

Aggressivity in penitentiaries. A retrospective study conducted in Galati county between 2003-2008

Adriana Lupu¹, Paul Stefanescu², Viorel Panaitescu³, Mariana Rosu⁴, Sorin Hostiuc^{5*}

Abstract: Prisons are known to be injury risk hotspots, with significantly higher rates of violent acts compared to those recorded in the general population. The purpose of this article is to reveal the main characteristics of violence in prisons in Romania, using the databases of the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration and significant samples collected from the Galati penitentiary. The study was conducted using data obtained from the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration from 2003 to 2008, and cases from the casuistry of the Galati Penitentiary. The prevalence of aggressive acts has significantly increased from 2003 to 2008, with a relative increase of about 500% for hetero-aggressive acts and about 50% for auto-aggressive acts. This difference is most likely caused by the fact that self-harm is more profoundly linked to psychological factors and subsequently less linked to external conditions, which only have a minor involvement in the development of the self-aggressive acts.

Key Words: penitentiary, aggressivity, Romania.

Prisons are known to be injury risk hotspots [1], with significantly higher rates of violent acts than those recorded in the general population. Prison trauma, together with the use of illegal drugs and mental disorders are known to be the most endemic health problems in penitentiaries [1-3]; unlike however the latter two which are usually preexistent, prison violence is highly dependent upon the incarceration environment [1] and therefore the authorities may limit it by developing preventive strategies which may prove to be very effective.

More than 10 million of prisoners are reported worldwide, the highest number being in China with 2.5 million, US with 2.3 million and Russia with 0.9 million [4], whilst the higher percentage of prisoners related

to the general population is in US, with a value of 756 to 100000 people, more than five times higher than the mean world value (145/100000) [5]. In Romania both the mean number of prisoners and their frequency have significantly decreased in the last years, from 46224 prisoners (214/100000 inhabitants) in 2003 to 27777 (128/100000 inhabitants) in 2008.

Whilst in the general population violent acts are extremely polymorphic in regard of both cause and manner, in prisoners both violence-related and accident-related injuries are more easy to be correlated with a small numbers of causative factors, the most frequently cited being a history of physical or sexual abuse, weapon victimization, violent offenses, substance abuse and mental disorders [6-19].

1) MD, Galati Penitentiary of maximum security

2) PhD Student, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy

3) Prof, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Faculty of Dental Medicine, Dept. of Legal Medicine

4) National Institute of Legal Medicine, Dept. of Forensic Anthropology

5) Assist. Prof, Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Faculty of Medicine, Dept. of Legal Medicine and Bioethics

*Corresponding author: Vitan Barzesti 9, 042122 Sector 4, Bucharest, Romania, Phone No. 0040723791072, email: soraer@gmail.com

The purpose of this article is to reveal the main characteristics of violence in prisons in Romania, using the databases of the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration and significant samples collected from the Galati penitentiary.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted using:

1) Data obtained from the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration from 2003 to 2008. The following elements were analyzed: morbidity and mortality rates, diseases, auto- and hetero - violent acts, simulation/dissimulation, etc. The data was included in an Excel database (.xls) and statistical analyzed were conducted using the Excel 2007 software.

2) Data and cases from the casuistry of the Galati Penitentiary.

The study was approved the Institutional Ethics Committee and was conducted in accordance with national and international laws and regulations regarding patient consent and confidentiality, and data protection.

RESULTS

1. Aggressivity directed towards others in Romanian penitentiaries between 2003-2008.

Between 2003 and 2008 we have identified 2470 aggressive acts directed towards others (we only took into consideration aggressive acts leading to severe consequences). Eleven (0.44%) caused the death of the victim.

If, in 2003 the number of cases was at a minimum, with only 233 cases, in 2008 the value more than tripled to 767, which, associated with an almost 40% decrease in the number of prisoners, lead to a relative increase of more than 500% (See Figure 1).

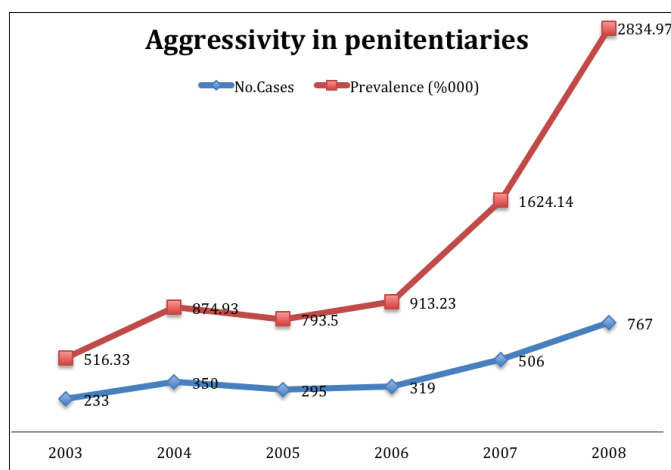


Figure 1. Aggressivity in penitentiaries in Romania 2003-2008

2. Aggressivity directed towards others in Galati penitentiary between 2003-2008.

A total number of ten major violent acts occurred in this period in Galati County. They were usually committed in prison chambers, the cause often being trivial – who goes first to the toilet, staying too long at the toilet, a no smoking rule in the chamber, etc. Most of the perpetrators are repeat offenders and are between 20 and 30 years old (eight out of ten). Most affected areas were the head & face area followed by the thorax and abdomen. We only took into consideration aggressive acts leading to more than 10 care days; in seven cases the life was put in jeopardy, one remained with permanent disability and one with temporary esthetic prejudice. As traumatic agents were used: blunt objects, sharp objects (hand made), boiled water, etc.

3. Self-harm in Romanian penitentiaries between 2003 and 2008.

A total number of 10987 self-harm acts were recorded between 2003 and 2008. If, in absolute numbers the values did not yield significant differences, in regard of the relative frequencies related to the total number of prisoners we can easily identify a significant increase in 2007 and 2008, with a maximum value in 2007, with an increase of almost 50%. A number of 71 suicides were recorded in that period of time.

4. Self-harm in Galati penitentiary between 2003 and 2008.

Ten severe self-harm acts were identified in the Galati penitentiary between 2003 and 2008. In all cases the prisoners were condemned for violent acts and most of them (seven) were less than 30 years old. Main reasons for the self-aggressive acts were: to extort the administrators of the penitentiary, not to perform certain activities, to impress the roommates, and psychiatric pathology. They all needed specialized medical care. The most affected areas were: forehead (four cases), ear amputation (one case), sectioning of the jugular vein (one case), three lesions in the thorax and limb areas, one had lesions due to ingesting objects. We have identified the following traumatic agents: nails (four cases), blades (three cases), injected faces (one case), fire (one case).

DISCUSSIONS

Aggression as a form of violence, expresses an annulment by forced imposition of the freedom of speech and action of a certain person in particular, and the existentiality of the world he is living in, in general [20].

Taking contact with a prison environment alters the personality equilibrium throughout a triple reduction: of the living space, of the personal time and of the social interactions. To these we can add the fact that it enters in a group of unknown persons, its behaviors are strictly regulated and controlled, the personal space is very limited due to overcrowding, etc. All these factors can decompensate a borderline personality or determine the development of penitentiary psychosis characterized by a lack of initiative, fatalistic resignation, lost of interest in people and events, emotional anesthesia, inability to make plans, etc. [21-26]. In the absence of proper procedures/ preventive measure this pathology often leads to increased aggressiveness in prisons, directed usually against the self, and thus leading to a very high prevalence of suicides (the most frequent cause of death in custody in most countries, but not in Romania).

In the years we have analyzed we saw a significant decrease in the number of prisoners, a fall of over 40%. The main cause was a favorable international conjuncture, making easier for the Romanian people to leave in the countries of the European Union. If the number of prisoners has significantly decreased, the number of hetero-aggressive acts has significantly increased in the same period of time, from 233 in 2003 to 767 in 2008. This alarming increase is mainly due to the freedoms granted to the inmates, as well as to an incomplete legislation dealing with violent acts

in prisons. If were imposed penalties like: denial of parole, significant and real penalty increases, complete elimination of "prison tourism" and if the personnel would have been better protected by the law against any kind of violent act committed by the prisoners, the values would most likely have not been so high.

Self-harm is defined as a violent manifestation directed against one owns body, caused by diminished survival skills, despair or a low degree of preservation instinct [27].

In the absence of an outer defiance, the aggressivity accumulated in the prison environment is diverged toward the self. From a medical-legal point of view the moment when the self-aggressiveness manifest itself depends mainly on (1) psychological factors (chronic alcohol abuse, psychiatric disorders, personality disorders, psychoorganic syndromes, congenital malformations or infirmities (very despised in the prison), somatic symptoms associated with depression) and (2) sociological factors (antisocial behavior, interpersonal conflicts, etc). Our study reveals a relative increase of about 50% in self-harm frequency between 2003 and 2008. The increase is less significant than the one regarding hetero-aggressive acts, the most likely cause being the fact that self-harm is more profoundly linked to psychological factors and subsequently less linked to external conditions, which only have a minor involvement in the development of the self-aggressive acts.

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