

Occupational Stress and Its Relationship with Sociodemographic Variables in Penitentiary Servants

Sabrina Azevedo Wagner Benetti, Cíntia Beatriz Goi, Marcos Benetti, Matias Nunes Frizzo, Eliane Raquel Rieth Benetti, Cátia Cristiane Matte Dezordi, Eniva Miladi Fernandes Stumm

Universidade Regional do Noroeste do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul
Brazil

ABSTRACT

The work in the prison system requires in addition to technical and scientific knowledge, the ability to manage emotions and to cope with the stress experienced, in order to maintain physical and psychological health and the quality of services provided to people deprived of their liberty. The purpose of this study was to analyze the occupational stress of penitentiary servers and to correlate it with sociodemographic variables. The development of the research was methodologically based on a cross-sectional and analytical study with 254 prison workers from the 3rd Penitentiary Region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. Data collection was based on a sociodemographic, functional and Job Stress Scale. Among the participants who answered the questionnaires, it was identified that 52.4% were male, 72.4% were married or partners and had an average age of 41.62 years old, 55.9% had moderate intensity stress and 2.8% of the sample was at high level stress. From the results obtained, it is necessary to make a critical reflection on the conditions to which prison workers are exposed daily. The results also demonstrate that new actions of planning and interventions are needed to improve work in this troubled environment.

Keywords: Professional exhaustion, Prisons, Workers

INTRODUCTION

Prison is a reality in people's lives that either directly or indirectly reflects social inequalities and is considered an instrument of social exclusion that serves a ruling class (MADRID; PRADO, 2014). The authors consider the situation of people deprived of liberty (PDL) living in Brazil, a serious and sad situation. They live in overcrowded prisons, in an idle situation and without fundamental rights guarantee. Together with this reflection, the United Nations report (2016) describes the Brazilian prison system as cruel, inhuman, degrading, human rights abuser and in disagreement with national and international norms (BRITO; DAUDÉN, 2015).

Brazil has the fourth largest penitentiary population in the world (622,202) in the ranking led by the United States (2,217,000), China (1,657,812) and Russia (644,237). The prison population grew by more than 575% in the last 25 years. In view of this demand, the country would need to increase about 373,991 vacancies in prisons (BRAZIL, 2015). In this context, the chaos of prisons needs to be managed and this task belongs to the penitentiary servers. The International Labor Organization (2008) considers the

Penitentiary Agent profession to be one of the oldest of humanity and the second most dangerous in the world. This situation contributes to the suffering of professionals, to the occurrence of occupational stress and predisposes them to physical and psychological illness resulting from it.

Occupational stress is a process in which the subject perceives demands of work as stressors when they exceed their coping ability (PASCHOAL; TAMAYO, 2004). In relation to the penitentiary server, stress levels are high, especially when they do not have the necessary resources to perform their functions, such as lack of personnel, inadequacy or deficiency of equipment (BEZERRA, ASSIS; CONSTANTINO, 2016). The professionals are submitted to work that triggers physical and mental fatigue, risk of infectious diseases, exhausting shifts, added to inadequate wages (HARIZANOVA; TARNOVSKA, 2013). Another stressor mentioned by workers is the invisibility of their profession by society, even in a country where the prison population increases sharply and their working conditions remain precarious (TSCHIEDEL; MONTEIRO, 2013).

Stress is closely related to the adaptability of human beings to adversity and change (FARO, PEREIRA, 2013). It is an inherent process to human being, which, however, has subjective responses that differ from person to person (BEZERRA, ASSIS, CONSTANTINO, 2016). In the meantime, attention to mental health of penitentiary servants brings benefits to them, to their families, to prisoners and to society as a whole. (BEZERRA, ASSIS; CONSTANTINO, 2016). Therefore, we highlight the importance of workers knowing about stress, signs and physical and emotional symptoms, in order to enable them to use effective coping strategies to preserve their health and avoid damages.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the occupational stress of prison staff and to correlate it with sociodemographic variables.

METHODOLOGY

This study integrates the master's dissertation entitled "Stress and indicatives of burnout syndrome in prison staff". This is a cross-sectional and analytical study in which participated in the survey workers who met the following criteria for inclusion: being a public servant in service and penitentiary worker, belonging to the Superintendence of Penitentiary Services (SUSEPE), settled in the 3rd Penitentiary Region and having accepted voluntarily to participate in the survey. Servants who had difficulty in understanding the issues that made up the data collection instruments were excluded.

The target population consisted of 381 prison workers assigned to the 3rd Penitentiary Region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), which include the following professional categories: Penitentiary Agents, Administrative Penitentiary Agents and Superior Penitentiary Technicians. At the time of data collection, 88 servants were not found in prisons. From them, eleven were on concession leave, nine of them were dismissed for health reasons, seven of them were on leave, five of them refused to participate, three of them were removed by the State Attorney General, one of them was assigned to the union and one was on maternity leave. Thus, 254 workers in total participated in the study.

Data was collected through the use of a protocol consisting of a sociodemographic and functional characterized form and the Occupational Stress Scale - OSS (PASCHOAL; TAMAYO, 2004). The form was elaborated by the researcher and included the following variables: gender, marital status, education

level, position, amount of time working in Susepe, functional class, place of residence, working hours load, option to work for the prison system. Concerning the reasons that took workers to choose being a penitentiary servant, it was allowed to them the use of multiple answers.

In order to evaluate the occupational stress, TSE was used, which is a general, uniform, occupational stress scale composed of 23 situations, each of which addresses both a stressor and a reaction to it (PASCHOAL; TAMAYO, 2004). Each item in the instrument offers response options with variable values ranging from one to five, on a Likert scale: one - "totally disagree", two - "disagree", three - "partly agree", four - "agree", and five - "I totally agree". The participants were classified by the sum of the scores attributed to the scale items, after having been divided by the number of items and the individual average. Participants were classified according to the intensity of stress: "low stress" - 1.00 to 2.00; "moderate stress" - 2.01 to 4.00 and "high stress" - 4.01 to 5.00.

The research data was recorded and organized in the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 15.0. Descriptive statistics (upper and lower limit, range, average, standard deviation, coefficient of variation), ANOVA and 95% confidence interval were used. In the internal reliability of the TSE, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.942 was found for the 23 items, which attests the reliability of the instrument for this population.

The ethical aspects that conduct research done with human beings have been respected. The project, after the consent of the Ethics Committee of the Penitentiary School of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UNIJUI (opinion n° 1.948.910, CAAE n° 63136916.6.0000.5350). Participants who accepted to join the research signed a Free and Informed Consent Form in two copies.

RESULTS

Concerning the sociodemographic characterization of the 254 participants of the study, 133 (52.4%) were males, 184 (72.4%) were married or had a partner. In terms of formal education, 1 (0.4%) of the workers had primary education, 2 (0.8%) did not finish high school, 98 (38.6%) completed high school, 96 (37.8%) completed graduation, 50 (19.7%) had some specialization course, 6 (2.4%) had master's degree and 1 (0.4%) had a doctorate degree.

Regarding age it was verified that 94 (37%) were under 40 years of age, 126 (49.6%) were between 40 and 50 years old, and 34 (13.4%) were older than 50 years old. It was also identified that the lowest limit of age was 23 years old, the highest was 59 years old and the average age was 41.62 ± 7.20 years old.

As to the district of residence, 167 (65.7%) workers live in the city where they are settled. The facts that motivated the participants to be public servants were the following: (50%) the benefits of the public concourse, (50%) stability, (17.3%) salary, (15%) per option and (6%) for lack of another opportunity.

Among the participants in the research, 198 (78%) were Prison Agents, 22 (8.7%) were Administrative Correction Agents and 34 (13.4%) were Senior Correctional Technicians. Regarding the amount of time at work, 147 (57.9%) had been working in the job for less than 10 years, 61 (24%) had been working between 10 and 15 incomplete years and 46 (18.1%) had been working for 15 years or more. Among the participants, 92 (36.2%) were in class B, which included the largest number of workers; 172 (67.7%) fulfilled their load

of working hours in the form of shifts, and 209 (82.3%) worked exclusively at SUSEPE. In what concerns uninterrupted sleeping hours the night before work, the average was 5.56 ± 2.24 , with a coefficient of variation of 40.29%, which reveals variability in the uninterrupted sleeping hours.

Sequentially, Table 1 presents the classification of workers concerning the intensity of occupational stress verified by TSE.

Table 1 - Classification of the occupational stress intensity

EET	N	%	Li; Ls	Average	Standard deviation
Low Stress	105	41,3	1,00; 2,00	1,55	0,30
Moderate Stress	142	55,9	2,04; 3,91	2,73	0,50
High Stress	7	2,8	4,09; 4,61	4,27	0,19

Obs; Low Stress: 1,00 a 2,00; Moderate Stress: 2,01 a 4,00; High Stress:4,01 a 5,00.

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Table 2 shows the stress intensity classification of the research participants according to gender, marital status, schooling, age, district of residence and reason for being a penitentiary server.

Table 2 - Classification of stress intensity according to socio-demographic characteristics

Sociodemographic Variables		Low Stress N(%)	Moderate Stress N(%)	High Stress N(%)	Total N(%)
Sex	Masculine	58(22,8)	72(28,3)	3(1,2)	133(52,4)
	Feminine	47(18,5)	70(27,6)	4(1,6)	121(47,6)
Marital Status	Single	14(5,5)	27(10,6)	-	41(16,1)
	Married/Partner	76(29,9)	102(40,2)	6(2,4)	184(72,4)
	Divorced	11(4,3)	11(4,3)	1(0,4)	23(9,1)
	Widow/widower	2(0,8)	1(0,4)	-	3(1,2)
	Other	2(0,8)	1(0,4)	-	3(1,2)
Education	Primary school	1(0,4)	-	-	1(0,4)
	Incomplete High school	-	2(0,8)	-	2(0,8)
	Complete High school	42(16,5)	54(21,3)	2(0,8)	98(38,6)
	College	40(15,7)	54(21,3)	2(0,8)	96(37,8)
	Specialization	21(8,3)	26(10,2)	3(1,2)	50(19,7)
	Master`s Degree	1(0,4)	5(2,0)	-	6(2,4)
	Doctorate Degree	-	1(0,4)	-	1(0,4)
Age	Less than 40 years old	39(15,4)	52(20,5)	3(1,2)	94(37,0)
	40 to 50 years old	51(20,1)	71(28,0)	4(1,6)	126(49,6)
	More than 50 anos	15(5,9)	19(7,5)	-	34(13,4)

Living in the city where he or she is based	Yes	65(25,6)	96(37,8)	6(2,4)	167(65,7)
	No	40(15,7)	46(18,1)	1(0,4)	87(34,3)
Facts that motivated to be a penitentiary servant	Public Examination	51(20,1)	74(29,1)	2(0,8)	127(50,0)
	Stability	37(14,6)	48(18,9)	3(1,2)	88(34,6)
	Salary	4(1,6)	5(2,0)	1(0,4)	10(3,9)
	Lack of opportunities	-	2(0,8)	1(0,4)	3(1,2)
	By option	13(5,1)	13(5,1)	-	26(10,2)

Source: Elaborated by authors

In what concerns, the social class to which the workers belong to, it is verified that the higher levels of stress were found in class B, that is, "Moderate, Low and High stress" respectively and that they diverge from the other classes in smaller and approximate percentages.

Table 3 presents the classification of stress intensity according to the functional characteristics of the participants.

Table 3 - Classification of stress intensity according to functional characteristics

		Low Stress N(%)	Moderate Stress N(%)	Hgh Stress N(%)	Total N(%)
Position	Penitentiary Agent	91(35,8)	101(39,8)	6(2,4)	198(78,0)
	Administrative Penitentiary Agent	7(2,8)	15(5,9)	-	22(8,7)
	Superior Technical Penitentiary Agent	7(2,8)	26(10,2)	1(0,4)	34(13,4)
Amount of time working at the prison system	0 --- 5 years	24(9,4)	24(9,4)	-	48(18,9)
	5 --- 10 years	39(15,4)	57(22,4)	3(1,2)	99(39,0)
	10 --- 15 years	23(9,1)	37(14,6)	1(0,4)	61(24,0)
	15 --- 20 years	6(2,4)	7(2,8)	1(0,4)	14(5,5)
	20 --- 25 years	7(2,8)	15(5,9)	1(,4)	23(9,1)
	25 years or more	6(2,4)	2(0,8)	1(0,4)	9(3,5)
Social Class	A	23(9,1)	25(9,8)	1(0,4)	49(19,3)
	B	35(13,8)	55(21,7)	2(0,8)	92(36,2)
	C	18(7,1)	26(10,2)	2(0,8)	46(18,1)
	D	20(7,9)	28(11,0)	2(0,8)	50(19,7)
	E	9(3,5)	8(3,1)	-	17(6,7)
Attends working hours	On duty	77(30,3)	90(35,4)	5(2,0)	172(67,7)
	Shift	28(11,0)	52(20,5)	2(0,8)	82(32,3)
Works on other	Yes	19(7,5)	23(9,1)	2(0,8)	44(17,4)

functions*	No	85(33,6)	119(47,0)	5(2,0)	209(82,6)
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* One interviewee did not answer Ag-Agent

Source: Elaborated by authors

Table 4 shows the variables such as age, working hours and uninterrupted sleep according to the TSE. It shows that the results presented previously related to age, working hours and uninterrupted hours of the previous night do not show a significant difference among the average of these variables in each of the categories of stress levels. The referred table also shows the confidence interval (95%) in each of the categories divided by the stress level.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics, ANOVA and Confidence Interval of age, hours of work and uninterrupted hours the previous night, according to the Worker's Stress Scale (WSS)

	Level of Stress	Li	Ls	Mean	Standard Deviation	CV %	ANOVA By value	Confidence Interval 95%	
								Li	Ls
Age	Low stress	25,0	58,0	41,75	7,02	16,82		40,39	43,11
	Moderate stress	23,0	59,0	41,51	7,46	17,97	0,964	40,28	42,75
	High stress	36,0	49,0	41,86	4,60	10,98		37,60	46,11
Working hours	Low stress	0,0	36,0	7,58	9,36	123,40		5,77	9,39
	Moderate stress	0,0	60,0	7,66	10,38	135,61	0,979	5,93	9,39
	High stress	0,1	24,0	6,87	8,06	117,44		-0,59	14,32
Uninterrupted sleeping hours in the previous night	Low stress	0,0	19,0	5,86	2,39	40,86		5,39	6,32
	Moderate stress	0,0	12,0	5,35	2,14	39,95	0,204	5,00	5,71
	High stress	3,0	6,0	5,29	1,25	23,72		4,13	6,45

Means do not differ between (p>0,05) Li- Inferior Limit ; Ls-Superior Limit

DISCUSSION

A total of 254 workers from the prison system of the 3rd Penitentiary Region of the RS participated in the study. As for the sociodemographic characterization in percentages, the majority was male, married / partner, in the age group of 40 to 50 years old, with higher education and specialization. (Guimarães et al., 2006). In the present study, the study was carried out in the city of São Paulo. Similar results were also found in a study that analyzed the life quality in the work of 14 penitentiary agents of the Provisional Detention Center of Rio Grande do Norte, taking into consideration sex, age and schooling. On the other hand, they differ in their marital status (FAGUNDES, COSTA, MOREIRA, 2017). Concerning age, it was found that the results of the studies are similar, showing that the workers are part of a young population in a plenty productive phase.

In the classification of workers considering the intensity of occupational stress, it was verified through

TSE that the highest percentage was in "Moderate Stress" and that 2.8% of them were already in "Stress Stop". These professionals should have a differentiated look at the health services and the institution, taking into account that stress at this intensity already triggers warning signs in the body. In addition, due to the high risks they are exposed to in their work, these signs are more likely to evolve to the point that the agent can not deal with the stressors at work any longer and that might lead him/her to the removal of their work environment (BONEZ; MORO . SEHNEM, 2013).

Prison workers are exposed in their daily lives to various situations that can be perceived as stressors, by performing a high-risk function in an unhealthy environment, with continuous interactions and direct contact with prisoners, their family members, the staff, among others factors (BONEZ; MORO; SEHNEM, 2013). The authors state that due to the fact these workers are daily submitted to situations of pressure, discomfort, devaluation, lack of recognition of the population in general, overload of activities, they end up converging to stress and the effects thereof, including physical and mental health damages, which can many times be irreversible. Thus, the body becomes the target of suffering, fact that can evolve to the degradation of physical and psychological integrity.

In a survey of 171 male employees from four prisons in Iran, the level of occupational stress was higher among professionals in management positions (AKBARI et al., 2017). Security officers, administrative clerks, brokers, social workers, and health care workers were rated at medium stress level. In a general context, these workers were categorized into high stress level at work, and considering the evaluation tool used, they were found to be in high demand and low control at work.

A study with another population of workers, 519 military police officers, operating in 97 districts in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, showed that 72.39% were in moderate stress level, 16.99% were in high level stress and 10.62% were in low level stress (ALMEIDA et al., 2017). These results reaffirm that several situations experienced by prison workers are taken as stressors. In this setting, Viotti (2016) lists as main stressors the following ones: coexistence with prisoners which results in a negative social image; health risks that lead to fear of contracting diseases; extra hours of work; long distance between work and family which causes loneliness; inadequate physical structure resulting in hygiene problems; high temperatures in the summer and very low ones in winter, which affects the mood of both officials and prisoners. Finally, the conflict of values due to the difficulty in accepting their roles as "perpetrators of deprivation of liberty."

When the correlation between stress and sociodemographic variables was verified, it was found that most married or having partners penitentiary workers showed moderate stress, but with low statistical significance. This data differs from the Harizanova and Tarnovska (2013) study carried out with 106 prison staff in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, where 100% of the divorced and 50% of the unmarried individuals reported more irritation when they communicated with the prisoners, as well as lack of interest in their problems and needs. The authors point out that family is a source of emotional resources for the workers and contributes to express sympathy, respond to the prisoners' suffering and for the more effective rehabilitation of the offenders.

Concerning the stress levels of the workers who lived in the city where they worked, 96 of them (37.8%) were in "Moderate Stress" and 6 of them (2.4%) were in "High Stress". This result lines up with Viotti's (2016) study carried out with 28 prison officers from a prison in Italy, in which he points out that

professionals feel more stressed when working in correctional facilities away from their homes, with the need to move temporarily or permanently, having to separate from their place of origin and having to manage long-distance relationships with family together with solitude at work.

The classification of stress intensity, according to the functional characteristics of the participants of the present study analyzed, according to the position they occupy, shows that the highest percentages of moderate stress followed by low and high stress are of the Prison Agents. It was found that no Administrative Agents were in high stress. These results are in agreement with Almeida, Ibdaiwi and Lopes (2015), which had as target population 33 firefighters, from Santa Maria, RS. The authors evidenced that the firefighters who worked in the administrative sector had a high level of stress.

In what concerns the amount of time at work in prison, in terms of years, it is important to point out that the worker when starting his or her activities in jail goes through a period of adaptation, in which he/she starts to know the reality and the functioning of the system and its peculiarities. Generally, just after five years the worker understands the dynamics of the "total institution". This may justify the greater intensity of stress experienced by them from five to ten years of service. From ten years on at work, the participants of this research presented less intensity of stress. This reflection comes together with the conclusion of Almeida, Ibdaiwi and Lopes (2015) when stating that as the length of time in service increases, the improvement in relation to the techniques and procedures necessary for the execution of the activities inherent to the profession as well as the capacity to confront stress also increases.

The professionals that fulfill the workload in the form of shifts presented higher percentages of stress than those who work office hours. On the other hand, a survey of eight female prison security officers who work in a women's shelter in Porto Alegre / RS reveals that female workers consider the service scale in the form of shifts advantageous, as it allows them to work for 24 hours and to be off work for 72 hours (TSCHIEDEL; MONTEIRO, 2013). The authors state that the on-call scale allows penitentiary agents to work on other activities on days off in order to complement the family income, to have more time for leisure, to be together with the family, to practice physical activities, among others.

It was also found that professionals who had no other function outside the prison system were at higher stress levels than the others. This is justified because professionals who have other jobs do not stay at the work environment all the time, as they get involved in other activities and this can favor them in order to reduce stress levels.

Workers in the prison system experience higher rates of occupational stress due to organizational stressors, which lead to negative results not only for them, but also for the institution (FINNEY et al., 2013).

The analysis of the results of this research combined with some other authors' points of view based on worldwide research on prison and other prison professionals reveals that this type of prison activity is stressful due to innumerable factors such as coexistence with prisoners in an unhealthy, life-threatening environment that demands permanent alertness and emotional stability. It is thought that this activity requires acquiring and expanding knowledge in a way that empowers managers, professionals and society to a more adequate confrontation to prevent damages to physical and mental health.

CONCLUSION

The construction of this research allowed analyzing the occupational stress of 254 prison staff and correlating them with sociodemographic variables. It was found that with the use of the TSE tool more than half of them were in a moderate level of stress and 7 of them (2.8%) were in a high level of stress. These results deserve attention and actions taken towards the planning and interventions ranging from the expansion of knowledge on the individual to therapeutic tapping and formation of groups that allow the individuals to identify the signs and symptoms of stress together with socialization of the suffering experienced. It is thought that these interventions can contribute to the reduction of these stress rates and the maintenance of the physical and psychological health of these employees. At the same time, ensuring effective and quality work in prison with positive repercussions at the work environment and at the personal, family and social environment of this expressive percentage of professionals working in prison. It is expected that this work may instigate researchers in order to broaden research on the subject, including other methodological approaches and to make inferences based on scientific evidence. Limitations of the study: It was intended to contemplate all the workers who work in the prison system of the 3rd Region of Penitentiary of RS and this was not possible because 127 of them were not found in the workplace for several reasons. In addition to this, it is thought that, in terms of the methodology used, it could have been complemented by a qualitative approach seeking to identify the specificities of each worker regarding the perceptions of the stressors.

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