

Aggressive behavior towards staff in the prison environment.
Descriptive study on the first semester of 2015

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Abstract

Aggression on the penitentiary staff represent a situation for which authorities must identify adequate management methods, given than its escalation leads to serious issues both for the other inmates, and for the entire system. The hereby study intends to analyze the distribution of the aggression acts on the staff within the units subordinated to the National Prison Administration in Romania. During the first semester of 2015, 49 such events were recorded, almost two thirds of them (63.8%) having occurred inside the maximum security prisons and closed-regime prisons. The most vulnerable locations for engagement in aggression acts on the staff were the detention room and the walk yard. The social profile of the aggressors is defined by poor relations with the family and low education level. Verbal aggressions are the most frequent types of behavior manifested towards the staff. Identification of these elements represents an important part in identifying the best prevention and direct intervention methods.

Key words: inmates, aggression, staff, social profile

INTRODUCTION

The penitentiary institution, as an institution responsible with the application of the law in the matter of enforcement of penalties and measures of deprivation of liberty present a special social role, determined by its main functions, aiming to ensure community safety, on one hand, and social reintegration, on the other hand, (Law no. 254/2013, GD no. 756/2016, GD no. 157/2016). Through these functions, the penitentiary system brings its contribution to the increase of responsibility and socio-professional reinsertion of persons sentenced to punishments or measures of deprivation of liberty.

“The social structure of an organization is essentially generated by three factors: the division of work, the authority hierarchy and coordination”

(Cornescu, Mihăilescu & Stanciu, 2003, p. 36). Having these elements as starting point, together with the specificities of the detention places (e.g. large collectivities, overcrowding, heterogeneous groups, risks, complex needs of persons in custody), an organizational issue occurs, which is more complex than in other institutions, including from the point of view of the risks that the staff can be exposed to. The conditions of the detention environment, as well as the psychosocial characteristics of the persons in custody, thus lead to the consideration that, the interaction of these factors generates certain risks regarding the civil servants with special status, who carry out their professional activities in the penitentiary units.

Deprivation of liberty has a dramatic effect on the personality of incarcerated persons, sometimes leading to the occurrence of new behaviors, which are inexistent outside the penitentiary (Breaz, 2018). Thus, the engagement of persons deprived of liberty in aggressive behaviors (e.g. self-aggressive, hetero-aggressive) seeks explanatory support, to substantiate the adequacy of institutional decisions and administrative measures focused on the prevention part. In this context, the multidisciplinary comprehension of the phenomenology encompassing the custodial perimeter and, dependent upon this, the implementation of recovery undertakings, in compliance with the *evidence based* principle, must be included among the action priorities of the Romanian penitentiary system.

In relation with the aggression explanatory models, the model of general aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) embodies the greatest number of factors that can act in order to influence aggressive, violent behaviors. The specialized literature emphasizes that the insights provided by this explanatory model are highly valuable both in the research field, and for the practitioners responsible with aggression management, either individual or group aggression, or, if applicable, inter-group aggression. This model also allows formulating research hypotheses regarding aggression acts (e.g. verbal, physical, mixed) manifested in the penitentiary environment.

METHOD

Purpose

The hereby study intends to identify a certain social profile by describing certain contextual elements of the penitentiary environment which predispose persons deprived of liberty to engage in aggression acts against the employed staff.

Participants

The research universe included all the inmates registered in the

penitentiary system records as having committed aggression acts against the staff during the first semester of 2015. The final volume included 49 aggression events recorded in the detention units in the 8 territorial administrative regions of Romania (table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of aggressive incidents

Characteristic	N (%)
Region	
<i>South-West</i>	1 (2.0)
<i>South-East</i>	15 (30.6)
<i>North-West</i>	1 (2.0)
<i>North-East</i>	13 (26.5)
<i>Center</i>	1 (2.0)
<i>West</i>	4 (8.2)
<i>South</i>	7 (14.3)
<i>Bucharest</i>	7 (14.3)
Incarceration regime	
<i>Maximum security</i>	16 (34.0)
<i>Closed</i>	14 (29.8)
<i>Semi-open</i>	9 (19.1)
<i>Open</i>	1 (2.1)
<i>Criminal records</i>	4 (8.5)
<i>Not classified</i>	3 (6.4)
Inmate age category	
<i>Minor</i>	3 (6.1)
<i>Juvenile</i>	9 (18.4)
<i>Adult</i>	37 (75.5)
Inmate educational level	
<i>Higher education</i>	2 (4.2)
<i>High school education</i>	5 (10.4)
<i>Secondary education</i>	26 (54.2)
<i>Primary education</i>	13 (27.1)
<i>Illiterate</i>	2 (4.2)

Measurements

The data were centralized in an Excel file, which included the following dimensions: (a) administrative data (detention unit, detention regime and the region that the unit belongs to); (b) time context (the moment when the deed occurred: month, day of the week, time interval); (c) physical context (location where the event took place); (d) the action itself (type of aggression) and (e) social-demographic context (age category of the authors, gender, reoffending

status, family relations, educational level, participation in the activities and programs offered).

Procedure

Information was requested at the level of the National Administration of Penitentiaries through a request submitted to the managing board. Following approval, the data were collected uniformly from all the units, and later transferred in SPSS 18 and used in the descriptive analyses presented in the Results section.

RESULTS

Most acts of aggression took place at the level of the detention room (42.9%), in the walk yard (14.3%) and in the hospital room (10.2%) while the lowest number of aggression acts was recorded at checkpoints, accommodation pavilion, the dayroom and the visiting sector (2%). More than half of the recorded acts (55.1%) represented verbal aggression, one third (32.7%) represented mixed aggression and 12.2% physical aggression.

Generally, the highest aggression rate against the staff was recorded for those in the South-Eastern (30.6%) and North-Eastern (26.5%) regions, compared to those in the South-West, North-West and Center who recorded a rate of 2%. Depending on the detention regime, the highest risk rate of engaging in aggressive behaviors was recorded in the maximum security penitentiaries (34%) and closed penitentiaries (29.8%), while in the case of open and semi-open regimes, the rate is lower. This may be explained by the fact that the closed and maximum security regimes are more restrictive, thus favoring the occurrence of additional frustrations and implicitly relieving through acts of aggression against the staff, which represents the projection of authority. The time interval when most acts of aggression were committed was 12-16 (28.5%), followed by 08-12 (18.3%) and 06-08 and 16-18 each counting 14.2% of the events. The lowest number of aggression acts (4%) against the staff was recorded in the time interval 18-20. Thus we can conclude that the first part of the day represents a higher risk context.

The number of aggression acts increases by age, from 6.1% in case of minor children up to 75.5% in case of adults. A little over half of our research sample included respondents with maximum 8 grades graduated (54.2%). A quarter of the respondents (27.1%) have only graduated primary school and only 1:10 have graduated high school. Almost half of the aggression acts (46.9%) were committed by reoffenders, and a quarter committed by persons deprived of liberty with and without criminal records.

Involvement in various programs and activities during detention is

perceived as a protective factor and a preparation factor for the post-detention period. The data collected with regards to the first semester of 2015 indicated however that, from the total of recorded events, 9% of the authors were enrolled in work activities, 15.9% in school activities, 52.3% in various programs and 84.1% in other semi-structured activities (educational, psychological, social fields). This draws attention to rendering the contents of these activities adequate to the actual needs of the inmates.

In order to shape the profile of the person deprived of liberty engaging in the three types of aggression, a series of associations were driven, using the individual features (age, education), social features (family relations), and institutional features (detention regime, location where the event took place), as independent variables. Thus, no significant associations were identified between age and type of aggression [$\chi^2 = 4$, $df = 4$, $p = .409$], however verbal aggression is most frequently engaged in by all inmates. For that matter, this is the only type of aggression that minor children engage in. Similarly, no statistically significant differences were identified between the educational level and the type of aggression that the inmate was involved in [$\chi^2 = 4.50$, $df = 8$, $p = .809$]. Regardless of the educational level, verbal aggressions proved to be the most frequent, varying between 100% (in case of those with no education) and 50% (in case of those having graduated from higher education and secondary education).

Although the large majority of events were produced by persons having poor relations with their family (44.9% of them have never been visited in prison, and 36.7% reported rare visits), we did not identify a significant relationship between the type of family relations and the committed aggression [$\chi^2 = 4.98$, $df = 6$, $p = .546$]. However, those who have an open relationship with their family engage, more frequently, in mixed aggressions (50%), while for the others, verbal aggression is the most frequent (63.6% for those who do not maintain relations with their families, and 55.6% for those who are rarely visited).

From the institutional point of view, there is no significant association between the detention regime and the type of aggression [$\chi^2 = 16.63$, $df = 10$, $p = .083$] or between the location where the behavior occurred (inside or outside the room) and the type of aggression [$\chi^2 = 1.21$, $df = 2$, $p = .544$]. Verbal aggressions were most frequently reported in both locations.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the comprehension of the specificity elements of the custodial environment (e.g. limitation of the personal space, daily program, detention regime, large collectivities), certain explanatory supports can be emphasized

with regards to the manifestation of hetero-aggressive behaviors by the persons deprived of liberty.

In order to handle the new challenges, the penitentiary institution must engage in a change process at structural and functional level (Breaz, 2018). In this context, we reiterate a few elements of interest, applicable to the detention places, with regards to the factors that the specialized literature emphasize as being involved in determining aggressive responses, in the situational context of the penitentiary environment: *instigation to aggression; power of habit; situational factors; potential to respond* (Gheorghe, 2003).

Acknowledging certain inherent limitations to the employed method (i.e. documents analysis), the conclusions of the hereby study present however the potential to bring a practical contribution in relation to references, for the judicious planning of the staff in service, from the point of view of certain time intervals, locations, situational contexts associated with risks.

With regards to the scientific validation of certain specialized interventions (e.g. psychological, social), as well as of certain multidisciplinary strategies relevant to the system, we underline that, for *evidence based* practices, the cooperation of practitioners with the research environment is vital.

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