonment and whether or not they have ever self-harmed inside or outside of prison.

## Results

Three sets of analyses were undertaken and these are reported separately. The first set of analyses focused on the quality of support as measured by the PQS. Second, data pertaining to what sources of support the prisoner has used during his current term of imprisonment are presented. Third, data pertaining to whether or not contact had been made between a prisoner and his family and friends (outside prison) are presented.

### Perceived Quality of Support

A mixed model ANOVA design was used, using SPSS (7.01). There was one within-subjects variable : support source (9 levels). There were two between-subjects variables : sentence length (2 levels) and race (2 levels). The between-subjects variables were included so as to determine whether any significant effect for support source extends to both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal prisoners and prisoners serving both long and short term sentences. Box's M, Levines Quality of Error Variance and Mauchly's Test of Sphericity were not significant, indicating that no assumptions were violated.

Table 1 outlines the results of the ANOVA, where it can be seen that the only significant effect was the main effect for source of support. Tukey's HSD was used to test the significance of post hoc comparisons across the different ratings of support sources. The critical difference between means was 10.27. As presented in Table 2 (and Figure 1), family is significantly higher than all other sources of support. Unit staff was significantly lower than all other sources. The remaining seven PQS scores did not differ significantly from each other.

The results for access in the ratings of PQS were analyzed separately. A general linear model (repeated measures) was used to analyze access. The Mauchly's Test of



Sphericity was significant ( $W = 0.039$ ,  $df = 35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and consequently the Huynh-Feldt correction test was performed. This indicated a significant difference between prisoners perception of access across support sources,  $F(6.958) = 7.216$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The mean rating scores are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. The Tukey's HSD was used to test the significance of post hoc comparisons between each support source. The critical difference between means was 1.75. As seen in Figure 2, Other prisoners were perceived as the most accessible, and friends outside the least.

A reliability analysis was conducted on the internal consistency of the PQS scale. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.937 for data pertaining to other prisoners to 0.966 for data pertaining to forensic case management team.

#### Use of Support Sources

Prisoners' use of support sources during their term of imprisonment was analyzed using Chi Square. This is presented graphically in Figure 3, where Family (68.6%) and Other prisoners (51.4%) were most likely to have been used. As seen in Figure 4, ratings of how helpful support sources were when last used indicated the lowest mean rating was for Unit Staff ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 3.71$ ) and highest for Family ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ). Statistical tests of significance were not conducted as the sample sizes differed across different support sources, as these data were only based on those prisoners who reported using that support source.

Chi square analyses, using Fisher's exact test (2-tailed) were conducted on whether prisoners' sentence length, race and previous imprisonment differed in whether supports were ever used during their current sentence. The results indicated that four of the 18 analyses were significant. Family was significant with a higher proportion of

prisoners serving less than 5 years (81%) more likely to use Family than prisoners serving less than 5 years (14 of 28 prisoners, 50%),  $X^2 (1, N=70) = 7.468, p<0.05$ . There was a significant difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal prisoners in their use of Prisoner Support Officer and Peer Support Team. Seven out of 16 (43.8%) Aborigines used PSO compared to 8 of the 54 non-Aboriginal prisoners (14.8%),  $X^2 (1, N=70) = 6.138, p<0.05$ . With the Peer Support Team, Aboriginal prisoners were more likely to have used this support, 7 of 16 (43.8%) and non-Aboriginal 8 of 54 (14.8%),  $X^2 (1, N=70) = 6.138, p<0.05$ . There was also a significant difference between the use of Peer Support Team and previous imprisonment,  $X^2 (1, N=70) = 6.123, p<0.05$ . Of those experiencing their first time in prison ( $n=17$ ), none had used Peer Support Team compared to 15 (28.3%) of the 53 who had been previously imprisoned. In both of these analyses (Peer Support Team and Prisoner Support Officer), one of the four cells had an expected frequency of less than 5 (3.4 and 3.64 respectively), and consequently these analyses are not sufficiently stable to place any confidence in.

#### Frequency of contact with family and friends outside prison

Prisoners' contact with family and friends outside prison were assessed according to visits, phone calls and mail (received). Table 4 lists the descriptive data of contact variables. Overall, 66 (94.3%) had some contact with their family during their current term of imprisonment. As Table 4 indicates, only 12 (17.1%) of prisoners had no visits from family members, with 44 (62.9%) receiving 1-4 visits per month. The majority of prisoners, 47 (67.1%) are making more than 5 telephone calls per month. Receiving mail was variable, with the greatest amount received being 1-4 per month by 27 (38.6%) of prisoners. With regard to contact with friends outside prison, of the 70 prisoners

interviewed, 50 (71.4%) had made contact with friends outside. Interestingly, 33 (47.1%) never had a visit, 32 (45.7%) never had phone contact and 35 (50%) never had contact through the post.

### Discussion

Male sentenced prisoners perceived their families as providing the highest quality of support, while prison officers were perceived as providing the lowest quality of support. Family members were the most likely source of support to have been used during the current term of imprisonment and were seen to be more helpful than other sources of support when last used. While other prisoners were perceived as the most accessible source of support, families were also seen to be highly accessible. The data provide practical support for the hypothesis that informal supports would be more highly valued than formal supports. While family was rated as a significantly better support than all others, the other informal supports (friends outside, other prisoners) were rated as no better and no worse than the formal supports (other than prison officers who were rated as the lowest quality support).

The finding that prisoners perceive a higher quality of support from family than from prison-based supports is not surprising. Adams (1992) observed that maintaining contact with friends and family is considered important to prisoners. While the findings from Hobbs & Dear (2000) suggest that prisoners rarely seek support from officers, the data from this study indicate that one third of prisoners have approached unit staff for support at least once in their current term of imprisonment. Even though prisoners report that unit staff are not a valued support, prison officers are still approached for support. It might be that prisoners are simply using unit officers to access other supports rather than

using unit staff as a support per se. This might result from apparent 'us versus them' maxim maintained in the prison or from the costs associated with establishing interpersonal relationships with unit staff (Biggam & Power, 1997 ; Flanagan, 1980b ; Toch, 1992). Workshop instructors were perceived as having a higher quality of support, easier to access and more helpful when last used compared to prison officers. However, the amount of prisoners who had used workshop instructors as a source of support was similar to prison officers. Although workshop instructors are located outside the living units, they are still correctional officers, therefore the same costs might apply to prisoners' relationship with them as is found with unit officers.

Other prisoners were perceived to be the most accessible support source followed by family. Unit staff were significantly less accessible than other prisoners. This suggests that even though unit staff engage in daily interactions with prisoners, at those times when prisoners have needed unit staff they have not been available to them. Although other prisoners were perceived as most accessible they were perceived as providing a low quality of support (only unit staff were judged as lower in quality of support). Inmates share all daily activities with other prisoners, therefore other prisoners are accessible if a prisoner wanted to approach them. However, interpersonal relationships in prison are not always considered close, and although the prisoners' day is largely in contact with other prisoners we cannot assume that other prisoners will be sought as a support (Zamble & Porporino, 1988). Cohen & Wills (1988) stated that daily interactions are the most effective support, however this refers to when there are no risks or costs in maintaining the relationship that shapes those interactions.

Even though other prisoners were often used, prisoners who made up the peer support team were not. This might be the result of the prisoner perceiving that if a problem is discussed with one member of the PST, all members will be told, thereby he might not trust where the information goes. At the time of testing, there was no peer support team members located in the protection unit. With prisoners only leaving the protection unit under escort by a prison officer, protection prisoners would have limited access to PST and this might account for these results. The prisoner support officer had only been located in the prison for six months, and was primarily involved in managing the PST rather than providing direct support to prisoners therefore it is difficult to establish any generalizations about the use of this support.

Prisoners maintained a relatively high level of contact with family. Contact was maintained particularly through visits and more frequently by telephones, at least several times a month, by a majority of prisoners. The difficulties experienced by family visiting (Dingle, 1993 ; Hairston, 1988) do not appear to prevent prisoners in this prison from having contact with them. Phone contact is the most common, perhaps because of the immediate feedback (Howard league of Penal Reform, 1978) and ease in access. A prisoner might make several calls per day if his finances and the availability of a phone allow this. Mail received was the least used form of contact, however many prisoners received a letter more than once a month. This might be discouraged by some prisoners because of poor literacy and the inability to reciprocate the letter. However this study enquired about letters received and did not obtain information on how many prisoners actually send letters.

Contact with friends outside prison was not as frequent as contact with family. The majority of prisoners had never had a visit from friends, however with restricted numbers of visits, the prisoner might prefer to have a visit from their family (and children). However, this study indicated that a large number of prisoners had several contacts per month (telephone call, received a letter) from friends outside prison.

There are five main limitations in this study. First, the study was based on one prison and therefore it is difficult to establish whether the results generalize to other prisons. Second, those prisoners who entered the prison after the start of data collection were excluded from the sample and therefore I did not obtain information about early entry prisoners. The stress of imprisonment, especially during the early stages would have been interesting to sample, given the effect this might have had on use of support. Third, even though the proportion of Aboriginal prisoners in the sample, matched that of the entire prison population, there are relatively small numbers in some analyses and the lack of race effects might reflect a lack of statistical power rather than there truly being no race effects. Fourth, only male prisoners were studied. It is therefore remains unclear as to whether female prisoners would differ in their perceptions of the same support sources in prison. Finally, the data are based on self-report and are therefore reliant on prisoners' memory and their willingness to accurately disclose their perceptions in interview.

Although it appears that prisoners are maintaining contact with their families, it is not known to which member of the family each prisoner is referring. Moreover, it is unknown if quality of support varies according to different family members. This is important, as Sapsford (1978) found with long-term prisoners that contact with the

partner is the first to end with contact with parents, siblings and children being maintained for longer. It is important to note that in this sample, over half of prisoners' relationships with partners had ended since they had been in prison. Therefore, the family member that is being referred to by the prisoner is likely to be someone other than his partner (parents, children, siblings).

Even though this study is based on support and some reasons for why some supports are chosen over another, little is known about the prisoner who chooses to cope alone. Research has suggested that this is a preferred strategy among prisoners who are experiencing problems (Adams, 1992 ; Flanagan, 1980b). However, little is known about whether coping alone is a strategy, which is chosen by the prisoner, or one that is made involuntarily due to limited access to valued supports.

With access to prison based supports being regulated through unit staff, the question remains as to the effect that this has on prisoners' willingness to approach unit officers to facilitate access to services. Prison-based supports established in the prison (as sources of support) are not as highly valued as family and some are perceived as less accessible than family, and this prompts the question what it is about this support which makes it non valued by prisoners. This is of concern, especially if a reason for this is that access to supports is provided initially through contact with prison officers, which prevents support sources being sought. The role of unit management might also be challenged in its aim to achieve interrelationships and establish positive relationships between prisoners and officers within living units in the prison. This is important in the knowledge that prisoners are reluctant to approach prison officers and the reasoning for this should be investigated further. The question remains as to whether this is a result of

the interaction between the prisoner and the officer, especially given that this study reports that prison officers are approached yet were not perceived as a valued support.

Prison authorities and prison management must be aware of the implications of limiting access to those supports that are perceived as helpful to prisoners. Therefore, rather than establishing new practices in the prison, the focus should be directed at those support sources already available within the prison and to determine the reason for why these supports are not valued and are perceived as less accessible by prisoners. Further research and evaluations of prison-based supports is vital in maintaining an environment where support sources will be perceived as accessible and able to meet the needs of prisoners. As Dingle (1993) stated, “support is not actually supportive unless the individual perceives it to be” (p. 36). Further research would also provide information on how supports in prison are accessed (what procedures are used and alternate processes), what services and supports can offer more help to prisoners, and what prevents these support sources being used in prison.

A simple answer to many challenges encountered within prison environments is education and training. However, providing further training to prison officers will not necessarily affect accessibility or alter prisoners’ perceptions of this support source. The issue rather relates to prison administration and functioning. However, the research available to prison administrators is very limited and they are forced to make generalisations from general literature that might not be applicable within the prison environment. It is not a question of the skills of prison officers, but rather their ability to utilise those skills within the function of the prison environment. This is not to ignore the benefit of further specialised training in the welfare role, and modifications of prison



officers' perception of their role and the influence of the systemic environment under which interactions between prison officers and prisoners occur. This might be addressed through the implementation of the cognitive skills training program for prisoners and prison officers, which may alter prisoner and prison officer interactions in a positive way.

Social support is a relatively unknown area of correctional research (Hart, 1995). Having established support sources in prison is not effective unless the prisoner values the perceived quality and accessibility of these sources. With support from family being perceived as providing the highest quality and being the most helpful, all attempts should be made to facilitate this contact with prisoners. However, those established support networks in prison require further investigation to ensure that the maximum potential of these sources is being used to increase their effectiveness and thereby meeting the needs of prisoners.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance for Prisoners' Ratings of Perceived Quality of Support (POS) scale

Variable	df	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>
Within Subjects			
Source of Support (SOS)	8	10.92**	0.14
SOS mean square error	528	(356.32)	
Between Subjects			
Sentence Length (SL)	1	2.72	0.40
Race (R)	1	0.10	0.002
SL x R	1	0.33	0.005
SOS x SL	8	1.95	0.03
SOS x R	8	1.76	0.03
SOS x SL x R	8	0.70	0.01
SL x R mean square error	66	(1911.44)	

Note. Values in parenthese represent mean square errors.

\*\* p<0.01

Table 2

PSQ scores for each source of support

Support Source	M	SD
PST	48.19	22.33
FAM	68.16	19.59
US	27.67	21.56
WSH	44.76	24.51
FRO	52.99	26.41
PSO	47.47	24.18
OPR	43.89	22.69
FCM	50.36	25.64
NUR	46.36	23.43

Note.

Tukeys HSD = 10.27

N = 70

Table 3

Mean Rating Scores for Access Across Support Source

Support Source	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
PST	7.07	2.92
FAM	7.83	3.21
UNI	6.11	3.16
WSH	7.60	3.06
FRO	5.63	3.91
PSO	5.69	3.52
OPR	8.23	2.50
FCM	6.20	3.29
NUR	6.36	3.33

Note.

Tukeys HSD = 1.75

N = 70



Table 4

Frequency Data of Prisoners Contact with Family and Friends Whilst in Prison

	FAM	FRO
<b>Visits</b>		
Never	12 (17.1%)	33 (47.1%)
<1 mth	7 (10%)	18 (25.7%)
1-4 mth	44 (62.9%)	18 (25.7%)
>5 mth	7 (10%)	1 (1.4%)
<b>Phone</b>		
Never	9 (12.9%)	32 (45.7%)
< 1 mth	1 (1.4%)	8 (11.4%)
1-4 mth	13 (18.6%)	17 (24.3%)
> 5 mth	47 (67.1%)	12 (17.1%)
<b>Mail</b>		
Never	10 (14.3%)	35 (50%)
< 1 mth	15 (21.4%)	11 (15.7%)
1-4 mth	27 (38.6%)	17 (24.3%)
> 5 mth	18 (25.7%)	7 (10%)

Note.N = 70

### Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean rating scores of the Perceived Quality of Support (PQS) scale across different support sources.

Figure 2. Mean rating scores of accessibility of support sources.

Figure 3. Number of prisoners who report using support sources during their current term.

Figure 4. Mean ratings of how helpful support sources were when last used.

Figure 1

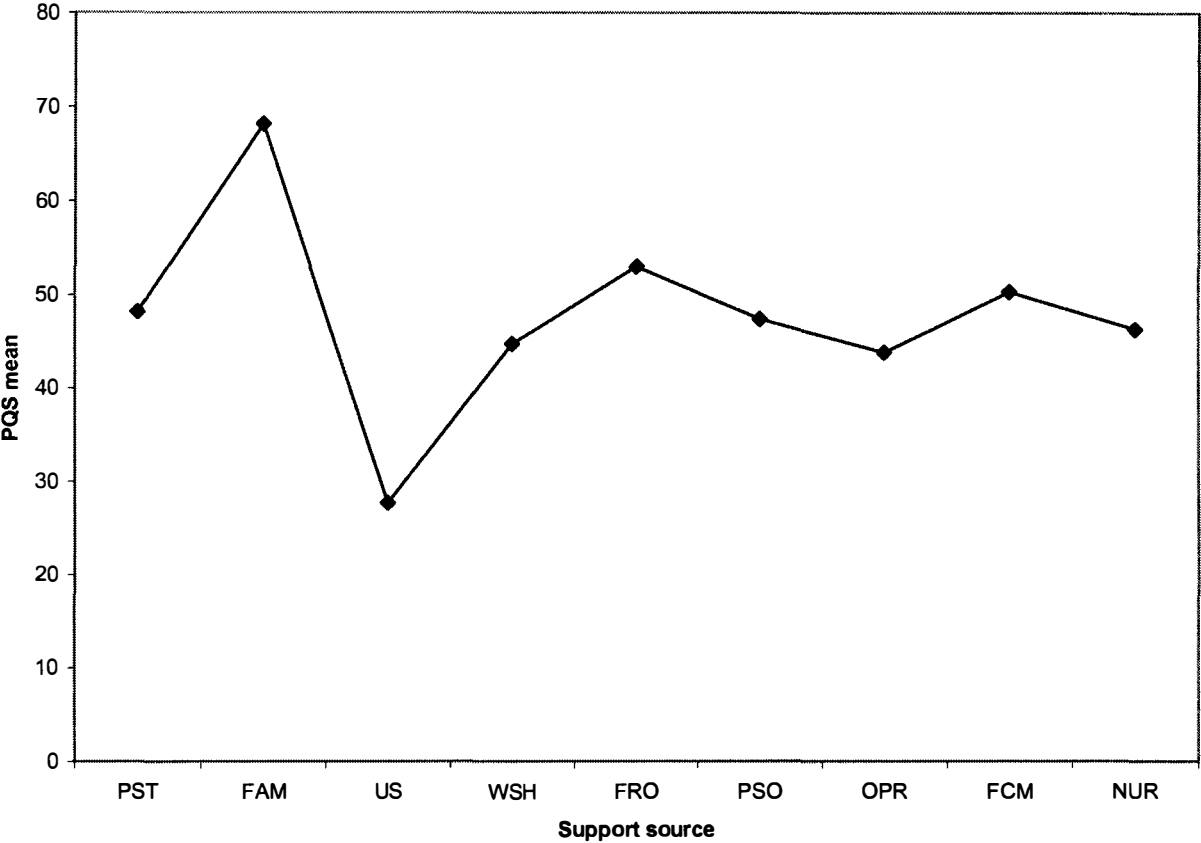


Figure 2

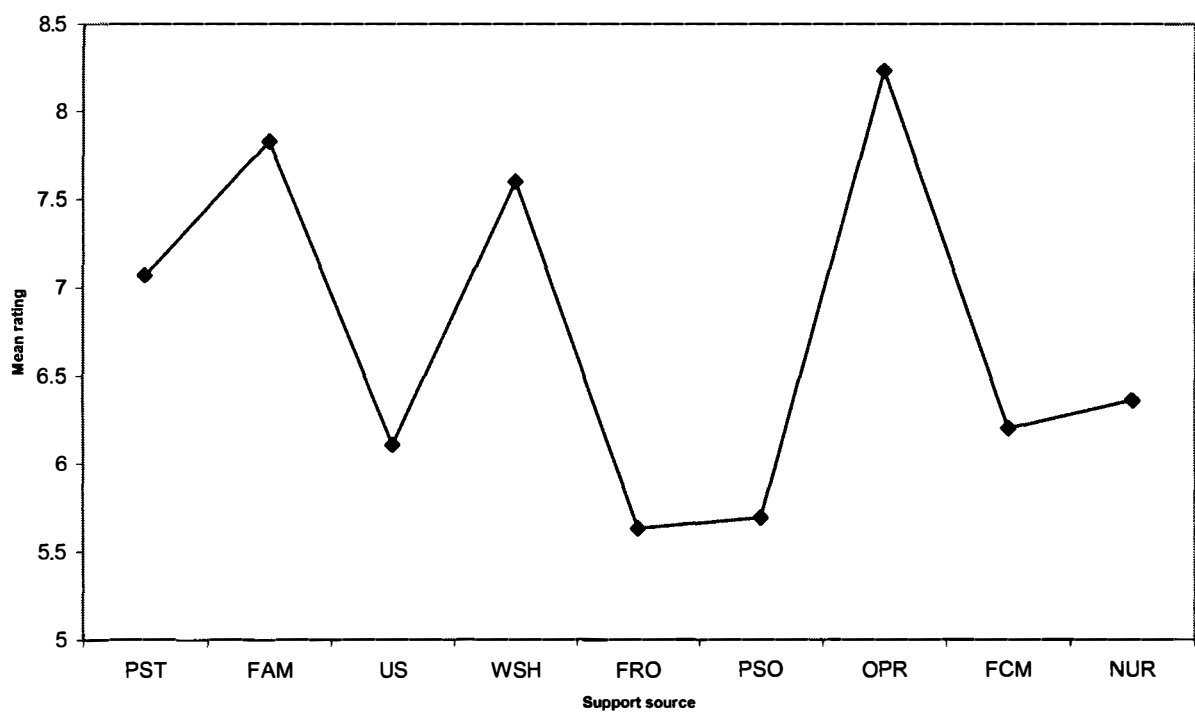


Figure 3

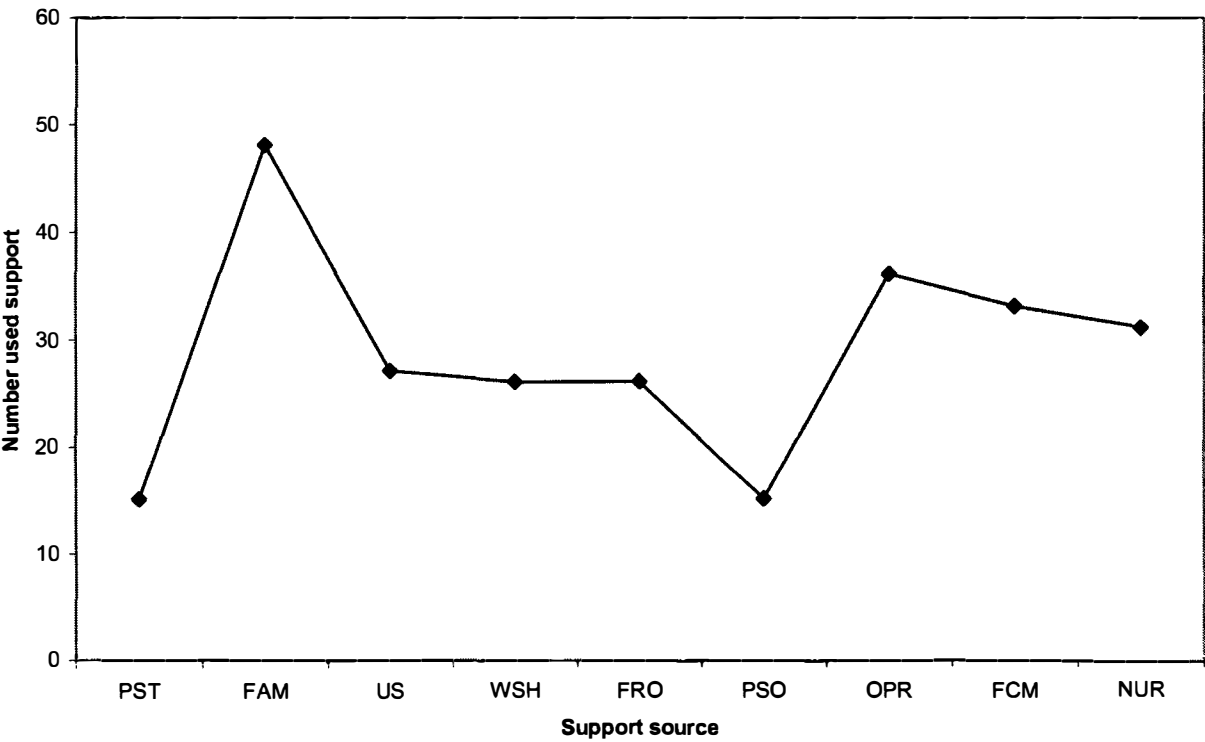
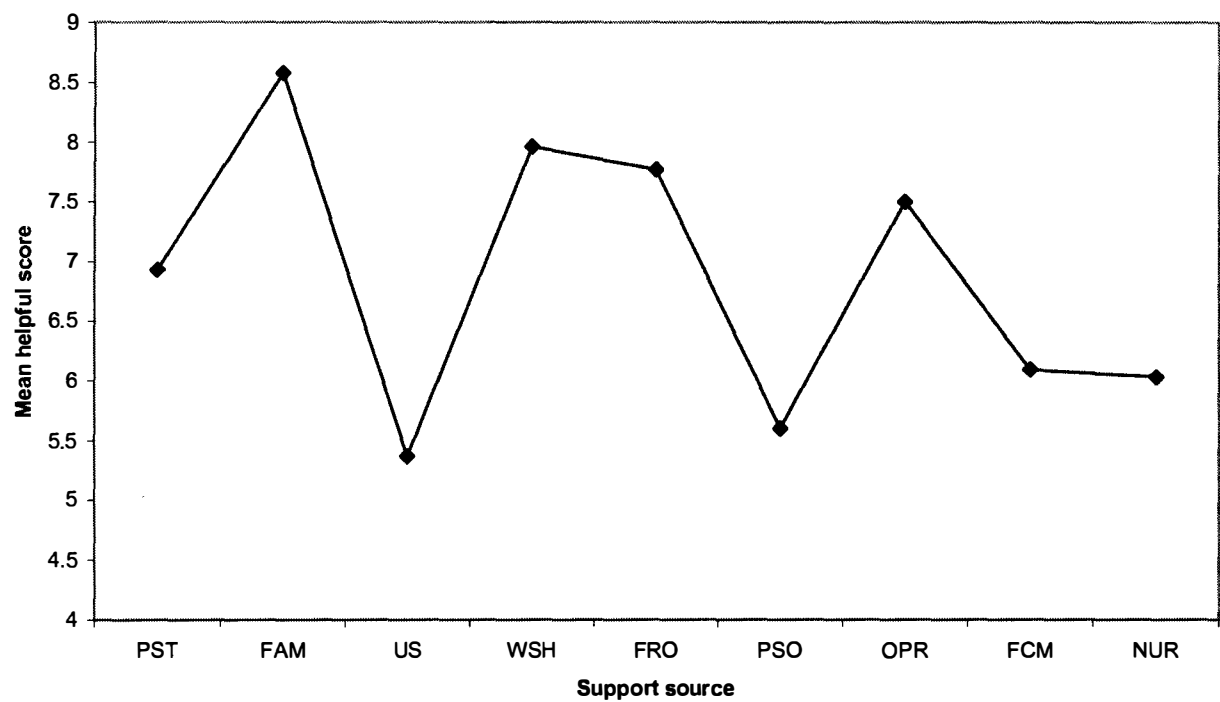


Figure 4



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CONSENT FORM

Edith Cowan University is conducting research on prisoners’ perception of support available whilst in prison. The purpose of this study is to obtain more information about prisoners needs so that recommendations can be made to the Ministry of Justice for services for prisoners.

The university needs as many prisoners to complete this interview as possible so they can get a good idea of what prisoners really think. This study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to participate or not, it will in no way affect your treatment in the prison. Prison officers will not be aware of your choice not to participate. Your name will not be used and all information you give will be anonymous.

If you have any further questions about the research these can be directed to Gaynor Hobbs at the School of Psychology on 0114 225 1411.

I have read or listened to this statement and understand the information. I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered. I agree to participate in this study and are aware that I am free to withdraw at any time. I understand that the answers I give will be used in this research, however this will not include my name.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

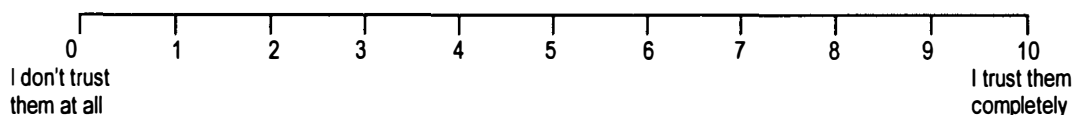
\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

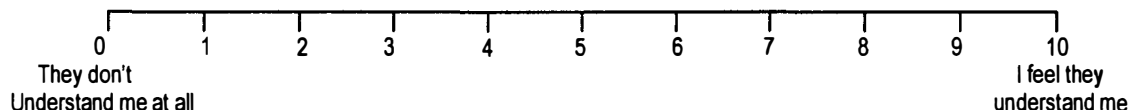


Sample response guide provided to participants.

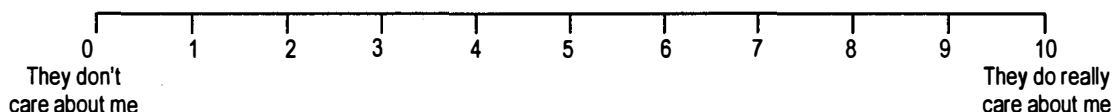
1. I trust \_\_\_\_\_ with the information I give them.



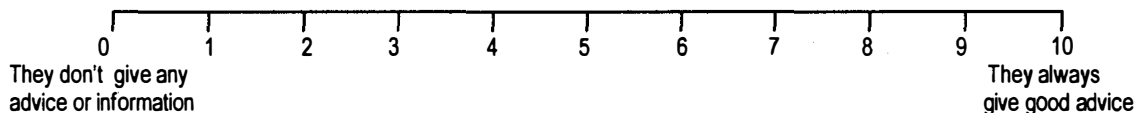
2. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ would really try to understand the problems I have.



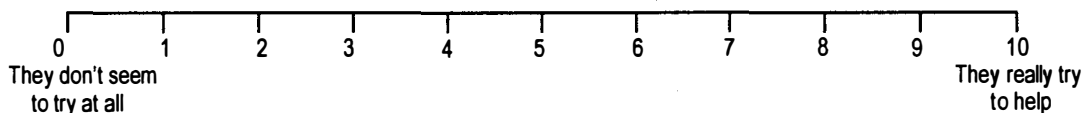
3. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ cares about me and my welfare.



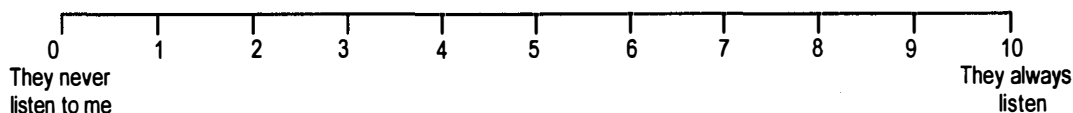
4. I believe that \_\_\_\_\_ give good advice and information.



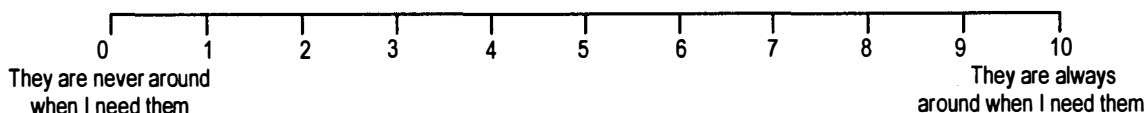
5. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ would really try to help me.



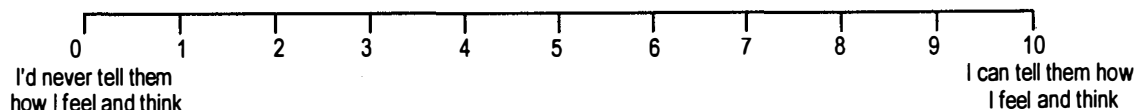
6. I feel that \_\_\_\_\_ would really listen to me.



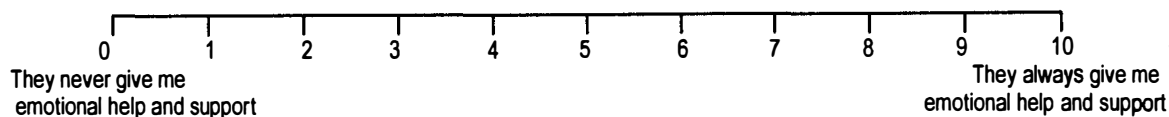
7. \_\_\_\_\_ are easy to contact when I have problems.



8. I think that I can tell \_\_\_\_\_ how I feel and what I think.



9. \_\_\_\_\_ would provide me with the emotional help and support I need.



## DEMOGRAPHICS

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Race                      Aboriginal      ☐  
                                Non Aboriginal    ☐  
                                Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### Length of sentence

< 5 years      ☐  
> 5 years      ☐

Time already spent in custody \_\_\_\_\_

Length of custody (term) \_\_\_\_\_

### Prior to this offence, have you previously been imprisoned?

Yes              ☐  
No               ☐

### Have you recently been transferred from another prison?

Yes              ☐  
No               ☐

Name of prison \_\_\_\_\_

### Marital Status

Were you in a relationship before you came to prison?

Yes      ☐  
No       ☐

Married

Defacto

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Has this relationship continued?

Yes      ☐  
No       ☐

### Have you ever self harmed in prison (at any time in prison)?

Yes              ☐  
No               ☐

### Have you ever self harmed outside of prison?

Yes              ☐  
No               ☐

In prison, people cope with their problems in different ways. One thing that some people do is look for help and support from others. We will be asking a series of questions about a number of different people that you could go to for help. Some of these people you might not talk to, but we must ask all of the questions.

1.

PST are easy to contact when I have problems.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

They are never around when I need them

They are always around when I need them

2.

I think that PST would really try to understand the problems I have.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

They don't understand me at all

I feel they understand me

3.

I think that PST care about me and my welfare.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

They don't care about me

They do really care about me

4.

I believe that PST give good advice and information.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

They don't give any advice or information

They always give good advice

5.

I think that PST would really try to help me.

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

I don't think they would try at all

I think they would really try to help

6.

I feel that PST would really listen to me.

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They would never listen to me

They would always listen

7.

I trust PST with the information I give them.

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I don't trust them at all

I trust them completely

8.

I think that I can tell PST how I feel and what I think.

0

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I'd never tell them how I feel and think

I can tell them how I feel and think

9.

PST can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.

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They never give me emotional help and support

They always give me emotional help and support

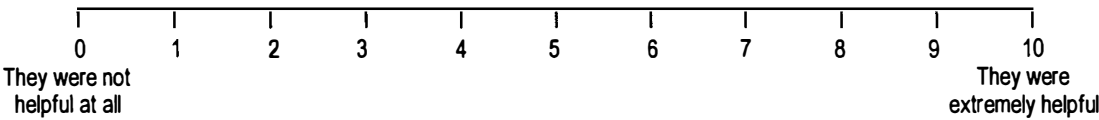
10. Have you ever gone to *PST* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

11. Last time you spoke to *PST*, how helpful do you think they were?



The following questions are about family.

Have you had any contact with family (outside of prison) whilst you have been inside prison?

Yes ☐

No ☐

What type of contact have you had?

**VISITS**

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

**MAIL**

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

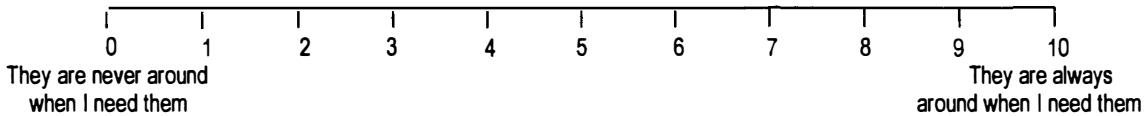
**PHONE**

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

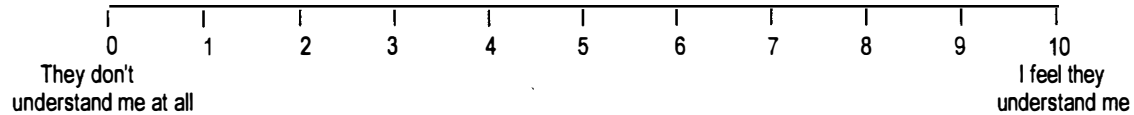
Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

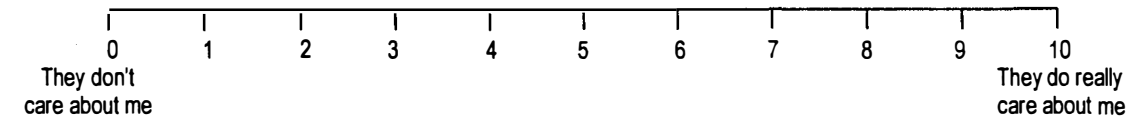
12. **Family (outside) are easy to contact when I have problems.**



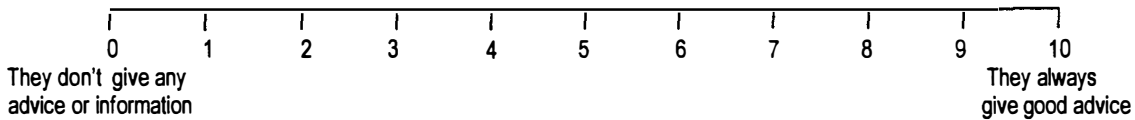
13. **I think that Family would really try to understand the problems I have.**



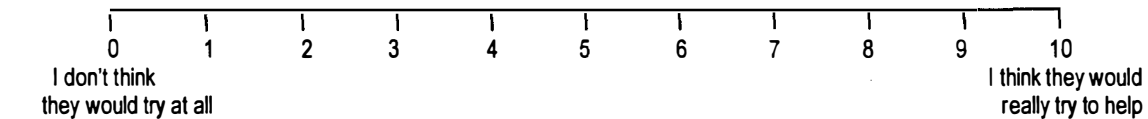
14. **I think that Family care about me and my welfare.**



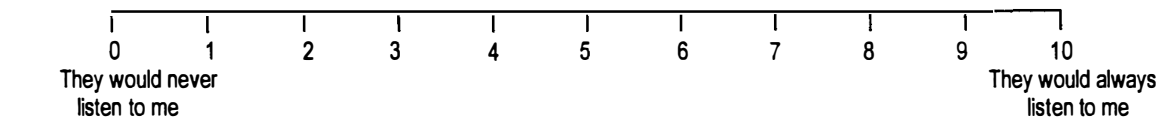
15. **I believe that Family gives good advice and information.**



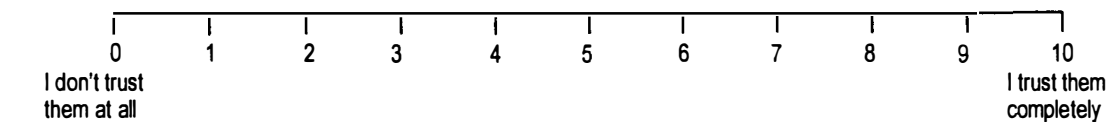
16. **I think that Family would really try to help me.**



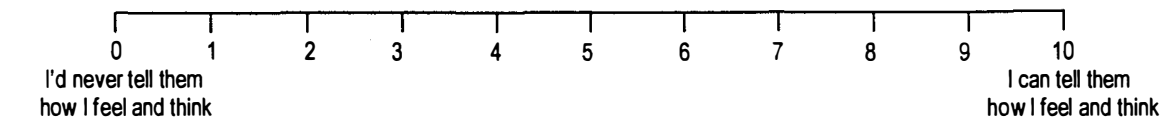
17. **I feel that Family would really listen to me.**



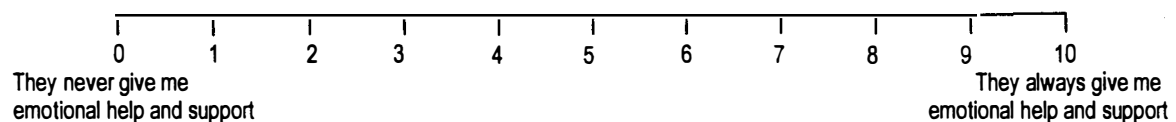
18. **I trust Family with the information I give them.**



19. **I think that I can tell Family how I feel and what I think.**



20. **Family can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



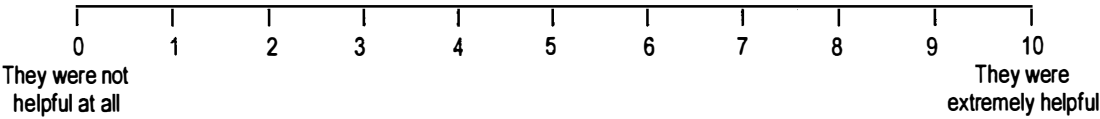
21. Have you ever gone to *Family* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

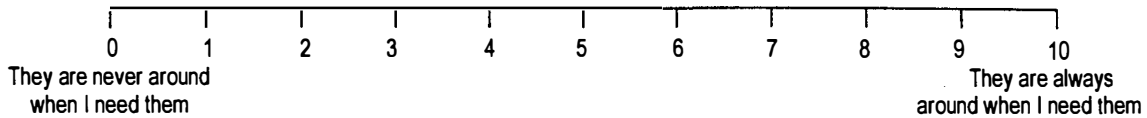
No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

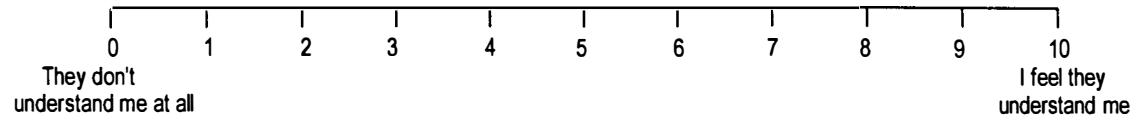
22. Last time you spoke to *Family*, how helpful do you think they were?



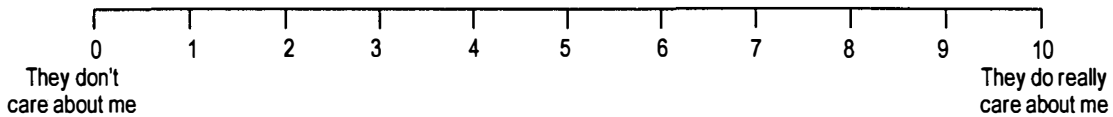
23. **Unit staff are easy to contact when I have problems.**



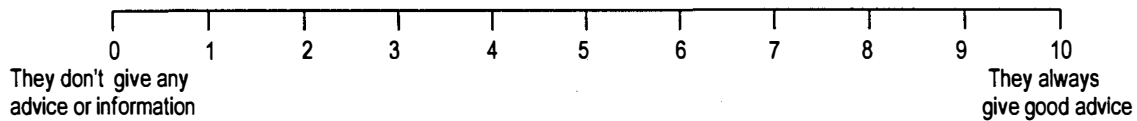
24. **I think that Unit staff would really try to understand the problems I have.**



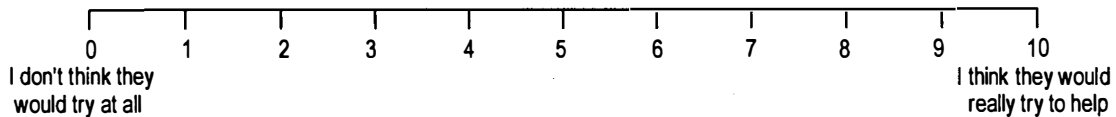
25. **I think that Unit staff care about me and my welfare.**



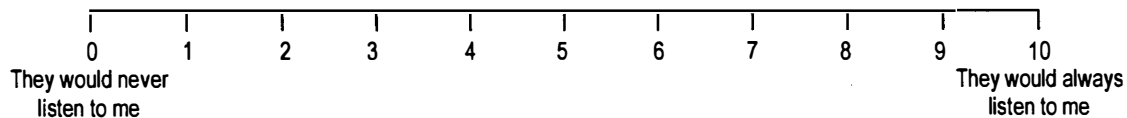
26. **I believe that Unit staff give good advice and information.**



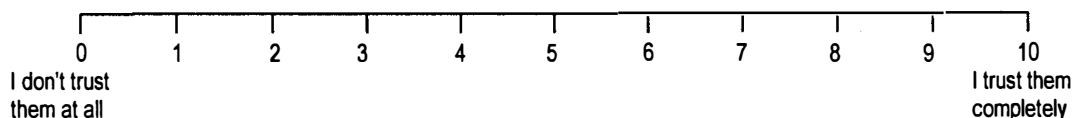
27. **I think that Unit staff would really try to help me.**



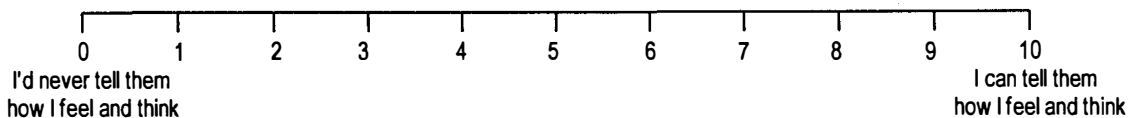
28. **I feel that Unit staff would really listen to me.**



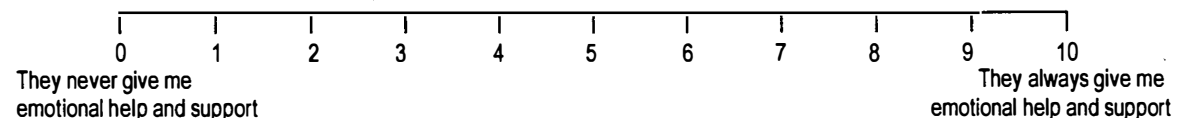
29. **I trust Unit staff with the information I give them.**



30. **I think that I can tell Unit staff how I feel and what I think.**



31. **Unit staff can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**





32. Have you ever gone to *Unit staff* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

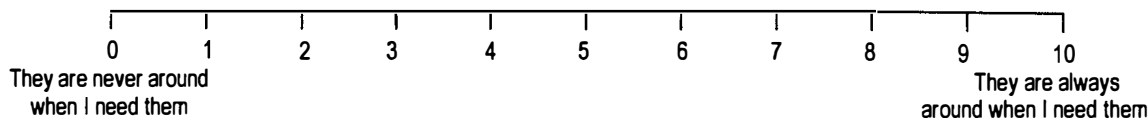
No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

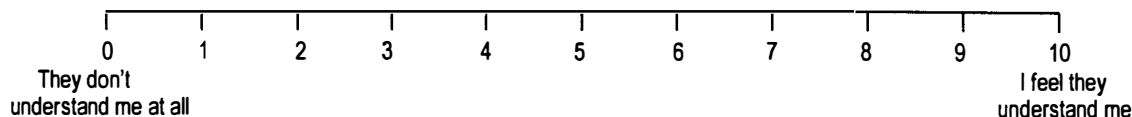
33. Last time you spoke to *Unit staff*, how helpful do you think they were?



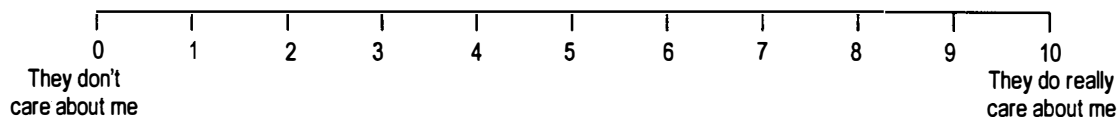
34. **Workshop instructors are easy to contact when I have problems.**



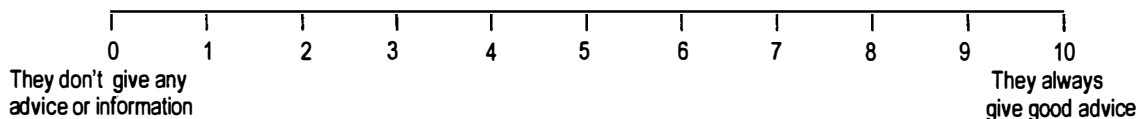
35. **I think that Workshop instructors would really try to understand the problems I have.**



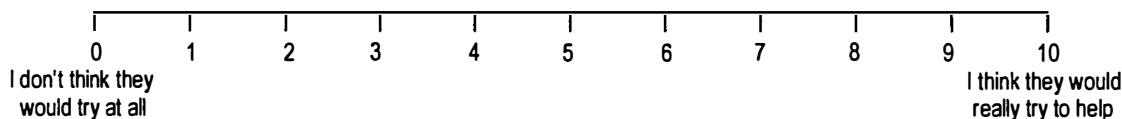
36. **I think that Workshop instructors care about me and my welfare.**



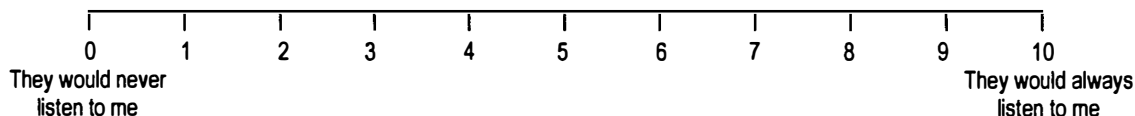
37. **I believe that Workshop instructors give good advice and information.**



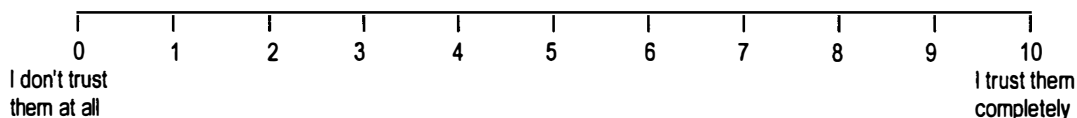
38. **I think that Workshop instructors would really try to help me.**



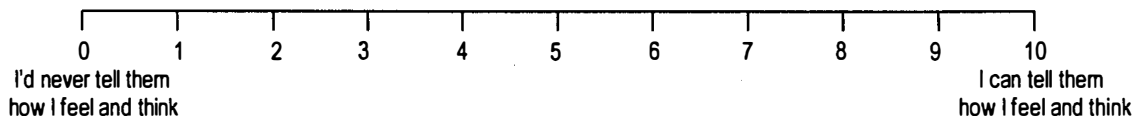
39. **I feel that Workshop instructors would really listen to me.**



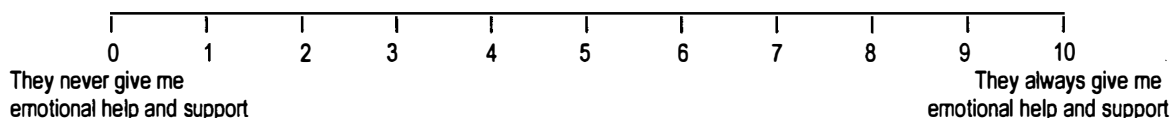
40. **I trust Workshop instructors with the information I give them.**



41. **I think that I can tell Workshop instructors how I feel and what I think.**



42. **Unit staff can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



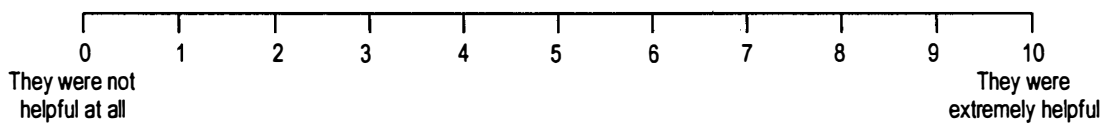
43. Have you ever gone to *Workshop instructors* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

44. Last time you spoke to *Workshop instructors*, how helpful do you think they were?



The following questions are about friends (mates) outside of prison.

Have you had any contact with friends (outside of prison) whilst you have been inside prison?

Yes ☐

No ☐

What type of contact have you had?

#### VISITS

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

#### MAIL

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

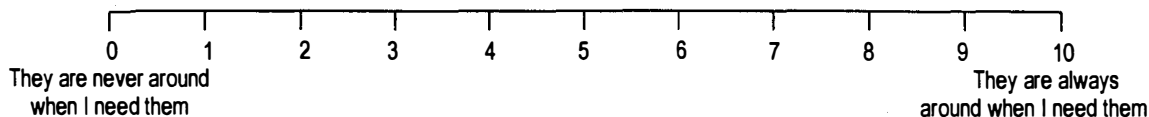
#### PHONE

Never —> why not? \_\_\_\_\_

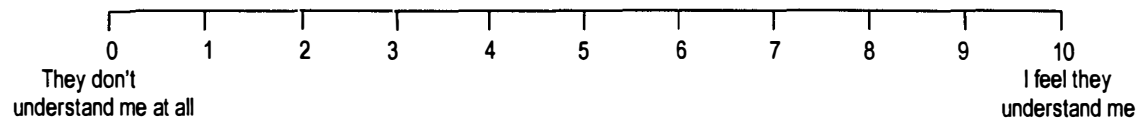
Once or twice

3 or more —> how often \_\_\_\_\_

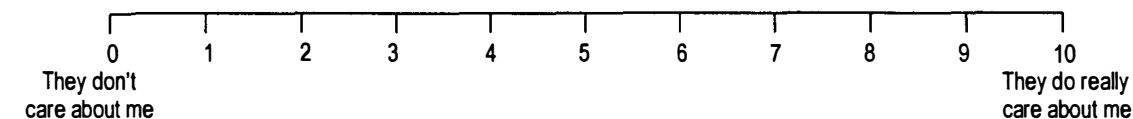
45. **Friends (outside) are easy to contact when I have problems.**



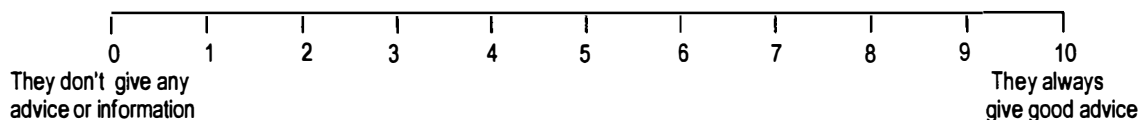
46. **I think that Friends would really try to understand the problems I have.**



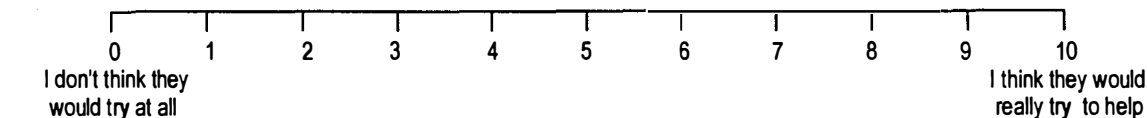
47. **I think that Friends care about me and my welfare.**



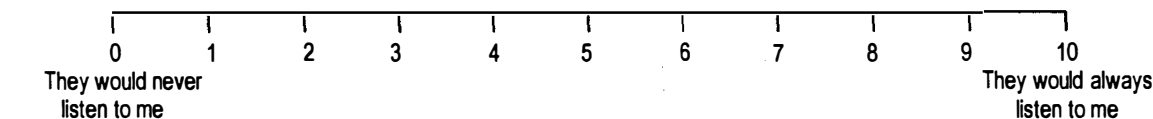
48. **I believe that Friends give good advice and information.**



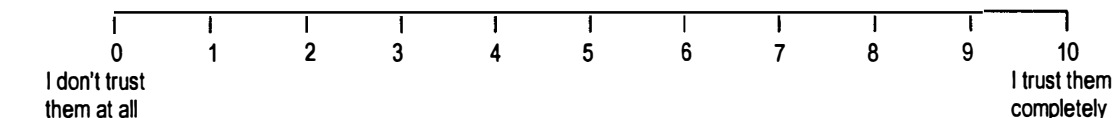
49. **I think that Friends would really try to help me.**



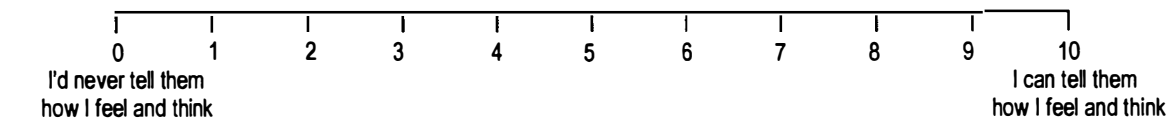
50. **I feel that Friends would really listen to me.**



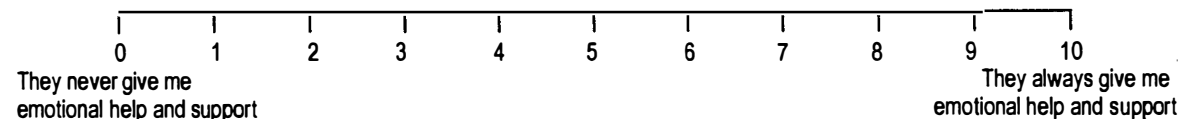
51. **I trust Friends with the information I give them.**



52. **I think that I can tell Friends how I feel and what I think.**



53. **Friends can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



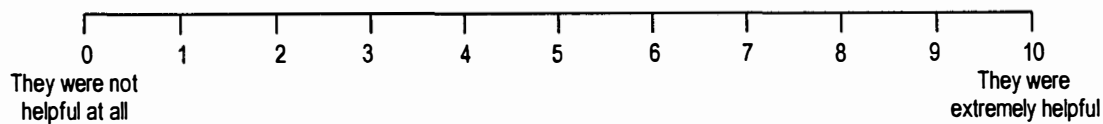
54. Have you ever gone to *Friends (outside)* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

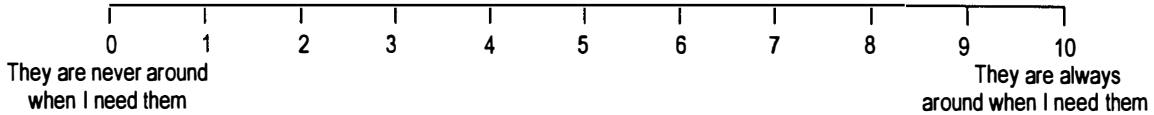
No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

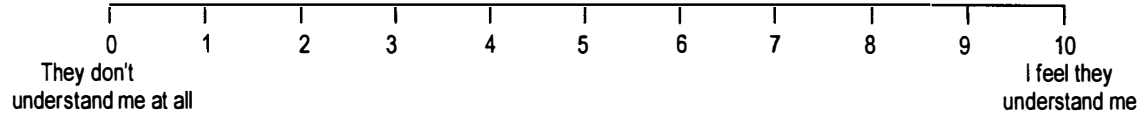
55. Last time you spoke to *Friends*, how helpful do you think they were?



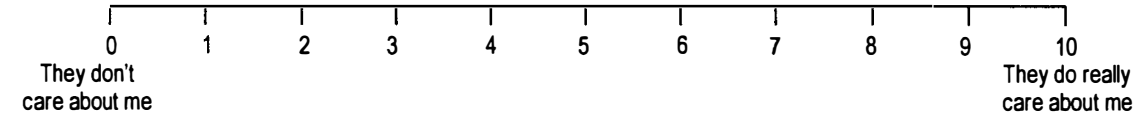
56. ***Prisoners support officers* are easy to contact when I have problems.**



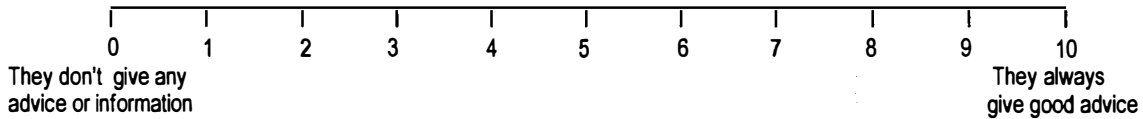
57. **I think that *Prisoners support officers* would really try to understand the problems I have.**



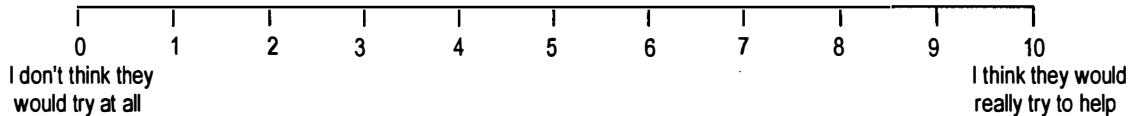
58. **I think that *Prisoners support officers* care about me and my welfare.**



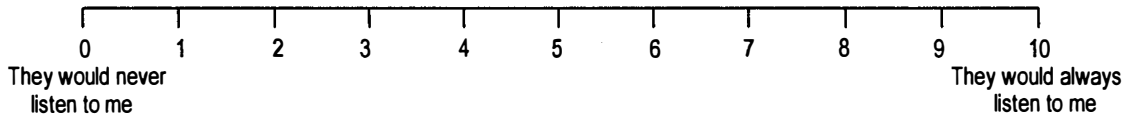
59. **I believe that *Prisoners support officers* give good advice and information.**



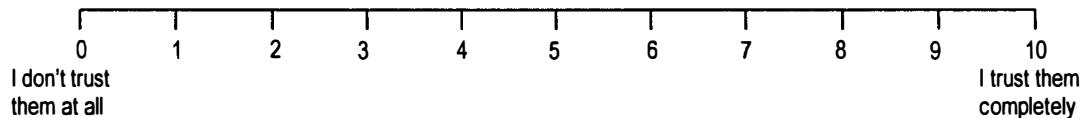
60. **I think that *Prisoners support officers* would really try to help me.**



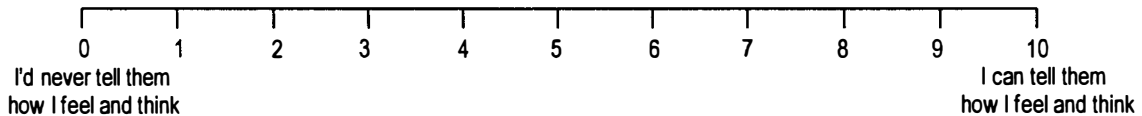
61. **I feel that *Prisoners support officers* would really listen to me.**



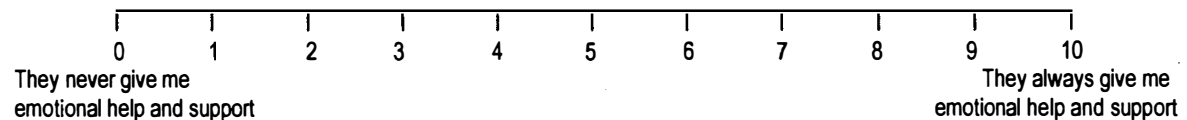
62. **I trust *Prisoners support officers* with the information I give them.**



63. **I think that I can tell *Prisoners support officers* how I feel and what I think.**



64. ***Prisoners support officers* can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



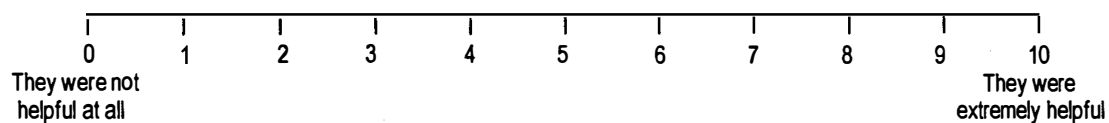
65. Have you ever gone to *Prisoners support officers* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

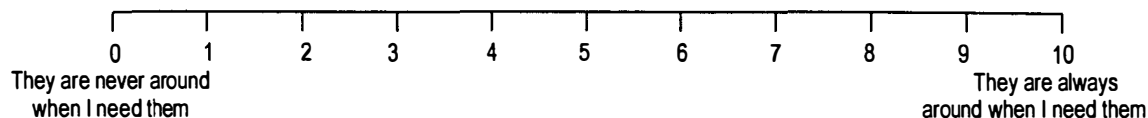
If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

66. Last time you spoke to *Prisoners support officers*, how helpful do you think they were?

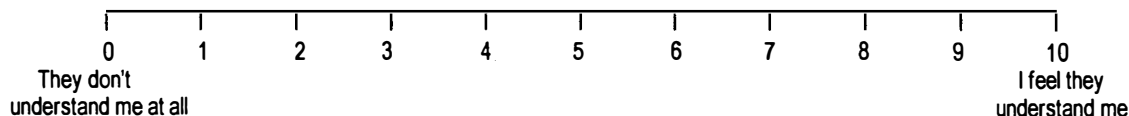




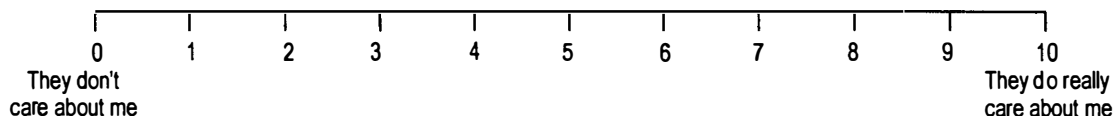
67. **Other prisoners are easy to contact when I have problems.**



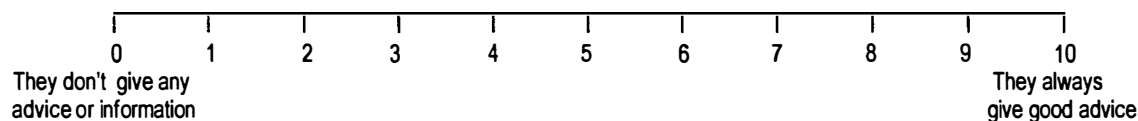
68. **I think that Other prisoners would really try to understand the problems I have.**



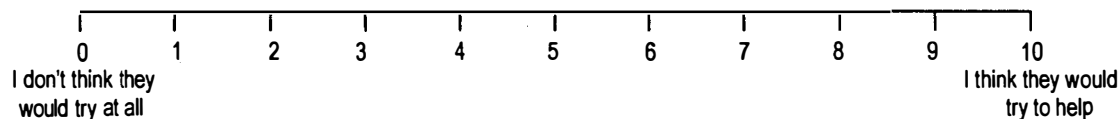
69. **I think that Other prisoners care about me and my welfare.**



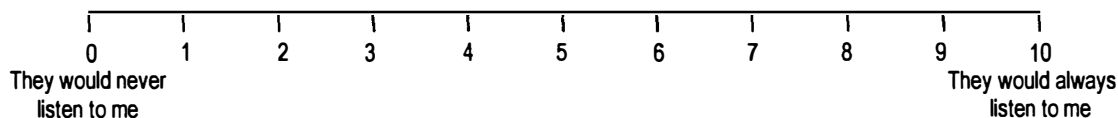
70. **I believe that Other prisoners give good advice and information.**



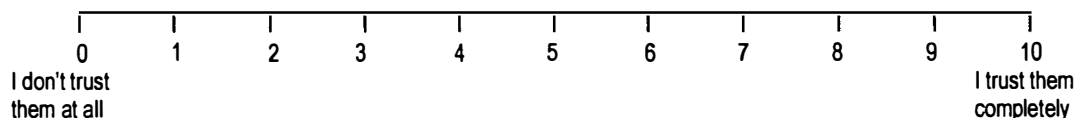
71. **I think that Other prisoners would really try to help me.**



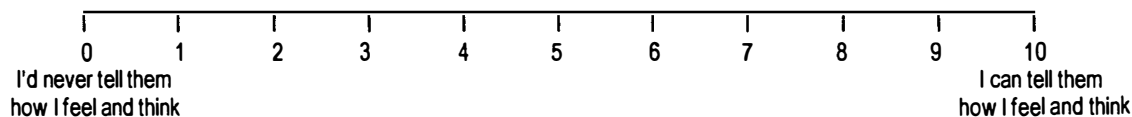
72. **I feel that Other prisoners would really listen to me.**



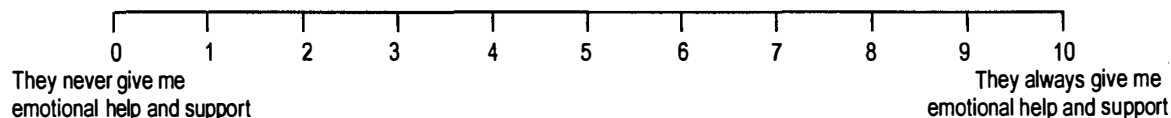
73. **I trust Other prisoners with the information I give them.**



74. **I think that I can tell Other prisoners how I feel and what I think.**



75. **Other prisoners can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



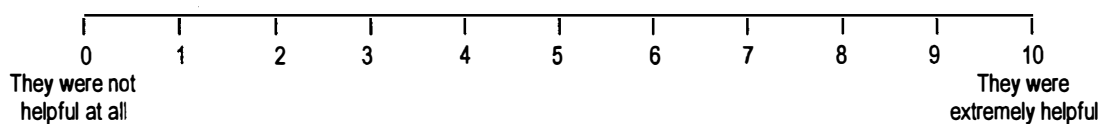
76. Have you ever gone to *Other prisoners* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

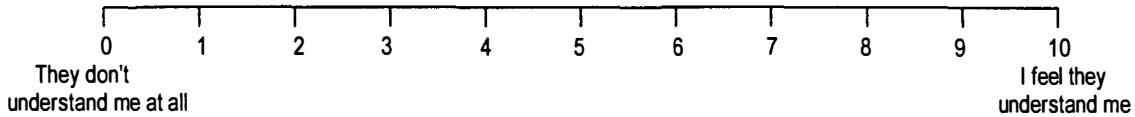
77. Last time you spoke to *Other prisoners*, how helpful do you think they were?



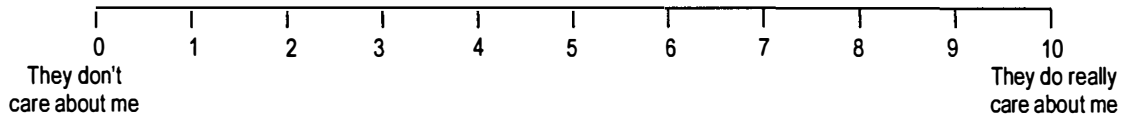
78. **FCMT are easy to contact when I have problems.**



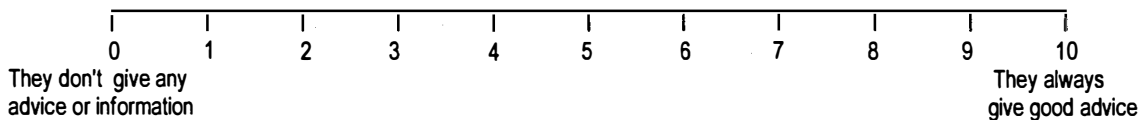
79. **I think that FCMT would really try to understand the problems I have.**



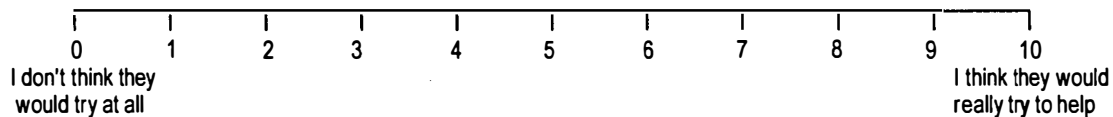
80. **I think that FCMT care about me and my welfare.**



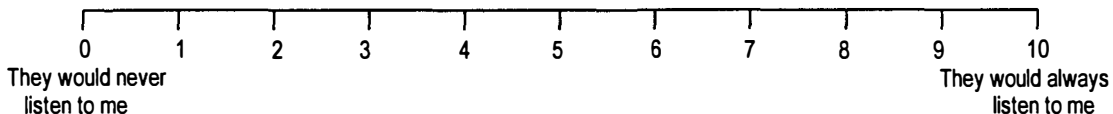
81. **I believe that FCMT give good advice and information.**



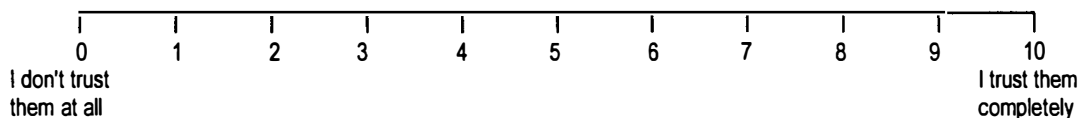
82. **I think that FCMT would really try to help me.**



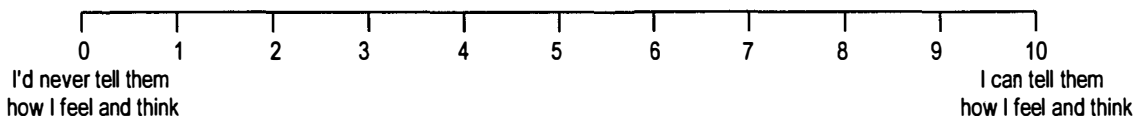
83. **I feel that FCMT would really listen to me.**



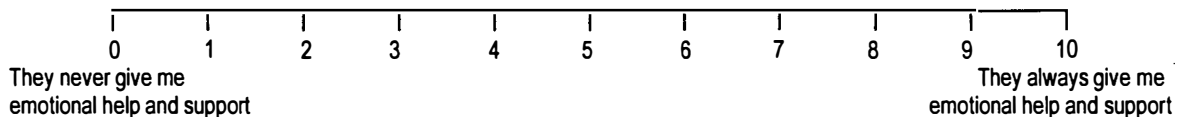
84. **I trust FCMT with the information I give them.**



85. **I think that I can tell FCMT how I feel and what I think.**



86. **FCMT can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



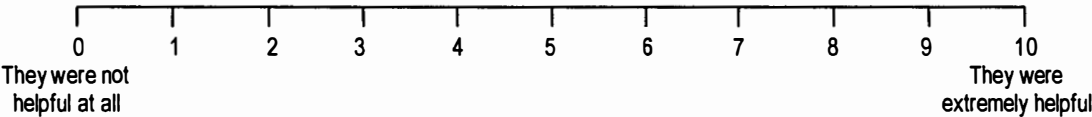
87. Have you ever gone to *FCMT* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

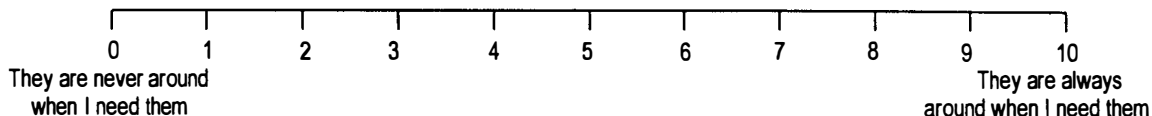
No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

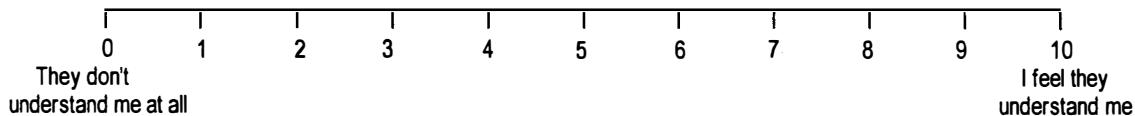
88. Last time you spoke to *FCMT*, how helpful do you think they were?



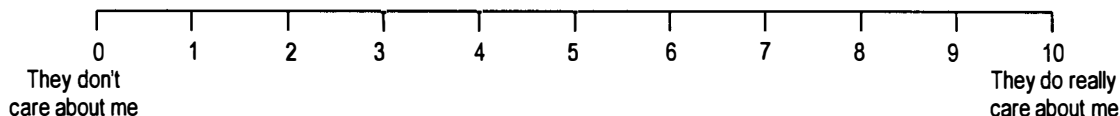
89. **Nursing staff are easy to contact when I have problems.**



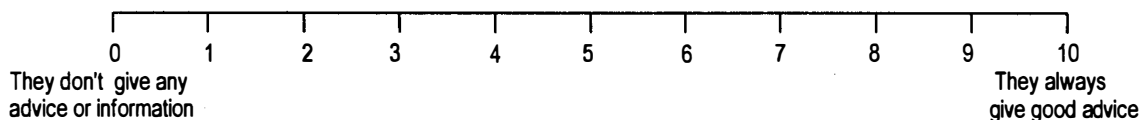
90. **I think that Nursing staff would really try to understand the problems I have.**



91. **I think that Nursing staff care about me and my welfare.**



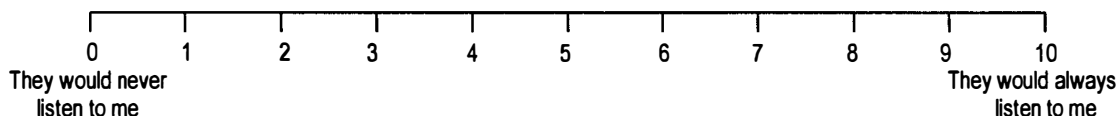
92. **I believe that Nursing staff give good advice and information.**



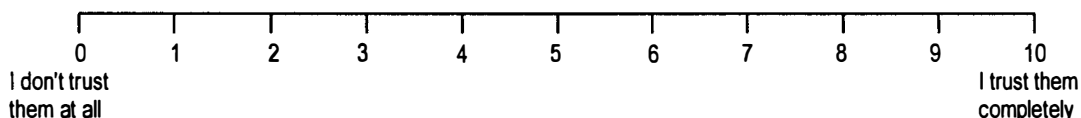
93. **I think that Nursing staff would really try to help me.**



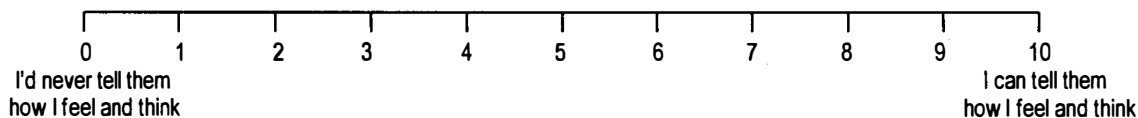
94. **I feel that Nursing staff would really listen to me.**



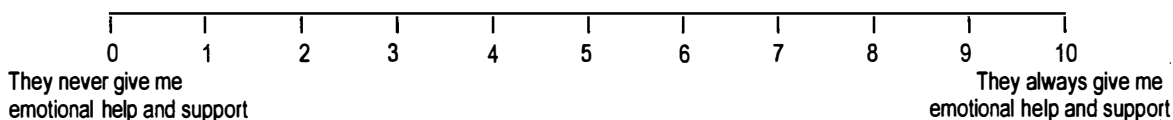
95. **I trust Nursing staff with the information I give them.**



96. **I think that I can tell Nursing staff how I feel and what I think.**



97. **Nursing staff can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.**



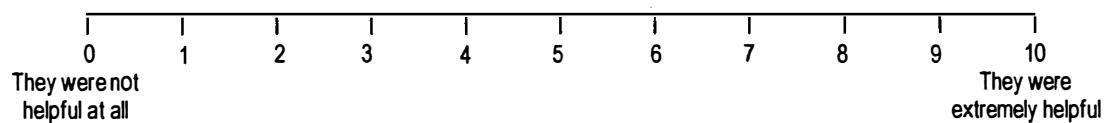
98. Have you ever gone to *Nursing staff* for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

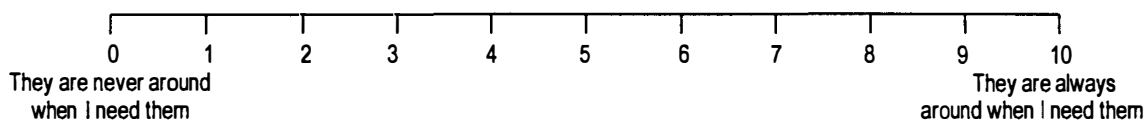
99. Last time you spoke to *Nursing staff*, how helpful do you think they were?



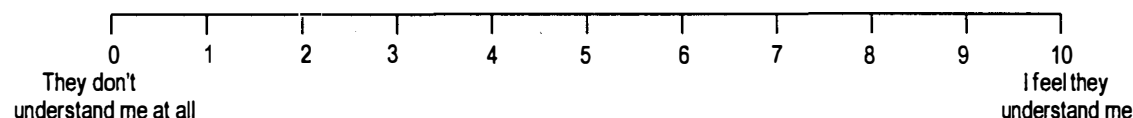
So far we have asked questions about supports available inside and outside of prison.

Is there anyone else who you could go to when having problems who has not been mentioned already?

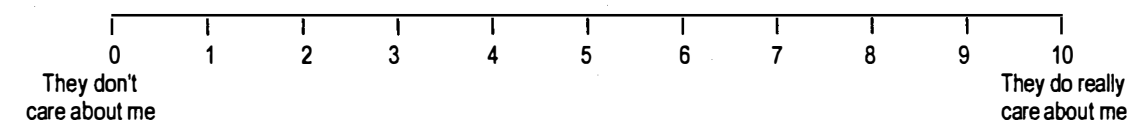
100. \_\_\_\_\_ are easy to contact when I have problems.



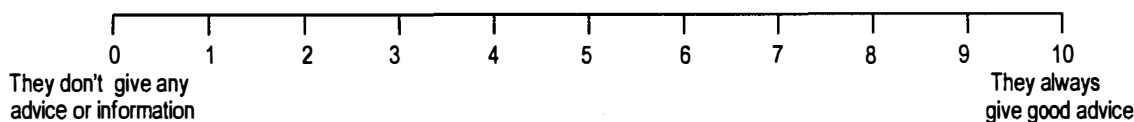
101. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ would really try to understand the problems I have.



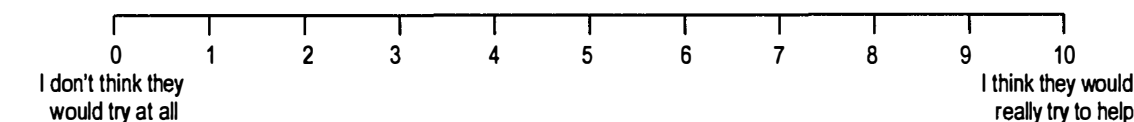
102. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ care about me and my welfare.



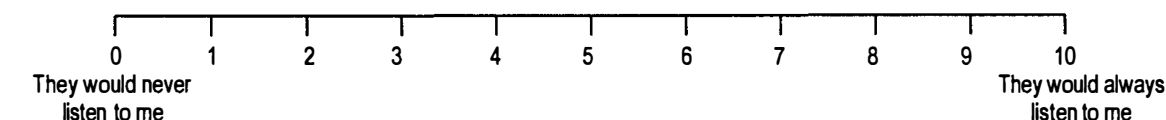
103. I believe that \_\_\_\_\_ give good advice and information.



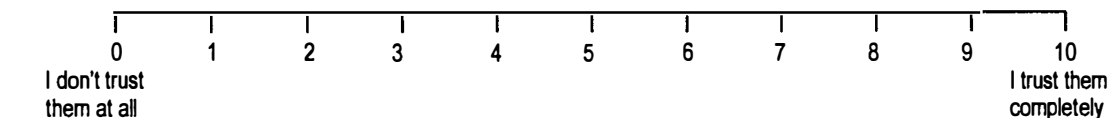
104. I think that \_\_\_\_\_ would really try to help me.



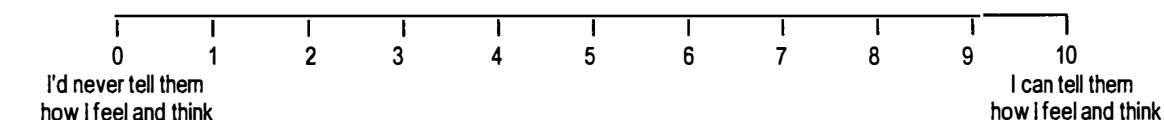
105. I feel that \_\_\_\_\_ would really listen to me.



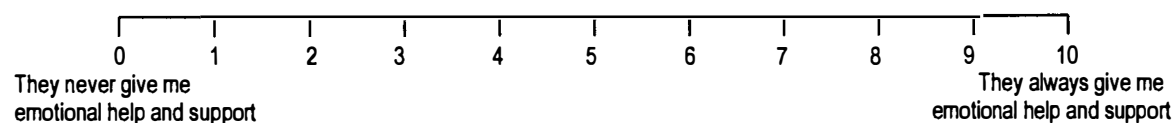
106. I trust \_\_\_\_\_ with the information I give them.



107. I think that I can tell \_\_\_\_\_ how I feel and what I think.



108. \_\_\_\_\_ can provide me with the emotional help and support I need.



109. Have you ever gone to \_\_\_\_\_ for support when having problems?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If NO, what are some reasons for choosing not to use this support?

110. Last time you spoke to \_\_\_\_\_, how helpful do you think they were?

