


Mental health challenges of prison officers

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the importance of analyzing the mental health of criminal police officers, addressing the challenges they face in the work environment on a daily basis. The role of correctional officers requires dealing with various challenging situations within the prison system, where they face confrontations with the irregular or criminal conduct of inmates. They are responsible for ensuring the safety of colleagues and the inmates themselves, often putting their own lives at risk. This work goes beyond the simple fulfillment of daily tasks, requiring a constant state of alertness, even in moments of rest. Challenges faced include resolving difficult situations and dealing with the unpredictability of the prison environment. In addition, correctional officers face the emotional stress associated with violence, the possibility of confrontation with violent inmates, and even the death of colleagues. These factors contribute to a high-risk work environment, where the need to make difficult decisions is constant and can significantly impact your mental health, which directly reflects on your professional, social, and family life. The aim of this approach was to enable a more complete and holistic understanding of the mental health of criminal police officers, providing ideas for the development of more effective support policies and programmes tailored to the specific needs of these professionals.

Keywords: Mental health, Criminal police officers, Challenges, Prison environment, Work.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is fundamental to human well-being, affecting all aspects of professional, social, and family life. However, in certain professions, such as police officers, the challenges associated with mental health often go unnoticed. Correctional officers play a crucial role in maintaining order and security within the prison system, facing challenging environments, high-stress situations, and complex interactions with inmates on a daily basis.

Correctional officers regularly face a range of stressful situations, from physical confrontations to the management of individuals with mental disorders. These challenges can have serious impacts on mental health, including chronic stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Constant exposure to high-stress situations and the unpredictable and sometimes violent nature of the work environment contribute to a significant emotional burden for these professionals, which can result in adverse consequences for their mental health.

In addition, occupational stress not only has deleterious effects on the human body, it can also negatively affect worker efficiency and job satisfaction (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011; Santana & Santana, 2011). High levels of stress at work can decrease job satisfaction. Chronic stress can result in burnout, lack of motivation, disengagement, and feelings of hopelessness about work. This can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and an increased risk of *burnout*.

Stress can have a significant impact on a person's social and family life, taking a toll on their relationships and quality of life. One of the ways this can happen is by reducing the quality of time spent with family and friends due to physical and mental exhaustion caused by stress. Additionally, irritability and lack of patience associated with stress can make it difficult to cope with social and family demands, leading to conflict and arguments in relationships.

While awareness of the importance of mental health is increasing in many professions, correctional officers often face significant barriers to seeking help. Stigma, organizational culture, and lack of adequate resources are just some of the obstacles that can prevent correctional officers from seeking support for their mental health issues.

In this article, we will take a closer look at the factors that contribute to the mental health of correctional officers, including the impact of the work environment, the demands of the profession, and the resources available to support psychological well-being. Additionally, we will discuss potential strategies to foster a culture of mental health within prison institutions and provide effective support to correctional officers facing psychological challenges.

Through this analysis, we hope to highlight the critical importance of addressing the mental health issues of correctional officers and provide valuable insights into how to improve the support and psychological well-being of these essential professionals.



DEVELOPMENT

The professional called Criminal Police Officer, formerly known as Prison Agent or Inspector, plays a fundamental role in maintaining order and discipline both within prison units and in their surroundings.

The role of the Penitentiary Officer is of great importance in a Democratic State of Law, because in addition to guarding prison institutions and ensuring the safety of society, they also have the responsibility of preserving the physical integrity of inmates and seeking their resocialization (BRASIL, 2003).

In Brazil, Penitentiary Officers are linked to the State Secretariats of Penitentiary Administration, and access to the career occurs through state or federal public examinations.

In Minas Gerais, the creation of the career of the Penitentiary Officer was established by State Law No. 14,695/2003, which defines their competencies, including ensuring order and security within penal establishments, carrying out escort and custody activities of prisoners, and performing functions of both internal and external surveillance in prison establishments, including in walls and guardhouses (BRASIL, 2003).

In Brazil, as of December 2019, with the enactment of constitutional amendment 104, the title of prison officer was changed to criminal police officer (BRASIL, 2019). With this change, correctional officers have been equated with police officers, although their duties remain specific. According to Silva (2019), the criminal police officer is the professional in charge of ensuring the organization, discipline, and security within prisons, in addition to being responsible for assisting in the resocialization of inmates.

The introduction of the Criminal Police into Brazilian society marks a significant change in the way professionals in charge of security in prison systems are recognized and designated. Formerly known as correctional officers, often stigmatized with the term "jailers" by the ancients, these professionals face unique challenges that affect not only their mental health but also their overall well-being (SILVA, ALENCAR, 2023).

The mental health of prison officers in the Brazilian prison system is a topic of increasing importance, considering the extreme challenges and adverse working conditions faced by these professionals.

Bezerra, Assis and Constantino (2016) highlight that the prison environment is intrinsically stressful, characterized by a series of factors such as overcrowding, violence, lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure conditions. These factors contribute to high levels of stress and psychological distress among agents, manifesting in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and *burnout*. Psychological distress is not only an individual issue, but an occupational health problem that requires structural and institutional interventions to be effectively mitigated.



Matheus (2018) analyzes the penal system from the perspective of prison officers. Using a qualitative approach, it explores the perceptions and experiences of agents in relation to their working conditions and the challenges faced in daily prison life. Agents report feelings of insecurity, professional devaluation and work overload. These feelings are exacerbated by constant exposure to situations of conflict and violence, as well as a lack of adequate institutional support. These factors not only affect the mental health of officers, but also compromise the effectiveness of the prison system as a whole.

Scartazzini and Borges (2018) examine the psychosocial condition of prison officers and the impacts of prison work on the mental health of these professionals. The study addresses how the prison work environment, characterized by social isolation, low pay and lack of recognition, contributes to the development of psychosocial problems. Officers often face a moral dilemma, balancing the need to maintain order and security with the pressure to treat detainees humanely. This dilemma can lead to high levels of stress and emotional distress, as well as negatively affect agents' personal lives and social relationships.

Structured interventions are needed to improve the mental health of correctional officers. Some studies suggest the implementation of psychological support programs and training in stress management skills, others emphasize the need for institutional policies that value correctional officers and improve working conditions, and propose psychosocial interventions that address both the individual and collective well-being of officers. These interventions should be integrated into a broader occupational health policy, which includes ongoing psychological support, improvements in working conditions, and professional recognition (LIPP *et al.*, 2017).

The mental health challenges of prison officers in the Brazilian prison system are multifaceted and require an integrated approach that combines psychological support, better working conditions, and institutional policies for professional development. The implementation of such measures is crucial to ensure the mental health and well-being of these workers, reflecting positively on the effectiveness and safety of the prison system (SILVA, ALENCAR, 2023).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The criminal police officer, as a public servant, enjoys economic and functional stability, however, many of them face dissatisfaction and lack of motivation when performing their duties. This is because they are often tasked with tasks that are not aligned with their professional expectations, which can result in the emergence of various symptoms that affect their health, as noted by Stradiotti *et al.* (2019).

According to Siqueira, Silva and Angnes (2017), the role of the criminal police officer is of paramount importance, not limited only to inmates, but encompassing the protection of society as a



whole. However, Scartazinni and Borges (2018) point out that these professionals often do not receive due recognition, as they are often perceived by society as responsible for torture and ill-treatment, in addition to being blamed for escapes and other problems in prison institutions. A study indicated that, due to this negative perception, most criminal police officers do not feel proud of their profession and, whenever possible, prefer to hide their occupation (MATHEUS, 2018).

Unlike an individual convicted of a crime, who will lose his freedom as punishment and serve part of his sentence in a prison institution, gradually progressing to freedom as established by the Penal Execution Law, number 7,210, of July 11, 1984, the criminal police officer will face, possibly until his retirement, the peculiarities inherent to this condition. These include working in unhealthy, violent, and often unrecognized environments.

The mental health of prison officers in the context of the prison system is a topic of great social relevance, as it directly impacts not only the well-being of these professionals, but also the safety of prison institutions and society in general. The challenges faced by criminal police officers in relation to their mental health have been widely acknowledged, but there are still significant gaps in understanding and addressing these issues.

To perform their function, the criminal police officer is expected to carry out a series of activities, such as managing the execution of sentences of convicts, receiving pretrial detainees, escorting and custodialing prisoners, whether they are provisional or with final sentences, and also carrying out external surveillance in the State's prison units, as established by the Penal Execution Law.

Additionally, a lack of energy and motivation caused by stress can lead to a decrease in interest and engagement in social activities, while isolation and withdrawal can make it difficult to establish and maintain positive social connections. These impacts of stress on social and family life can contribute to a cycle of constant tension and worry, negatively affecting the overall well-being of the professional.

Research in this field can provide important answers to the proposed problems by investigating the causes and effects of mental health challenges faced by criminal police officers. Although there is a growing interest and recognition of the importance of the mental health of criminal police officers, the stage of knowledge development on the subject is still limited. There is a lack of comprehensive, long-term research investigating the risk factors, impacts, and intervention best practices related to the mental health of these professionals.

In addition, the research has the potential to suggest significant modifications in the scope of the reality proposed by the theme. It can influence policies and practices within prison institutions, promoting a culture of support for the mental health of prison officers, and may lead to the implementation of more effective intervention and prevention programs, aiming to improve the well-



being of these professionals and, consequently, the safety and efficiency of the prison system as a whole.

Therefore, investigating the mental health challenges of prison police officers is essential not only for the care of these professionals, but also to promote a healthier, safer, and more productive work environment within prison institutions, contributing to a more just and equitable society.



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