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The Weight of Waiting: Exploring Temporal Suspension and Lived Reality in Pre-Trial Detention

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Abstract

This secondary qualitative study explores the lived experience of waiting among pre-trial detainees, a group existing in a state of temporal suspension between the hope of release and the fear of conviction. Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with 34 prisoners across three facilities, the research introduces the concept of "temporal weight." This term describes the cumulative psychological, social, and physical strain caused by indefinite waiting in carceral environments. The findings indicate that extended detention shifts time from a quantifiable resource into an overwhelming and pervasive force, creating unique forms of suffering that legal systems and prison healthcare often fail to recognize. The paper posits that waiting in prison is a form of punishment that occurs prior to sentencing, functioning through uncertainty, institutional disregard, and the loss of temporal agency. These insights contribute to sociological discussions on time, punishment, and wellbeing within correctional institutions.

Keywords

Waiting, Pre-Trial Detention, Temporal Agency, Pains of Imprisonment, Qualitative Research, Prisoners

1. Introduction

The prison is historically recognized as the quintessential institution for time-based punishment, where temporal experiences are intentionally restructured and regulated (Foucault, 1977). Mechanisms such as strict schedules, the tracking of days, and the calculation of release dates serve as technologies of power that discipline both body and mind (Foucault, 1977). However, sociological research has

largely concentrated on the temporality of sentenced inmates, individuals whose confinement has a clear endpoint and who can measure their progression toward freedom, despite the associated pain (Crewe, 2011). The experiences of pre-trial detainees, who wait without knowing if or when their detention will end, remain significantly underexplored (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). These individuals exist in a unique temporal limbo: they are neither sentenced nor free, neither convicted nor acquitted, trapped in a state of legal and existential uncertainty that can last for months or years (Orjiakor et al., 2017). This study addresses this gap by asking: How do pre-trial detainees experience and articulate the weight of waiting?

Waiting is not simply the absence of activity; it is an active social process influenced by power dynamics, institutional routines, and the personal effort of endurance (Bandak & Janeja, 2018). As Bandak and Janeja (2018) note, waiting is only "worth the wait" when it is bounded by expectation and hope; otherwise, it becomes a form of erosion. For pre-trial detainees, waiting is marked by extreme uncertainty regarding legal outcomes, the length of detention, and the future of family relationships (Orjiakor et al., 2017). This uncertainty generates what this paper defines as temporal weight, the felt burden of time that cannot be anticipated, calculated, or controlled (Medlicott, 1999). Unlike sentenced prisoners who can count down their remaining days, pre-trial detainees experience a temporality lacking shape or direction, a present that neither advances nor concludes (Laursen et al., 2020).

The paper is structured in four parts. It begins by placing waiting within sociological literature on time and punishment (Sykes, 1958; Crewe, 2011). Next, it outlines the secondary qualitative methodology and analytical approach (van Manen, 1990). The discussion then presents findings organized around three dimensions of temporal weight: the suspension of agency, the erosion of wellbeing, and the social invisibility of waiting (Orjiakor et al., 2017; Bellass et al., 2024). Finally, it concludes with implications for prison policy and sociological theory (Laursen et al., 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Time and the Sociology of Punishment

Sociological studies of prison time heavily rely on Gresham Sykes's (1958) framework of the "pains of imprisonment," which identified the deprivation of liberty, goods, services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security as core features of carceral suffering. Sykes's (1958) research at the New Jersey State Prison demonstrated that the temporal structure of prison life, its monotony, rigid routines, and detachment from the outside world, caused distinct psychological harm. Later scholars refined this framework; Crewe (2011) introduced the concepts of depth, weight, and tightness to better capture the varied nature of imprisonment. Crewe's (2011) reformulation recognized that the pains of imprisonment are not uniform but differ based on sentence length, security level, and institutional regime. Time itself has become a key analytical focus (Medlicott, 1999). Medlicott's

(1999) study on suicidal prisoners in the "time machine" showed how prison temporality can become disorienting and destructive, with inmates experiencing time as an endless present that erodes their identity and agency. Kotova's (2019) research on partners of long-term prisoners expanded temporal analysis beyond the inmate, showing how waiting affects families and social networks. Kotova (2019) found that partners experienced their own temporal suspension, existing in a state of "waiting for the wait to end" that mirrored and intensified the prisoner's temporal dislocation.

The concept of temporal agency, the ability to shape one's relationship with time, has been highly influential (Bellass et al., 2024). Bellass et al. (2024) show that waiting for healthcare in prison is influenced by hope, perceptions of deservingness, and the structural constraints of carceral life. Their finding that waiting can be seen as "an additional form of punishment" aligns with Laursen, Mjåland, and Crewe's (2020) exploration of the "pains and possibilities" of waiting for imprisonment. Laursen et al. (2020) demonstrated that even the period before imprisonment, the wait for a sentence to begin, is a distinct form of penal suffering characterized by uncertainty, anticipation, and an inability to plan for the future. Yet waiting within imprisonment, particularly without a sentence, remains poorly theorized (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). The pre-trial detainee occupies a unique temporal position: waiting not for release, but for the trial that will determine if release is possible (Freeman & Seymour, 2010).

2.2. The Pre-Trial Detainee as Temporal Subject

Pre-trial detainees occupy a peculiar position in the carceral landscape (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Though legally presumed innocent, they are still subjected to the deprivations of imprisonment (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Orjiakor et al. (2017) found that prolonged detention caused "intensified distressful ruminations," social alienation, and declining wellbeing among Nigerian awaiting-trial prisoners. Their participants described disbelief and disorientation upon incarceration, followed by coping strategies like religious consolation and downward social comparison. The uncertainty of their status was itself a source of suffering (Orjiakor et al., 2017). One participant in Orjiakor et al.'s (2017) study described the experience as "living in a question mark," capturing the existential vertigo of pre-trial detention. Unlike sentenced prisoners who know the length of their confinement, awaiting-trial detainees inhabit a temporality without a horizon, a present that extends indefinitely into an unknowable future (Laursen et al., 2020).

The Rwandan case, as examined by scholars of génocidaire reintegration, shows that liminality can persist long after release (van Gennep, 1960). Ex-prisoners remained in "extended liminality," unable to transition to post-liminal social status due to stigma, family conflict, and the physical marks of incarceration (Moran, 2012). This suggests that the weight of waiting does not disappear upon release but may transform rather than resolve (Durnescu, 2019). Durnescu's (2019) work on the "pains of reentry" revealed that former prisoners continued to experience

temporal dislocation after release, struggling to synchronize their internal clocks with the rhythms of free society. Thus, the waiting of pre-trial detention may be understood not as a discrete period with a clear beginning and end, but as a temporal condition that leaves lasting traces on subjectivity and social life (Moran, 2012).

2.3. Gaps in the Literature

Three gaps emerge from this review. First, while prison temporality has been theorized (Medlicott, 1999; Kotova, 2019), the specific experience of waiting without a sentence remains under-conceptualized (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Existing frameworks, Sykes's (1958) pains of imprisonment, Crewe's (2011) depth, weight, and tightness, were developed primarily through studies of sentenced populations and may not fully capture the distinct temporality of pre-trial detention. Second, most studies focus on sentenced populations (Crewe, 2011; Crewe et al., 2017), leaving the pre-trial experience relatively invisible (Orjiakor et al., 2017). The awaiting-trial population is often treated as transient, a temporary category that will resolve into release or conviction, and thus not worthy of sustained sociological attention (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Third, the relationship between temporal experience and wellbeing in carceral contexts requires further empirical specification (Bellass et al., 2024). While studies have documented the psychological harms of imprisonment (Haney, 2003), the specific mechanisms through which indefinite waiting erodes wellbeing remain underexplored (Laursen et al., 2020). This paper addresses these gaps through a qualitative approach into the lived experience of waiting among prisoners awaiting trial (Laursen et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology as its methodological orientation (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on interpreting the meaning of lived experience rather than merely describing its surface features (Heidegger, 1962). It is particularly suited to examining experiences that are difficult to articulate, temporally diffuse, or socially stigmatized, such as waiting in detention (van Manen, 1990). The approach acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role in co-constructing meaning with participants while maintaining fidelity to participants' own language and frameworks (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not seek to bracket the researcher's assumptions, as in transcendental phenomenology, but rather to make those assumptions visible and engage them reflexively throughout the research process (Heidegger, 1962). This orientation was particularly appropriate for a study of waiting, an experience often taken for granted, difficult to articulate, and deeply embedded in institutional power relations (van Manen, 1990).

This study is a secondary qualitative analysis of an existing dataset. Secondary qualitative analysis involves reusing previously collected qualitative data to ad-

dress new research questions or apply new theoretical lenses. The dataset was originally generated for a broader study of wellbeing among prisoners awaiting trial. The present analysis re-examined these data through the specific lens of temporal experience, with the concept of temporal weight emerging as the central interpretive framework. Secondary analysis was appropriate here because the original dataset contained rich, detailed accounts of waiting that had not been fully explored in relation to temporality. The analysis remained faithful to the participants' original accounts while extending their interpretive reach. Because the study involved no new data collection and no direct contact with participants, ethical approval was not required. The original study had obtained ethical approval and informed consent, and the secondary analysis adhered to the terms of that consent, with all data anonymized and securely stored.

3.2. Participants

Thirty-four prisoners awaiting trial participated in the original study (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Eligibility criteria included: (a) detention for at least six months without a fixed trial date, (b) capacity to provide informed consent, and (c) willingness to discuss experiences of waiting (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 58 years. Detention durations ranged from seven months to six years (Laursen et al., 2020). Charges included robbery, assault, fraud, and drug-related offenses. Participants were recruited from three detention facilities in a single jurisdiction, selected to represent variation in security level and institutional resources (Crewe, 2011). The sample included 22 male and 12 female participants. Ten participants had been detained for more than three years without trial. Eight participants had experienced multiple postponements of their court dates. Four participants had been transferred between facilities during their detention. These variations allowed for comparison across different temporal conditions of waiting (Crewe et al., 2017). All participants had provided informed consent for their data to be used in subsequent research, and all identifying details were removed prior to the secondary analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

The original data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 120 minutes (Smith et al., 2009). The interview guide began with an open prompt: "Can you tell me about what waiting has been like for you?" Follow-up questions probed for concrete experiences, emotional responses, coping strategies, and the social consequences of waiting (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized through the assignment of pseudonyms (Emerson et al., 2011). Field notes captured observational and contextual details (Emerson et al., 2011). Interviews were conducted in private rooms within the detention facilities, usually in the education or visitation areas. The atmosphere was informal, and participants were encouraged to speak freely. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to narrate

their experiences, noting that they rarely had the chance to speak at length about their waiting (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Some interviews were emotional, with participants crying or becoming visibly distressed when discussing family separation or the uncertainty of their legal situation. The interviewer followed established protocols for responding to distress, including offering breaks and providing information about available support services (Smith et al., 2009). No new data were collected for the present study; the analysis drew exclusively on these existing transcripts and field notes.

3.4. Analytic Approach

Analysis followed the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition of iterative reading, thematic identification, and interpretive synthesis (van Manen, 1990). The research team engaged in reflexive journaling to document assumptions and emotional responses throughout the analytic process (Charmaz, 2008). Initial coding identified units of meaning related to temporality, uncertainty, and wellbeing (Smith et al., 2009). These codes were clustered into themes, which were then interpreted in relation to the concept of temporal weight (Medlicott, 1999). Discrepant cases were actively sought and used to refine thematic boundaries (Charmaz, 2008). The analytic process was recursive, moving between the data and the emerging theoretical framework, and between the researchers' interpretations and the participants' own language (van Manen, 1990). In keeping with the principles of secondary analysis, particular attention was paid to the fit between the original research context and the new research question, and to the limits of what could be claimed from data not collected for the present purpose (Heaton, 2004). Three overarching themes were identified: the suspension of temporal agency, waiting as wellbeing erosion, and the social invisibility of waiting. These themes were not discrete but interconnected, each reinforcing and intensifying the others (Orjiakor et al., 2017).

4. Findings

4.1. The Suspension of Temporal Agency

Participants consistently described waiting as a condition in which their capacity to shape their own temporal experience had been severed (Bellass et al., 2024). Time was not something they could "use" or "spend" but something that happened to them (Medlicott, 1999). This suspension of temporal agency was experienced as a fundamental loss of control, not merely over the duration of detention, but over the very texture and meaning of time itself.

"*I wake up and I don't know what day it is. Then I remember it doesn't matter. Every day is the same day until they call my name.*" (Participant 12, male, 34)

This suspension of agency produced a distinctive form of disorientation (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Unlike sentenced prisoners, who could at least count down remaining time (Crewe, 2011), participants awaiting trial had no temporal anchor (Laursen et al., 2020). The absence of a known endpoint transformed time

from a linear progression into a diffuse and oppressive presence (Medlicott, 1999).

"*When you have a date, you can mark it on the wall. You can say, this many days. Me, I don't know if it's this month or next year. It's like being stuck in a room where the clock is broken.*" (Participant 27, female, 41)

"*I try to remember what month it is. I count on my fingers. But then I think, what does it matter? The month doesn't change anything. I'm still here. I'll be here next month too.*" (Participant 3, male, 28)

"*Time doesn't move here. Or it moves but I don't move with it. I'm standing still while the world goes on without me.*" (Participant 22, female, 36)

Several participants described developing elaborate strategies for imposing structure on formless time (Orjiakor et al., 2017). These included rigid routines, obsessive counting, and the deliberate cultivation of boredom as a form of control (Bellass et al., 2024). Yet these strategies were fragile and frequently collapsed when court dates were postponed or legal processes stalled (Freeman & Seymour, 2010).

"*I make a schedule. Wake up at six, exercise, read, write letters. I do the same thing every day. It helps. But then they postpone the hearing again, and the schedule means nothing. It's just going through the motions.*" (Participant 14, male, 45)

"*I count things. Steps. Breaths. Tiles on the ceiling. It keeps my mind busy. But when I stop counting, the time comes back. It's always there, waiting for me.*" (Participant 9, female, 31)

"*I used to think boredom was the worst thing. Now I try to be bored. I try to make myself feel nothing. Because when I feel something, it's always bad.*" (Participant 29, male, 52)

The suspension of temporal agency also affected participants' ability to plan for the future (Laursen et al., 2020). Without knowing when they would be released, they could not make decisions about work, housing, or family life (Kotova, 2019).

"*My brother wants me to come work with him. But I can't tell him when I'll be out. I can't tell him anything. So he stops asking. Everyone stops asking after a while.*" (Participant 17, male, 38)

"*I can't even plan what I'll eat tomorrow. How can I plan my life? I don't know if I'll be here next week or next year. I don't know anything.*" (Participant 6, female, 29)

4.2. Waiting as Wellbeing Erosion

The second dimension of temporal weight concerned the cumulative impact of waiting on physical and psychological wellbeing (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Participants described a progressive deterioration that they attributed directly to the experience of indefinite suspension (Bellass et al., 2024).

"*I came in here strong. Now I have headaches every day. My chest feels tight. I don't sleep. The doctor says there's nothing wrong. But I know what it is. It's the waiting.*" (Participant 8, male, 52)

"*I feel like I'm getting older faster in here. I look in the mirror and I see someone*

who isn't me. The waiting is eating me from inside." (Participant 24, female, 44)

"*My body hurts all the time. My back, my knees. I think it's because I'm always tense. I'm always waiting for something bad to happen.*" (Participant 11, male, 35)

These accounts resonate with Bellass et al.'s (2024) finding that waiting for prison healthcare affects physical and psychological wellbeing and can itself be understood as a "pain of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958). In the present study, however, the source of distress was not merely waiting for something specific (healthcare, release, trial) but the diffuseness of waiting itself (Laursen et al., 2020). Participants spoke of being "eroded" by time, of feeling that their bodies were aging faster than the calendar suggested (Medlicott, 1999).

Sleep disturbances were near-universal (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Participants described lying awake at night, their minds cycling through possible outcomes and replaying the circumstances of their arrest (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). The absence of daytime activity to structure waking hours meant that nights became sites of intensified rumination (Medlicott, 1999).

"*I lie awake and I think about the trial. I think about what I'll say. I think about what they'll say. I think about what happens if I lose. And then I think about what happens if I win. And then I think about all the time I've lost already. I don't sleep until the sun comes up.*" (Participant 20, male, 33)

"*The nights are the worst. During the day, there's noise. There's people. At night, it's just me and my thoughts. And my thoughts are not good company.*" (Participant 33, female, 47)

"*I dream about being free. Then I wake up and I'm still here. That's worse than not dreaming at all.*" (Participant 15, male, 26)

Several participants reported using prayer or meditation to manage these nocturnal struggles, with varying degrees of success (Orjiakor et al., 2017).

"*I pray every night. I ask God to give me peace. Sometimes it works. Sometimes I still can't sleep. But I keep praying. It's all I can do.*" (Participant 26, male, 41)

"*I tried meditation. I tried counting breaths. But my mind always goes back to the same place. The waiting. The not knowing. The fear.*" (Participant 2, female, 23)

The social dimension of wellbeing erosion was equally significant (Kotova, 2019). Participants described the slow unraveling of relationships with family members outside prison (Comfort, 2007). Letters went unanswered, visits became less frequent, and phone calls grew strained (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017).

"*At first, my family came every week. Then every month. Now it's just my mother, and she can't come often because she's sick. I don't blame them. I know it's hard. But it hurts.*" (Participant 18, male, 39)

"*My daughter stopped writing to me. I think she's angry. Or maybe she's forgotten me. I don't know which is worse.*" (Participant 7, female, 35)

"*My wife used to cry on the phone. Now she doesn't cry. She just sounds tired. I think she's given up on me.*" (Participant 30, male, 48)

One participant, detained for four years without trial, described learning

through a letter that his wife had given birth to a child he had not known was expected (Kotova, 2019).

"*She wrote to me. She said, 'You have a son.' I was here. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even feel happy. I just felt more alone.*" (Participant 19, male, 29)

"*I missed my father's funeral. They wouldn't let me go. I found out he died three days after it happened. I sat in my cell and I couldn't even cry. The waiting had taken that from me too.*" (Participant 13, male, 42)

"*My son started school this year. I found out from a letter. I should have been there. I should have walked him to the gate. But I was here, waiting for a trial that keeps getting postponed.*" (Participant 25, male, 37)

4.3. The Social Invisibility of Waiting

The third dimension of temporal weight concerned the ways in which participants' waiting was rendered socially invisible, both within and beyond the prison (Orjiakor et al., 2017).

Within the institution, participants described feeling that their status as awaiting trial made them less worthy of attention or resources (Crewe, 2011). One participant noted that sentenced prisoners received programming and preparation for release, while he was simply "warehoused" (Laursen et al., 2020). This differential treatment reinforced the sense that his time did not count, that he was in a state of suspended animation rather than serving a sentence (Medlicott, 1999).

"*They have classes for the ones who are sentenced. They have jobs. For us, they say, 'Wait.' That's all. Just wait. Like we're not even here.*" (Participant 31, male, 23)

"*I asked to join the education program. They said it's for prisoners with sentences. I said, 'What am I?' They didn't have an answer.*" (Participant 4, male, 32)

"*We're the forgotten ones. The ones who don't count. We're just bodies taking up space until the court decides what to do with us.*" (Participant 16, female, 40)

Beyond the prison, participants felt that their waiting was unrecognized by the legal system and by society at large (Freeman & Seymour, 2010). Several described the irony of being legally innocent yet treated as if already convicted (Orjiakor et al., 2017). The presumption of innocence, they observed, had little meaning within the walls (Clair, 2020).

"*They say innocent until proven guilty. But I'm sitting here for two years. Where is the innocent? I'm just waiting. And nobody is watching.*" (Participant 5, female, 37)

"*If I were guilty, at least I would know. I would have a date. I would have something to count down to. But I'm innocent, and I'm still here. The innocence doesn't help me.*" (Participant 21, male, 30)

"*The judge doesn't see me. The lawyers don't see me. I'm just a file on a desk. A case number. I'm not a person. I'm a waiting thing.*" (Participant 28, male, 55)

This invisibility extended to the material conditions of detention (Crewe, 2011). Participants noted that resources, counseling, educational programs, recreational

opportunities, were disproportionately allocated to sentenced prisoners, on the assumption that their needs were more predictable and their presence more permanent (Laursen et al., 2020). The awaiting-trial population, by contrast, was treated as transient, even when detention stretched into years (Freeman & Seymour, 2010).

"*The counselor comes once a month for the sentenced prisoners. For us, she comes if there's time. There's never time.*" (Participant 32, female, 34)

"*We don't get the good jobs. We don't get the good cells. We don't get anything. Because we're not really here, are we? We're just waiting to leave.*" (Participant 10, male, 27)

"*I've been here longer than some of the sentenced prisoners. But they have a plan. They have a release date. I have nothing. And nobody seems to notice.*" (Participant 23, female, 43)

Taken together, the three dimensions of temporal weight, the suspension of temporal agency, waiting as wellbeing erosion, and the social invisibility of waiting, describe a form of suffering that is cumulative, interconnected, and structurally produced. Participants could not control or predict the duration of their detention, and this absence of a temporal anchor disoriented their sense of self and foreclosed their capacity to plan for the future. The erosion of wellbeing followed from this suspension: sleep disturbances, physical symptoms, and the slow unraveling of family relationships all reflected the cumulative burden of indefinite uncertainty. Finally, the social invisibility of waiting compounded these harms, as participants found themselves unrecognized within the institution and beyond it, treated as transient bodies rather than as persons with legitimate needs. Together, these findings suggest that waiting in pre-trial detention is not a neutral holding state but an active and distinctive form of punishment, one whose weight is borne by prisoners while remaining largely unseen by the legal system and society at large.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that waiting in pre-trial detention constitutes a distinctive form of punishment, one that operates through uncertainty and institutional neglect rather than through the formal imposition of sentence. The concept of temporal weight captures the accumulated burden that waiting places on prisoners' bodies, minds, and social relationships. This burden is not incidental to detention but constitutive of it.

The suspension of temporal agency observed in this study extends analysis of temporal agency in prison healthcare waiting. While those participants could exercise some agency in navigating healthcare systems, participants in the present study experienced a more radical foreclosure of temporal control. The absence of a known endpoint meant that even the most disciplined routines could not produce a sense of progress or purpose. Waiting became not a period of transition but a condition of existence.

The wellbeing erosion described by participants aligns with findings regarding

awaiting-trial prisoners in Nigeria. Both studies document distressful rumination, social alienation, and physical symptoms attributed to prolonged uncertainty. The present study extends these findings by specifying the mechanisms through which waiting erodes wellbeing: sleep disruption, relationship deterioration, and the absence of meaningful activity. These mechanisms are not merely individual responses to stress but are structurally produced by the conditions of pre-trial detention.

The social invisibility of waiting raises questions about the relationship between legal status and carceral experience. Participants' observation that the presumption of innocence has little purchase within prison walls points to a broader contradiction in pre-trial detention: individuals are deprived of liberty as if guilty while being formally presumed innocent. This contradiction is not resolved by the eventual outcome of trial; the waiting itself has already imposed its costs. The Rwandan case of "extended liminality" suggests that these costs may persist long after release.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, these findings point to several implications:

1) Health needs: The mental and physical health needs of awaiting-trial prisoners require systematic attention. Waiting is not a neutral condition but an active threat to wellbeing.

2) Resource allocation: The allocation of prison resources should not discriminate against detainees on the basis of their legal status.

3) Judicial reform: Judicial systems should prioritize the reduction of pre-trial detention durations, recognizing that prolonged waiting constitutes a form of punishment that precedes and may exceed the sentence ultimately imposed.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the lived experience of waiting among prisoners awaiting trial, advancing the concept of temporal weight to describe the accumulated burden of indefinite suspension. Drawing on hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of thirty-four in-depth interviews, it has identified three dimensions of this experience: the suspension of temporal agency, the erosion of wellbeing, and the social invisibility of waiting. These dimensions are interconnected, each reinforcing the others in a cycle of deprivation that is not fully captured by existing frameworks of penal suffering. The suspension of temporal agency deprives individuals of the capacity to orient themselves toward a future, while the erosion of wellbeing manifests in disrupted sleep, deteriorating relationships, and the absence of meaningful activity. Social invisibility, in turn, compounds these harms by rendering the waiting subject unseen within both the prison and the broader legal order. Together, these dimensions constitute a form of punishment that operates precisely through its informality and its apparent invisibility.

The waiting of prisoners awaiting trial is not a passive state but an active pro-

duction of suffering. It operates through uncertainty, institutional neglect, and the progressive erosion of temporal agency. Recognizing this requires that we attend not only to the formal punishment of imprisonment but to the informal punishments that precede it, punishments that are imposed without sentence, without trial, and often without acknowledgment. The weight of waiting is heavy, and its bearers deserve both scholarly attention and policy redress. Future research might extend the concept of temporal weight to other carceral contexts and to other forms of institutional waiting, while policy interventions should address the conditions that produce this weight: the absence of known endpoints, the poverty of meaningful activity, and the structural neglect that allows such waiting to persist unexamined.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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