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Embodied overcrowding and sensory tensions: A carceral autoethnography of Philippine jails

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I undertake a sensorially oriented autoethnography of two Philippine jails, illuminating the visceral textures of carceral life that conventional sociological or criminological discourses often overlook. Drawing inspiration from Jewkes and Young's (2021) examination of Kyoto Prison, I foreground the overlapping realms of sight, sound, smell, and touch, arguing that incarceration is inherently a profoundly embodied phenomenon. By weaving personal reflections, field observations, and broader scholarly insights, I reveal how overcrowded dormitories, suffocating heat, and lingering bodily odours converge to redefine detainees' spatial, temporal, and psychosocial realities in ways rarely captured by quantitative metrics. While mindful of Nelken's (2009) caution against ethnocentrism and simplistic cross-cultural comparisons, I situate this Philippine context within a global conversation on punitive confinement, underscoring the urgent need for sensorially attuned research, policy, and praxis. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a radical reconsideration of punishment's sensory dimensions in the pursuit of more humane (if ever possible) penal landscapes.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I provide a sensorially attuned narrative located within two Philippine jails. As with Jewkes and Young's (2021) reflections on Kyoto Prison in Japan, the aim here is to illuminate the 'unconventional' (e.g., sensory, atmospheric, and visceral) dimensions of punitive and carceral environments. Dimensions often obscured in more traditional criminological or sociological accounts. Focusing on selected Philippine jails that I visited during official prison visits, accompanied by an international non-governmental organisation, I examine how the look, feel, sound, and especially the smell of confinement permeate everyday carceral life. This account, based on field observations via autoethnography is necessarily partial. It is not 'deep ethnography' in the sense of having spent prolonged periods in these jails or having carried out extensive interviews with incarcerated people and staff. Instead, I was briefly permitted inside, accompanied by local personnel, after obtaining the required clearances. Much of what follows draws on my immediate sensorial impressions and subsequent reflections, alongside broader knowledge of the Philippine penal context gleaned from the available criminological and penological literature. My purpose in writing this paper is twofold: (1) to highlight how the senses can deepen our understanding of confinement as lived experience, and (2) to contribute to a modest but growing body of work on carceral atmospheres in a region that remains underrepresented in international criminological literature. Following Nelken's (2009) call to avoid ethnocentrism (where we measure non-Western penal conditions purely by Western standards) and, equally, to avoid uncritical relativism (where we decline to evaluate conditions at all), I attempt here to place what I saw and felt

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in Philippine jails within the unique social, cultural, and institutional context of that country, while acknowledging that some universal aspects of incarceration inevitably resonate across jurisdictions.

Autoethnography, broadly conceived, positions the researcher's own subjectivity as both the site and instrument of enquiry, allowing lived experience to serve as an analytic lens through which wider social, cultural, and institutional phenomena may be interrogated (Anderson, 2006; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Boylorn and Orbe, 2016; Butz and Besio, 2009). Within convict criminology, this reflexive mode of scholarship has been especially generative. Formerly incarcerated scholars have long deployed autoethnographic narratives to illuminate the otherwise occluded textures of penal life and to contest orthodox, outsider-dominated criminological discourses (see Newbold et al., 2014). Newbold et al. (2014) crystallise this tradition in their notion of 'convict autoethnography,' a methodological stance that foregrounds embodied expertise while simultaneously demanding rigorous critical self-interrogation. Yet ethical and epistemological caveats attend any such endeavour. In the present paper I write not as someone who was incarcerated but rather as a visitor. My observations are unavoidably mediated by the spatial routes, verbal explanations, and visual tableaux that jail authorities elected to place before me. My prior incarceration inevitably inflects how I perceive and interpret custodial environments. The prison, in Moran's (2012) terms, is inscribed upon the body, just as inadequate healthcare etches itself into corporeal memory. This embodied experience functions as an analytical, visual, spatial, and sensory lens through which I apprehend other carceral settings. Nevertheless, the autoethnographic reflections offered here remain necessarily partial, bounded by institutional gatekeeping and the curated realities to which my visitor status afforded access.

My autoethnographic observations emerge from site visits in two Mindanao-based jails in the Philippines: Davao City Jail and Zamboanga City Jail, where the interplay of culture, carceral infrastructure, and daily life coalesces into vivid sensory experiences. Although my formal criminological training took place in Australia, I was born in Davao, speak the local language, and comprehend the cultural nuances that infuse these environments. In addition, I also have lived experience of being an incarcerated person albeit in a different context. In Glissant's (1997) sense, my relationship to these sites is dense and related, shaped not only by professional expertise but also by personal affiliations and lived cultural knowledge. Davao City Jail, situated in Barangay Ma-a, has garnered recognition for its modest yet meaningful rehabilitative programmes which include: literacy classes, livelihood opportunities, and college offerings (Mizell, 2021), despite now housing a population far exceeding its original design (Pages, 2017). Conversely, Zamboanga City Jail, located in the city's western port area, has been cited by national data as one of Mindanao's most severely overcrowded facilities, with occupancy rates soaring to 300–400 % beyond capacity (Mamac, 2024). Government audits and local reports alike indicate that resource constraints in Zamboanga often compel detainees to sleep in improvised bunk extensions or on shared floor spaces, highlighting the facility's acute infrastructural deficiencies (Mamac, 2024). Taken together, these two jails crystallise how institutional constraints, burgeoning populations, and embedded cultural frameworks collectively shape the sensory, social, and psychological dimensions of imprisonment in the Philippines

2. Jails in the Philippines

Philippine penal systems remain less examined in Western criminological scholarship than, for example, the United Kingdom, United States, and Nordic prisons. In the Philippines, the carceral system is divided between the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP): responsible for city, municipal, and district jails housing pre-trial incarcerated people and those serving shorter sentences. And the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor): which oversees larger prisons like New Bilibid and the Correctional Institution for Women, typically housing those sentenced and/or convicted of more serious offences. The Philippine jail population fluctuates, but it has long been plagued by severe overcrowding. Some official reports note occupancy rates surpassing 300% or 400%, and in extreme cases, higher still (see Clemente-Faustino and de Guzman, 2023; Walmsley, 2018). The pre-trial population, those awaiting charges or trial, often comprises the majority of incarcerated people in city jails, which intensifies the use of shared or makeshift sleeping spaces. Consequently, daily life in many Philippine jails are marked by cramped conditions, limited access to hygienic facilities, and intense physical proximity (Yarcia and Bernadas, 2023), further exacerbated by the Duterte government's war on drugs which increased jail populations (Deinla et al., 2024; Lee and Narag, 2019). Under such conditions, the sensory dimensions of confinement, particularly smell, become even more palpable. However, it is important to underscore that many of the Philippine jails now administered by the BJMP never envisioned to house detainees for extended periods. Originally conceived as police holding cells, meant only for brief custody, they were repurposed into formal jails during the extensive governmental restructuring that followed the Marcos regime in the late 1970s and 1980s. This transition occurred largely without the architectural and infrastructural overhauls required for long-term confinement, a circumstance that has since contributed significantly to the chronic overcrowding and infrastructural deficits prevalent in these facilities.

At the same time, Philippine jails are not wholly monolithic or unchanging. Some have embraced rehabilitation initiatives, faith-based programmes, or community-based partnerships. Nonetheless, one must not overlook that chronic budgetary constraints, infrastructural inadequacies, and high rates of poverty-driven offences produce a jail environment that can be brutally difficult, reflecting broader sociopolitical and economic realities. In the discussion that follows, I focus on the everyday lived experience of local-level jails, drawing on brief observations in multiple sites in Zamboanga and Davao, located on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines.

3. Approaching the jail

My initial sensory engagement with a Philippine jail began long before crossing its official threshold. In Davao, for instance, even the approach to the facility was marked by the stifling embrace of tropical heat and humidity, a pervasive condition throughout the

archipelago, which descended upon me like a dense, unrelenting cloak. Vendors and families congregated along the roadside, awaiting the commencement of visitation hours, rhythmically waving fans in hopes of relief and vigilantly safeguarding their personal possessions. Rising from among the everyday bustle loomed a formidable concrete wall crowned with barbed wire, its once-bold lettering now faded with time and weather.

In Zamboanga, the experience took on a rather unexpected character. Rather than encountering prominent government signage and large-scale security infrastructure reminiscent of Western penal complexes, I was struck by how inconspicuous the facility appeared amid its surroundings. Almost without warning, the jail emerged at street level, seemingly intertwined with adjacent establishments and residential spaces. There was a notable absence of imposing gateways or highly visible reminders of heightened security. Instead, the jail's architecture and position within the urban landscape underscored its coexistence with everyday life, its presence at once understated and unmistakably authoritative.

My earlier engagements with Australian correctional estates diverge sharply from the prospect that confronted me in the Philippines. In Australia, jails are seldom situated in urban centres. Rather, they are relegated to suburban or rural peripheries, occupying expansive tracts whose towering walls announces their presence from afar and affords the visitor psychological forewarning. Reception protocols likewise mitigate discomfort: ample, climate-controlled spaces ensure that visitors are not consigned to the vagaries of weather while awaiting admission. Although I have traversed such thresholds on numerous occasions, both in the capacity of an incarcerated person and as a prison researcher, the approach to this Philippine jail felt curiously disorienting, as though I were negotiating carceral spaces for the first time. That embodied dissonance underscored how profoundly local geography, architecture, and administrative custom shape the phenomenology of punishment, alerting me to the qualitatively distinct carceral milieu I was about to encounter.

3.1. Administration and entry

Once admitted through the main entrance, I found myself in a modest administrative area, its pastel-hued walls and simple furnishings reminiscent of many government offices throughout the Philippines. Plastic chairs, a few wooden benches, and posters outlining institutional rules and regulations occupied the space. Yet any semblance of routine bureaucracy was swiftly undercut by the unmistakable presence of armed guards in dark uniforms, their vigilance underscoring the penal context at hand. As an officially sanctioned guest, I was promptly ushered into a smaller adjoining office complex. In a cramped room lined with desks around its perimeter, three or four officers laboured methodically, one intent on manipulating data in a spreadsheet, others occupied with various administrative tasks. The atmosphere felt undeniably makeshift, with outdated computers and a shortage of ergonomic seating. Each officer, clad in a uniform replete with military or police-style insignia, exuded authority that contrasted sharply with the room's infrastructural limitations. By contrast, a separate, more spacious office reserved for the warden displayed a notably different spatial and symbolic hierarchy. A single desk dominated the room, four chairs meticulously arranged to convey the occupant's elevated status and control. This subtle division of space and furniture, juxtaposed with the conspicuous austerity of the surrounding offices, highlighted the distinctly hierarchical nature of the institution and underscored the power differentials woven into its very design.

3.2. Education and recreation areas

In many of the Philippine jails I visited, the notion of designated 'learning' or 'leisure' spaces was often aspirational rather than fully realised. Where such areas existed, they were typically modest in scale and makeshift in design, frequently doubling as corridors, hallways, or even partially enclosed corners within a larger dormitory. In the jail in Davao, for example, I was introduced to a small library: a balcony area stocked with donated books, some dog-eared from heavy circulation, others collecting dust from lack of use. The shelves, though sparse, represented a rare resource, suggesting an institutional aspiration toward education and self-improvement. Yet these efforts frequently contended with inadequate spaces dedicated for these purposes. In Zamboanga, what was formally designated as a 'library' functioned chiefly as an office space for the officer overseeing educational initiatives. Within this modest room, a limited selection of texts, often represented by only a handful of copies per title, lined the shelves in orderly fashion. Each volume was meticulously encased in plastic to extend its lifespan and minimise wear, underscoring both the scarcity of reading materials and the institution's effort to preserve them for continued use. When questioned about the officer in-charge's decision to occupy the designated library space as an office, rather than opening it to detainees as a shared resource that might foster communal learning, the officer expressed apprehension about potential damage, neglect, or theft of the books. This rationale speaks to the perennial underfunding of Philippine correctional institutions, despite international assessments suggesting that the nation possesses sufficient economic capacity to ensure adequate support for all citizens (Pinches, 1999), including those in penal facilities. Allegations of systemic corruption have frequently been advanced to explain the persistent mismatch between available resources and actual institutional conditions (Batalla, 2020; Nolasco et al., 2014), particularly under the current administration. However, delving more deeply into such claims lies beyond the scope of this present discussion.

Similarly, designated recreation zones tended to reflect the jail's broader spatial constraints. Where one might expect a dedicated courtyard or a gym, incarcerated people instead made do with narrow walkways where they engaged in conversation, improvised exercises, or simple table games. In both facilities, some semblance of structured recreational activities: group prayer sessions, music programmes, or livelihood seminars, took place in multi-purpose rooms that also served as meeting areas for legal consultations. Across these jails, leisure or learning never existed in isolation. Rather, they were inserted into cramped and over-utilised pockets of space, thus highlighting the difficulty of maintaining meaningful educational or recreational programmes in chronically overcrowded environments. In many Western penal systems, it is not uncommon to find a range of recreational provisions (e.g., Gallant et al., 2015;

Meek and Lewis, 2012; Woods et al., 2017), such as table tennis, gymnasias, or other leisure facilities that allow individuals to engage in constructive activity while upholding a degree of human dignity. By contrast, my observations in Philippine jails revealed a conspicuous absence of such dedicated recreational spaces. The pervasive issue of overcrowding meant that opportunities for detainees to leave their cells or living quarters were typically curtailed, partly in the interest of maintaining security. With so many incarcerated individuals jostling for minimal personal space, any form of organised sport or structured physical exercise became logistically challenging, if not altogether impossible. Consequently, detainees were largely confined to cramped conditions that offered limited avenues for either physical release or communal interaction, underscoring how infrastructural constraints can curtail rehabilitation efforts and perpetuate an environment defined more by containment than personal development.

3.3. Living quarters

One of the most striking manifestations of overcrowding became apparent in the living quarters themselves. Typically arranged in a ‘dorm-type’ configuration, these spaces were simultaneously communal and oppressively cramped. Bunk beds nominally designed for two often accommodated three or four incarcerated people, leading many to improvise additional platforms from scrap wood or cardboard. In one particularly jarring instance, individuals slept quite literally on top of one another, forming precarious, vertical layers of human occupancy. Personal belongings: clothing, toiletries, and small plastic boxes for valuables, were tucked beneath mattresses or suspended from overhead beams. Navigating the dorms turned into a near-constant exercise in contortion, as incarcerated people threaded narrow aisles or carefully stepped over each other’s limbs. Despite these spatial indignities, a tentative sense of community could still be observed: incarcerated people pooled their scant resources to cook collective meals, swapped personal items such as soap and toiletries, and adorned their bunks with family photographs or handwritten signs indicating their provincial roots. Yet this all-pervasive congestion, compounded by insufficient ventilation and the relentless tropical heat, underscored systemic infrastructural and humanitarian shortcomings. Under such circumstances, conventional distinctions between public and private, or between the institution and the incarcerated, became practically meaningless, eclipsed by the tangible, everyday reality of shared confinement.

Prison overcrowding, moreover, is not exclusive to these local settings but remains a pervasive global challenge that poses serious consequences for both incarcerated populations and correctional personnel (see Harding, 1987; Huey and McNulty, 2005; Ravena and Mahmud, 2019). Research consistently underscores how a detainee population exceeding a facility’s intended capacity triggers substandard living conditions, escalates tensions, and elevates risks of violence and psychological distress (Huey and McNulty, 2005). For instance, high levels of overcrowding often correlate with increased drug use as incarcerated people seek relief from the relentless stress of their environment (Traoré et al., 2024). Moreover, the strain on finite resources has been linked to riots and disturbances, driven by widespread dissatisfaction regarding cramped living arrangements and inadequate sanitation (Buck and Tomczak, 2024). Compounding these issues are the psychological repercussions of such conditions: heightened incidence of mental health concerns has been documented among incarcerated people in overcrowded environments, further complicating rehabilitation efforts (Ravena and Mahmud, 2019). Collectively, these findings highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms aimed at mitigating the detrimental effects of overcrowding, both to enhance incarcerated people’s wellbeing and to foster more humane correctional practices.

4. Senses of imprisonment

4.1. Smell: the “palpable human sebum”

Prisons and jails around the world often share a distinct mixture of body odour, disinfectant, and stale air. But in the city jails I visited in the Philippines, that combination was intensified by extreme crowding. One of them, Zamboanga City Jail, was particularly overpowering in odour. In my notes, I described it as a ‘palpable smell of human sebum’: a pungent odour combining sweat, bodily fluids, and the faint tang of cleaning chemicals that never quite manage to sanitise the space. Overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, and the tropical climate converge to produce an environment in which, as incarcerated people themselves sometimes say, ‘the smell never leaves.’ The mustiness of sweat-soaked clothing hung on lines near cell windows (or draped over railings) merges with the odour of leftover food, drains, and communal toilets. In effect, the entire jail is pervaded by an intense proximity: bodies pressed close, daily routines carried out in half-dark corridors or multi-person cells. Unlike the relatively low-occupancy conditions described in some Japanese (Jewkes and Young, 2021) and Nordic (Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012) prisons, for example, the hallmark of many Philippine jails is exactly the opposite: unrelenting congestion.

In Zamboanga, a space that might comfortably accommodate 15–20 people housed some hundred (if not hundreds) of incarcerated individuals sleeping literally on top of each other, on makeshift additions haphazardly welded to existing bunk beds. At times, people’s heads or feet were pressed up against the cell bars. Here, the sense of smell is practically inescapable, a constant reminder of just how many people occupy this enclosed area. As with the ‘near emptiness’ that Jewkes and Young (2021) found eerie in Kyoto Prison in Japan, the ‘crushing fullness’ in these Philippine jails is likewise a salient atmosphere, one that saturates both the senses and the psyche.

As someone who once inhabited Australia’s comparatively spacious prisons, I found the air in Zamboanga almost suffocating in its density. The moment the smell enveloped me, my body recalled a subdued but unmistakable anxiety, an involuntary tightening of the chest that I had not experienced since my own incarceration. In Australian facilities, odours were present yet diluted by space and ventilation. Here, they were omnipresent, insinuating themselves into hair, clothing, and memory. The visceral force of that miasma rendered my scholarly detachment momentarily impossible. I felt simultaneously intrusive and complicit, aware that my temporary

discomfort was the detainees' permanent condition. This sensory overload thus re-inscribed my earlier custodial experiences onto the present encounter, sharpening both my empathy and my critical resolve to articulate how overcrowding is experienced not merely as a statistic but as an embodied, inescapable saturation of the senses.

4.2. Soundscapes and surveillance: Foucault's Lattice of control

Philippine jails are rarely, if ever, hushed. Instead, they reverberate with a perpetual hum of voices, sporadic shouts, music playing on modest radios, the metallic clang of gates, and the constant whir of electric fans. Within this cacophony, incarcerated individuals call out to staff or peers in adjacent cells, their entreaties ranging from urgent pleas to light-hearted banter. Guards, for their part, issue commands in abrupt bursts, particularly evident during headcounts or while directing incarcerated people from one sector of the jail to another. Yet in a curious echo of Foucauldian discipline, one ritual did stand out. Whenever I traversed living quarters in the presence of senior officials, the occupants would respond with a conspicuously synchronised greeting, its tone hovering between practiced courtesy and an imposed performativity reminiscent of boot-camp routines. This scenario exemplifies [Michel Foucault's \(1977\)](#) conceptualisation of docile bodies, wherein discipline arises not from silence per se but from the knowledge that one's behaviour is incessantly scrutinised. In this carceral setting, order emanates from a mosaic of watchfulness: roving guards traverse corridors, while designated incarcerated people-leaders, or 'mayores,' assume internal oversight responsibilities within each cell block. [Foucault's \(1977\)](#) emphasis on the panoptic principle, where visibility becomes a mechanism of control, resonates powerfully here. Although the architecture may not resemble Bentham's iconic circular structure, the essence of unceasing gaze persists, ensuring that incarcerated people police themselves in anticipation of the official eye. The resulting soundscape is decidedly human and densely textured, woven from the intermingling of voices, fans, footsteps, and sporadic broadcasts from battered televisions.

During a conversation with the officer overseeing educational initiatives at Davao City Jail, she employed the Tagalog phrase '*naka sala*' loosely translating to 'they have wronged/transgressed' or 'they are at fault.' This linguistic choice underscored her belief that the detainees' present circumstances were both a consequence of their actions and an opportunity for 'rehabilitation.' Of course, the theoretical and practical complexities surrounding 'rehabilitation,' including trauma-informed approaches and their attendant critiques, are well documented in the literature and need not be recapitulated here (e.g., [Carlton and Russell, 2023](#)). Notably, the officer observed that individuals who failed to comply with institutional directives risked forfeiting access to the jail's limited amenities, such as the modest library collection and its basic educational resources. Such remarks reveal how penal actors often invoke a moral rationale for imposing compliance, thereby reinforcing hierarchical power structures and a vision of correction rooted more in conditional privilege than in unconditional support.

The auditory torrent inside these facilities instantly reawakened memories of my own confinement in Australia, yet with a crucial divergence. There, institutional architecture and population densities permitted pockets of relative quiet. Here, the noise was unremitting, saturating every corridor and vibrating through my sternum. As detainees chorused their obligatory greeting, I felt a jolt of visceral recognition: the reflex to stand, to respond, to be counted, habits etched into muscle memory from my prior incarceration, briefly resurfaced. Simultaneously, I experienced an acute discomfort, aware that my presence alongside ranking officials had momentarily intensified the performative burden placed upon those men. In that instant, scholarly observation and personal history collided: I sensed the weight of the panoptic eye not upon the detainees alone but upon myself, now positioned ambiguously between institutional guest and former captive. This affective dissonance sharpened my appreciation of how carceral soundscapes do more than fill acoustic space, they inscribe disciplinary power onto the body and psyche alike.

4.3. Constrained communication and familial ties

Within the tight confines of Zamboanga City Jail, one area is devoted to 'e-dalaw,' or electronic visitation. This is not unique to the Philippines and is a byproduct of the Covid-19 pandemic (see [Antojado and Ryan, 2024](#)). There, anywhere between 50 and 60 men cluster around aging tablets and smart phone devices to exchange hurried words with family members, each session capped at a mere 5 minutes. What might otherwise be intimate gestures of comfort or support unfold in an environment saturated by the collective murmur of simultaneous calls. This combination of public and personal heightens the acoustic chaos, underscoring the extent to which even the most private moments are subject to institutional regulation. Criminological research underscores that such brief familial interactions can provide crucial psychological relief and bolster incarcerated people's sense of identity and hope. Studies have demonstrated that sustained ties with loved ones are instrumental in reducing recidivism and fostering more successful reintegration (e.g., [Western and Pettit, 2010](#)). By contrast, the constraints imposed by overcrowded conditions and limited technology can undercut these potential benefits, further entrenching feelings of isolation. In this sense, e-dalaw, as a surrogate for physical visitation, offers a glimpse into the complexities of modern correctional practices. It reveals both the carceral system's effort to maintain social bonds and the Foucauldian logic of persistent regulation, where every interaction, even with one's family, is mediated by institutional authority.

Observing this scene, I was struck by a pang of recognition and unease. During my own incarceration in Australia, contact visits, though regulated, afforded tactile immediacy: the warmth of a hand, the faint scent of a loved one's clothing. Video visits also afforded more privacy. Here, comfort was mediated through cracked screens and tinny audio, the participants jostling for space and audibility. I felt an almost physical ache at the realisation that, for these men, 5 minutes of pixelated intimacy must suffice. The cacophony amplified my sense of dislocation: affection reduced to snippets, drowned in the collective murmur of competing voices. In that moment, the abstract rhetoric of 'maintaining family ties' revealed itself as both a lifeline and a further reminder of confinement's reach, extending its grasp even into the most personal spheres of human connection.

4.4. Material constraints and visual overload

A substantial number of Philippine jails occupy older structures never intended for correctional use: former schools, administrative buildings, or even repurposed municipal halls. These improvised environments produce a muddled geography of confinement. Dim corridors, frequently illuminated by bare fluorescent tubes, wind through narrow spaces where thick bars or heavy mesh screens fragment lines of sight. Official signage is often faded or missing, leaving visitors to intuit a sense of direction from the echo of voices or the movement of guards. Where newer penal institutions might adopt standardised designs aimed at security and order, these reconfigured sites exhibit layers of haphazard adaptation: walls reinforced with rudimentary steel bars, windows barred or bricked over, and corners repurposed for storage in an effort to manage a population that far exceeds initial capacity.

Inside the 'dorm-type' cells, the crowded aesthetic intensifies. Metal bunk beds, often meant for two but accommodating up to four, line the walls, and when beds become insufficient, incarcerated people stack cardboard or plywood between bunks to create makeshift sleeping platforms. This vertical extension of living space underscores the improvisational nature of these facilities. The floor itself serves as another layer of habitation, strewn with thin mats or blankets that delineate the meagre personal space of those relegated to ground-level resting spots. Every available surface becomes prime real estate for personal belongings: clusters of clothes on lines strung between cell bars, plastic containers filled with toiletries or snacks, and handmade shelves fastened to any stable support. The result is a conspicuously overwhelming visual field, one in which each inch of space is contested, negotiated, and ultimately claimed.

Stepping into these repurposed halls, I felt an immediate kinaesthetic disorientation. Australian prisons, though hardly humane, at least conformed to a recognisable architectural vernacular: wide axial corridors, predictable sight-lines, spatial cues designed for both surveillance and way-finding. Here, every turn seemed improvised, every doorway provisional, as though the building itself were perpetually bracing for one more body. My chest tightened with an old, remembered claustrophobia, yet tinged with a new astonishment at the ingenuity on display. The bricolage of plywood bunks and wire-strung wardrobes testified to a collective resourcefulness that both impressed and unsettled me. It impressed for its creativity, unsettled because such ingenuity is demanded only where institutional neglect leaves no alternative. In that crowded visual field I sensed once again the quiet desperation of carving out a square foot of dignity amid architectural indifference, and I was reminded how profoundly the built environment scripts the emotional cadence of incarceration.

4.5. Overcrowding and the quest for personalisation

Families, when they do visit, might enter designated visitor zones, frequently converted hallways or re-purposed offices. Incarcerated people's attempts at personalisation within these cramped quarters often reflect a palpable yearning for normalcy. Religious icons, carefully cut images from newspapers, or pieces of art rendered in bright paint punctuate the institutional grays and beiges. Occasionally, these glimpses of creativity extend to entire walls where incarcerated people have banded together to decorate communal areas with murals or slogans, a gesture that temporarily brightens an otherwise monochromatic environment. Yet, as [Jewkes and Young \(2021\)](#) recount in their analysis of Kyoto Prison's meticulously curated show-cell, penal authorities elsewhere sometimes highlight or hide specific features to shape visitors' perceptions of the institution. In Philippine jails, by contrast, overcrowding is impossible to mask: the rows of improvised bunk beds, the jam-packed corridors, and the cacophony of personal effects betray any attempt at concealment. This visual overload renders the underlying human density unmistakable, negating any illusion of order or spaciousness. The tired walls and chipped paint speak less of institutional efficiency and more of relentless overuse, a tangible testament to the system's inability to cope with surging incarcerated populations. Ultimately, the starkness of these living conditions underscores the fundamental tension between limited infrastructure and the everyday demands of incarceration, inviting deeper reflection on how form and function collide within carceral spaces.

These tensions become even more pronounced when one considers the emotional weight carried by family visits. The spaces allocated for such reunions, often carved out from already overtaxed administrative or hallway areas, must simultaneously serve bureaucratic security mandates and the human desire for warmth and connection. Each fleeting interaction reveals the carceral state's struggle to accommodate not only its growing population but also the intangible needs of maintaining familial ties. In this sense, the visitor zones epitomise the dual nature of incarceration: they highlight an official intent to encourage socially constructive interactions while simultaneously reinforcing the physical and emotional barriers that define the punitive environment.

Additionally, the makeshift personalisation that so vividly punctuates these spaces underscores a deeper sociocultural dynamic. The deployment of vibrant murals or handcrafted artwork is not merely aesthetic, it serves as an act of symbolic ownership over a location that would otherwise be reduced to impersonal concrete and metal. Incarcerated people who collaborate on these projects are, in effect, reclaiming tiny pockets of agency and communal identity, even as the institutional framework tightly restricts their autonomy. Yet the precariousness of such efforts is never far from view: an overcrowded dorm can just as easily become a flashpoint for tension or conflict, overshadowing the fleeting respite provided by colourful designs or family mementos. Thus, these cramped and visually saturated environments must be read in two contrasting lights. On one hand, they serve as a testament to resilience and creativity, manifestations of shared humanity under systemic stress. On the other, they expose the broader neglect that has allowed infrastructure to lag so far behind population pressures. Facilities nominally intended to hold one or two dozen individuals now struggle under exponentially larger 'prisoner' rosters. Competing imperatives: security, cost-effectiveness, and the practicalities of daily life, collide within these constrained physical parameters, generating a matrix of small everyday triumphs and large systemic failures.

Observing these contested visitation spaces, I was struck by a pang of envy mingled with sorrow. During my incarceration in Australia, designated visitor halls, though hardly welcoming, offered enough room to hold a conversation without other families

brushing one's shoulders. Here, I watched parents whisper endearments across a sea of neighbouring voices, their touches mediated by latticework. I felt the old ache of truncated encounters but amplified: privacy was not merely scarce, it was conceptually absent. Yet the murals and makeshift décor evoked admiration and a strange familiarity. I recalled crafting similar tokens to humanise an otherwise sterile cell. In that moment I recognised resilience as a universal prison dialect, but also grasped how overcrowding in the Philippine context magnifies every fragile claim to dignity, each artefact of care, into an act of quiet defiance against spatial and administrative austerity.

4.6. Touch and temperature

Few elements shape the carceral experience in the Philippines more acutely than the tropical climate. Within most jails, air conditioning is an unattainable luxury. At best, stand fans or wall-mounted units stir the oppressive heat, offering only the faintest whisper of relief. Under these conditions, it is not just the incarcerated who perspire continuously: visitors, staff, and officials alike feel sweat beading on their foreheads, trickling down their backs. Metal bars, plastic seating, and even tiled floors all emanate warmth, compounding the overarching sensation of physical unease. When twenty or thirty individuals occupy a cell designed for far fewer, body heat radiates in all directions, exacerbating the heavy atmosphere to a near-palpable degree, particularly for those forced to share bunks or sleep in tightly packed rows on the floor.

In this extended crush of bodies, the sweltering environment itself becomes a tool of punishment. Borrowing from Adey (2013), one might depict the 'atmosphere' of the jail as an enveloping, humid mass that clings to every surface and every person. Unlike in better-resourced facilities where guards have the option to ration air-conditioning for operational or punitive reasons, such climatic control in Philippine jails is frequently a moot point, mechanical cooling simply does not exist. Consequently, the incarcerated negotiate the heat daily: fanning themselves with improvised materials, draping wet towels over their necks, or discarding shirts to maximize any fleeting breeze. This interplay between structural limitation and human improvisation highlights an unsettling reality. The very air within these carceral spaces becomes both a symbol and a mechanism of duress, revealing how environmental conditions and institutional inadequacies converge to intensify punishment. Every drop of sweat thus tells a dual story, one of incarcerated people's resilience in the face of heat, and of a penal system whose infrastructural deficits amplify suffering in subtle yet pervasive ways.

As the heat closed in, I felt an old, familiar clamminess resurface, yet magnified. Australian prisons had been austere, but their temperate climate and regulated ventilation afforded at least intermittent respite. Here, the stagnant air seemed to press against my chest, recalling the anxiety of hot, airless nights spent locked in a cell, but now without the promise of dawn's cooling relief. I was struck by how quickly perspiration blurred the boundary between observer and observed: my notebook pages dampened, my shirt adhered to my skin, and I found myself sharing, however briefly, the physical indignity that detainees endure unceasingly. That embodied convergence sharpened my awareness of heat as an invisible shackle, silently tightening around every movement and thought, and reminded me how environmental privation compounds the already taxing architectures of control.

5. Approaching everyday life

During my short visits inside these jails, I was often taken to the reception area for new admissions, a general 'dorm' cell (where incarcerated people crammed onto bunk beds or floors), and a multipurpose area sometimes used for prayer meetings or legal consultations. The fleeting nature of my visits limited my ability to observe daily schedules in depth. Yet from a few conversations with staff, I learned that incarcerated people typically rise early, queue for washing or limited shower time, gather for headcount, and then engage in improvised activities: cooking, chores, sometimes livelihood projects like crafts or painting. Meals are taken together, but in shifts if the population is too large. Instances of free time are often devoted to communal tasks, managing the distribution of meagre resources (e.g., toothpaste, soap) or maintaining cleanliness. The Philippine context appears defined by perpetual crowd management, resource-sharing, and a form of interpersonal negotiation, given that so many incarcerated people are stuck waiting for court proceedings that can face long delays (Narag, 2018). In Zamboanga City Jail, conversations revealed a palpable sense of hopelessness: incarcerated people had been there anywhere from one year to eight years awaiting resolution of their cases. This sense of resignation pervaded the humid hallways, as men attempted to entertain themselves through card games or half-hearted conversation, often overshadowed by the uncertainty of when (or if) they might be transferred or released.

Ultimately, the Filipino jail's visual, spatial, and affective landscapes challenge conventional assumptions about punishment as a purely disciplinary mechanism. The interplay between institutional limitations and in carcerated people's resourcefulness underscores a broader question: how can carceral policies be realigned to acknowledge the fundamental humanity of those confined within them? In every makeshift bunk, every mural scrawled on a peeling wall, and every muted family reunion behind metal bars, one glimpses both the inescapable force of the state's coercive apparatus and the enduring, if fragile, efforts of the incarcerated to construct a semblance of normalcy and dignity.

6. Regional variations: local divergences and the semi-communal fabric of incarceration

Although overcrowding and stifling heat represent a near-ubiquitous reality across the archipelago's jail facilities, the conditions within Philippine jails can vary meaningfully from one site to another. Davao City Jail, for example, diverges from the more oppressive density of Zamboanga in ways that, while modest, significantly impact everyday life behind bars. During my visit, a jail officer led me through a slightly more open layout, culminating in a modest prison library, a rare amenity within the country's penal landscape.

Situated on an upper level with windows overlooking the main yard, this small collection of donated books and reading materials offered not only intellectual stimulation but also a vantage point onto the jail's communal rhythms. From this elevated perch, I witnessed what might be termed a 'miniature marketplace:' incarcerated people gathered around makeshift stalls, bartering food items and basic necessities. These economic exchanges, though informal, revealed a delicate system of mutual support and negotiation, reflecting both the resourcefulness of incarcerated people and a latent camaraderie cultivated within constraints. Such structures of 'prison commerce' are not merely about the distribution of goods; they serve as a coping strategy that mitigates some of the harshness of confinement. Even the simple act of cooking a meal communally or sharing a surplus of toiletries can foster vital social bonds, especially under circumstances where formal institutional support is limited.

While these conditions in Davao are by no means luxurious: crowding, heat, and infrastructure deficiencies remain palpable, the fact that incarcerated people could move with a degree more freedom illustrates how local governance, staff initiative, and external partnerships can shape the carceral atmosphere. In some instances, proactive wardens collaborate with civic organisations or receive supplemental funding from municipal authorities, allowing for the creation of small but meaningful facilities such as libraries (e.g., [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023](#)) or multi-purpose rooms. These improvements, though slightly relative to the magnitude of need, underscore the outsized influence of incremental changes in mitigating the rigours of incarceration. Moreover, variations in architectural design, whether due to an older building's inherent limitations or the accidental advantage of wider communal spaces, can shift the intangible ambience from one of near-unbearable compression to something marginally more humane. Tellingly, the sense of 'community' I observed in Davao would be far more difficult to replicate in jails strained far beyond capacity, where even the most rudimentary personal space is a luxury. Consequently, the disparities between Zamboanga and Davao act as a microcosm of a national jail system struggling to reconcile overarching overcrowding with sporadic instances of progressive reform. These localised differences remind us that while broad-brush critiques of Philippine incarceration remain valid, the lived experience behind bars is not homogeneous. Rather, it is shaped by a fragile interplay of policy decisions, resource availability, and the everyday ingenuity of those who endure, or oversee, the confines of jail life.

7. Concluding thoughts: sensory lessons from Philippine jails

Attuning our sociological and criminological lenses to the smells, sounds, tactile impressions, and visual cues within Philippine jails provides a unique vantage on the lived reality of punitive confinement. Although imprisonment in the Philippines diverges significantly in material and cultural aspect from other jurisdictions worldwide, the fundamental truth remains that incarceration is inherently and profoundly sensory. Amid oppressive tropical heat, the pungent tang of human sebum, and an incessant din of human voices, these jails reveal themselves to be among the most challenging carceral settings. In stark contrast to the measured silence of places like Kyoto Prison in Japan ([Jewkes and Young, 2021](#)), overcrowded Philippine facilities confront incarcerated people with an overwhelming proximity of bodies, transforming a space initially conceived for containment into a site of perpetual human compression. This sensory onslaught, particularly the relentless assault of heat, odours, and noise, often slips beneath the radar of policy debates and administrative statistics, which too frequently reduce jail conditions to quantitative indices of capacity and staffing. Yet, from the viewpoint of daily life, these immersive experiences exert a pervasive psychological toll, reconfiguring an individual's relationship to both self and surroundings. Such dynamics underscore the breadth of [Nelken's \(2009\)](#) contention that penal systems demand rigorous cross-cultural and 'cosmopolitan' scrutiny. The Philippine experience demonstrates that we cannot merely evaluate prisons according to ethnocentric yardsticks or dismiss cross-national differences as impenetrably 'other.' Rather, we must recognise a shared, universal lesson: carceral spaces anywhere are shaped by the interplay of architecture, administration, and embodied practice, all of which coalesce in the sensory realm.

Looking ahead, comparative and sensory-based criminologies stand to benefit greatly from deepened engagement with the Philippine context. Future research might explore more granular aspects of jail life, such as taste and food security, the role of communal cooking in forging social bonds, or how incarcerated people adapt to and transform their sensory environment through cultural and religious practices. Rigorous, extended ethnographies could delve into how everyday improvisations, such as repurposing plastic containers, staging informal markets, or creating ephemeral artworks, serve as strategies of resilience. There is also scope for critical policy-oriented work that examines the implications of these sensory stressors for mental health outcomes, recidivism, and broader questions of human rights compliance. In other words, there is much to understand about the Philippine penal context.

Methodologically, researchers might adopt participatory action research (PAR) frameworks that integrate the perspectives of incarcerated individuals, their families, and staff, in accordance with [Johns et al.'s \(2022\)](#) emphasis on 'co-production.' Such an approach aligns with, and meaningfully extends, the canon of lived experience criminology (see [Antojado, 2025](#); [Antojado and McPhee, 2025](#)) by foregrounding the collaborative and dialogic creation of knowledge. Through sustained engagement with those most directly affected by carceral conditions, PAR and co-production methodologies have the potential to uncover nuanced, sensory-rich insights that conventional top-down studies might overlook. This work might illuminate how particular policy reforms, say, installing better ventilation systems or refining visitation protocols, could mitigate the punishing immediacy of overcrowding, thereby reshaping the atmospheric reality of these facilities. Equally, an interdisciplinary approach that merges architectural design, public health, and criminological theory would help reveal the structural, physiological, and sociological dimensions of confinement, generating policy insights grounded in robust empirical enquiry. In this sense, categorising any prison or jail as intrinsically 'better' or 'worse' becomes reductive. Rather, the Philippine case illustrates the necessity for a more nuanced conversation about punishment and its myriad modalities, including the silent forms of violence encoded in heat, noise, and scarcity of space. Ultimately, the lived experience of incarcerated people in these overstretched facilities highlights how vital it is to move beyond simplistic metrics of capacity or recidivism and to appreciate the full spectrum of carceral harm. By focusing on how penal environments actively shape

human perception and endurance, scholars and practitioners alike can foster an ethic of reform that acknowledges the profound human stakes at issue. Consequently, the staggering immediacy of human density, so visible in Philippine jails, offers not merely an object of scholarly fascination, but a clarion call for substantive, sensorially attuned policy and practice.

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