

Psychosocial risks within prison service

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Abstract

We aimed to identify the psychosocial risks that penitentiary police officers face. To do so, we developed the police stress risk questionnaire–prison (PSrQ–p), a questionnaire for psychosocial risk assessment at workplace, consisting of 22 items that investigated five macro dimensions: isolation, social image, firearms license, variety of work and roles/responsibilities. We tested this tool on a sample of 1,346 subjects, and testing is on-going. From the data obtained, we confirmed the hypothesis of psychophysical and negative social image relative to the isolation experienced by penitentiary police officers.

KEY WORDS: Psychosocial factors; police officers; prisons; social environment

Riassunto

La ricerca-intervento ha avuto come obiettivo l'individuazione dei rischi psicosociali del lavoro del Corpo di Polizia Penitenziaria. Abbiamo elaborato ad hoc il PSrQ-p, un questionario composto da 22 item che ha permesso di indagare 5 dimensioni: isolamento, immagine sociale, porto d'armi, varietà del lavoro e ruolo. Questo strumento è stato testato su un campione di 1346 soggetti e la sperimentazione è tuttora in corso. Dai dati ricavati è stata confermata l'ipotesi di partenza relativa ad un isolamento psicofisico e ad un'immagine sociale negativa vissuti dagli operatori del Corpo di Polizia Penitenziaria.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Marked psychological and physical isolation, a negative social image as well as psychosomatic suffering are all indexes of specific psychosocial risk among penitentiary police officers.

Competing interests - none declared.

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been conducted both in Italy and throughout the world concerning prisoners [1-7], but no data concerning the discomfort, suffering and isolation felt by those who are in charge of their custody exist. This failure prompted the founding of the Italian Society of Integrated Psychotherapy for Social Development (SIPISS) in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice in order to increase knowledge about the exact nature of this work environment's psychosocial risks [8-12]. The particular frame of reference is characterised by specific work-related stress risk factors that heavily affect the workers' welfare as well as their adoption of unsuitable and deviant behaviours [13-33]. Previous studies assumed the existence of a phenomenon of burnout among police officers [13-19]. According to a recent review, organizational stressors are associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers within adult correctional facilities [34]. Specifically, the organizational structure and climate was significantly associated with CO job stress and burnout. The other categories of organizational stressors including: stressors intrinsic to the job, role within the organization, rewards at work and supervisory support showed inconsistent findings [35-41]. The hypothesis in the present study is that Burnout syndrome only affects those workers who provide helpful support to others, such as doctors, nurses, fire fighters and teachers [20]; penitentiary police officers [42-46] cannot be ranked among the helping professions.

DISCUSSION

We assumed that the investigation's focus would shift regarding the factors of psychophysical isolation and the poor social image of the police officers. We used an ad hoc questionnaire to evaluate these two dimensions [47-49]. The sample consisted of 1,346 subjects who were surveyed between March and September 2015. They constituted a homogeneous group because all of them worked in prisons within three regions of

Italy: Veneto, Trentino Alto Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia. The sample included 1,178 men and 168 women aged between 18 and 65 years and with a good understanding of written and spoken Italian. The instruments used in the study were the PSrQ-p questionnaire and a physical examination. The PSrQ-p evaluates the risk of work-related stress in penitentiary police officers (we will present the data validation process of the instrument in a further paper). The questionnaire was self-administered and consisted of 22 randomly arranged items that allowed us to investigate the police officers' perception of five macro factors: isolation, social image, possession of firearms, the variety of work and roles/responsibilities. Each item presents a work situation and asks them to rate the frequency of each macro factor's occurrence. In this way, it was possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the police officers' perceptions of their work environment. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale comprised never, almost never, occasionally/sometimes, almost every time and every time. The five constructs were chosen on the basis of a thorough literature search and observation carried out on their work environment. The items were constructed to represent the five dimensions as accurately as possible. Finally, to test the goodness of the questionnaire, a series of reliability tests were performed.

Following the self-administration of the PSrQ-p, physical examinations were conducted on 210 police officers. Between April and May 2015, physicians visited the police officers with an interview protocol designed specifically for this research. The protocol is comprised of several parts, with differentiated assessments for each section. It investigates the police officers' alcohol and smoking habits, the age of onset and the average consumption of the substance. The survey on the presence of neurological, thyroid and cardiovascular diseases was confined to a 'Yes' or 'No' answer and a description of the disease if present. The assessment continued with a business risk profile, where 13 items representative of exposure to certain risk factors were

evaluated. It used a three-point Likert scale: low, medium and high. The analysis of the environment and the task confirm our initial hypothesis concerning the physical and mental isolation that causes general psychological distress. An important element is the geographical origin of the workers. They often come from other geographical areas, and for organisational and economic reasons, they prefer to live in the barracks located within the prison walls. Living away from home may produce resentment and tensions that inevitably negatively affect their labour and the relationships with their colleagues. They spend the entire day at work, and that their leisure time also occurs within the prison walls causes them physical and mental suffering due to their excessive isolation from the outside world. This situation is aggravated by the presence of an unhealthy microclimate characterised by high levels of humidity, insufficient light, disturbing noises and odours, etc.

The hypothesis concerning social image was validated by the dichotomy between the outside world (which is good) and the inside world of the prison (which is evil), which affects the police officers' public image. The stereotype of the bad jailer is well known, and work inside the prison takes on enough of a negative connotation to be considered a task that no one wants to do and that is socially undesirable. The data reveal widespread psychosomatic unease, which is also demonstrated by the high number of workers with medical prescriptions, leading to a high rate of absenteeism[50].

Specifically, 54% of the smokers consume

between 10 and 20 cigarettes a day, and 10% of the workers are affected by cardiovascular diseases. The police officers complain of an unhealthy microclimate characterised by dirt and dust (56%), unpleasant odours (49%), insufficient light (43%) and disturbing noises (41%). Another finding is the obesity of the workers. Their body mass indexes (BMI) are more than double the average BMI for sedentary occupations (51% are overweight).

The first part of this intervention was presented at a conference of SIPISS and Italian Penitentiary Administration "Working in the Italian Penitentiary System", held in Padova on 19 January 2016 in the form of a paper entitled 'Work in prison administration', where SIPISS along with the local prison administration presented a law proposal to the Secretary of Justice to set up a medical facility within the penitentiary for the police officers.

CONCLUSION

Marked psychological and physical isolation, a negative social image, psychosomatic suffering and high rates of obesity are all indexes of specific psychosocial risk for this work environment. These findings reveal the negative effect of the working conditions on the police officers' welfare and on their adoption of unsuitable and deviant behaviours. Exposure to these risks is behind the high rates of absenteeism, along with cases of suicide and acts of delinquency. These events are regularly covered in the news, negatively affecting the social image of penitentiary police officers.

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