

Job Burnout Among Bulgarian Prison Staff



Medical Science

KEYWORDS : burnout; coping; Maslach Burnout Inventory; prison staff

Stanislava N. Harizanova

Department of Hygiene and Ecomedicine, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University-Plovdiv, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Working in a prison is a stressful, challenging and socially important job. The aim of the present study was to assess the job burnout among Bulgarian prison staff. The cross-sectional study took place through individual, voluntary and anonymous interviewing of 307 employees from three district prisons in Bulgaria (209 men and 98 women) at the mean age of 40.59±0.48 years, as the only criterion for their selection was to have direct contacts with inmates. The Maslach Burnout Inventory was used to collect data. This study revealed that the prison employees do suffer from burnout (10.42%, 25.73% and 50.49% of respondent experienced high levels of burnout in the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment subscales, respectively). The high levels of burnout among prison employees were related to maladaptive coping (depersonalization and emotional exhaustion are significantly related to alcohol consumption, while emotional exhaustion is significantly associated with substance use).

INTRODUCTION

"...few other organizations are charged with the central task of supervising and securing an unwilling and potentially violent population..." (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004).

Correctional officers are enmeshed in a unique work environment. Working in a prison is a stressful, demanding, and socially important job. Research has found that the perceived dangerousness of the work, as a result of threats and inmate violence is a significant cause of stress for many correctional staff. One possible outcome of prolonged or chronic stressors at the work place is burnout. Within correctional facilities, it is estimated that 37% of correctional officers experience job stress and burnout (Bourbonnais et al., 2005). This is higher than the estimated 19-30% in the general working population. There has been little research on correctional staff burnout. Garland (2002) contended that burnout in the field of institutional corrections has not received the attention it demands. In Bulgaria at present job burnout has not been studied among employees working in prisons.

In correctional staff, work stress and burnout can lead to negative outcomes such as decreased physical health, internal withdrawal, and inability to cope with traumatic experiences, increased substance use (World Health Organization, 2007).

Methodology

Aim

The main purpose of this study was to assess the job burnout among Bulgarian prison staff. One of the focuses of this research was to examine whether maladaptive coping is related to burnout.

Respondents

A representative sample of 307 correctional officers at three district prisons in Bulgaria participated voluntarily in the cross-sectional study. The only qualification in the sample selection was that the employee has direct contact with inmates. Confidentiality of all the respondents was emphasized. Of the total number, 209 (68.08%) were men and 98 (31.92%) were women at the mean age of 40.59±0.48 years. Specifically, 237 correctional officers (77.20%) were married, 124 (40.39%) had university education, 79 (25.73%) were inspectors, and the mean number of years of service at the prison was 11.37±0.44 years.

Instrument

The Bulgarian version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory performed by B. Tzenova (1992) was used to measure the three core dimensions of burnout – emotional exhaustion, deper-

sonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Exhaustion was measured with nine items framed as statements of job-related feelings of emotional and physical fatigue. Depersonalization was rated with five items representing feelings of detachment and unresponsiveness in relation to the work. Reduced personal accomplishment was measured with eight items reflecting a reduced ability to do the job, and lack of professional efficiency. The items of personal accomplishment are reversed (lack of professional efficiency) – low value means good capability. High scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores on personal accomplishment were indicative of burnout.

The destructive coping – smoking, alcohol consumption, and substance use and abuse were assessed with the questionnaire with only two possible answers (yes/no) without asking participants the name of the medication taken.

Statistical analyses

The analyses were conducted using SPSS for Windows, version 17.0. A descriptive analysis (mean, standard error of means) was conducted on the sample, followed by a Student t-test to determine if any significant differences in the level of three burnout subscales exist between the prison staff according to their negative coping. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant (two-tailed).

RESULTS

Based on Maslach's categorization of burnout 10.42%, 25.73% and 50.49% of respondents experienced high levels of job burnout in the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment subscales, respectively.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to the subscales of Maslach Burnout Inventory

Burnout subscales	Number	Percent	Mean ± SE
EE			
Low	188	61.24	16.04 ± 0.55
Moderate	87	28.34	
High	32	10.42	
DP			
Low	142	46.25	7.99 ± 0.40
Moderate	86	28.02	
High	79	25.73	
PA			
Low	82	26.71	26.93 ± 0.62
Moderate	70	22.80	
High	155	50.49	

EE = emotional exhaustion, DP = depersonalization, PA = personal accomplishment

A t-test analysis showed that the levels of reported emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are higher among prison employees used alcohol excessively. Among three dimensions of burnout, only emotional exhaustion is statistically significant associated with psychotropic substance use among participants.

Table 2: Impact of maladaptive coping on three burnout dimensions

Burnout subscales	EE	DP	PA
Maladaptive coping	Mean ± SE	Mean ± SE	Mean ± SE
Smoking			
No	14.41±0.96	7.89±0.52	30.63±0.58
Yes	16.17±1.04	8.09±0.55	29.42±0.62
Alcohol use			
No	14.39±0.70**	7.54±0.38**	30.32±0.44
Yes	21.68±2.68**	11.59±1.27**	28.27±1.43
Substance use			
No	14.53±0.68**	7.83±0.38	30.25±0.44
Yes	31.00±4.14**	11.63±2.29	26.38±1.83

EE = emotional exhaustion, DP = depersonalization, PA = personal accomplishment

* p-value is < 0.05; ** p-value is < 0.01.

Discussion

All the previous researchers reported that prison environment affects emotional well-being of the prison staff, which in turn brings about increased stress among them and culminates in to job burnout (Roy, Novak & Miksaj-Todorovic, 2010). In the current study burnout is a problem among Bulgarian prison employees. Similar researches provide approximate percentages of burnout among correctional officers. The comparative study on burnout indicated severe job burnout among prison staff in the United States and Croatia (Roy, Novak & Miksaj-Todorovic, 2010). Keinan and Malach-Pines's study (2007) on job burnout among prison personnel in Israel reported burnout of 38% of correctional officers. Lindquist and Whitehead (1986) found that 68% of correctional officers considered their job to be at least moderately stressful, and approximately 33% reported experiencing symptoms of burnout. Higher levels of burnout are associated with shift work, a lack of stimulation on the job, low job autonomy, a lack of participation in decision making, low supervisor support, frequent contact with suspects, emotionally demanding and physically dangerous work situations (Lynch, 2007). The high levels of burnout among prison employees can have a significant negative impact on their work-related attitudes and behaviours. A problem that results from job burnout is alcohol and substance use and abuse. According to Violanti (1999)

alcohol abuse among police officers in the USA is about double that of the general population where 1 in 10 adults abuses alcohol. In the present study it has found that 14.01% of prison staff use alcohol excessively, the majority of them have increased alcohol consumption, and 44.30% of the all sample smoke. Among three components of burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are significantly related to alcohol consumption among Bulgarian prison officers. MacClean (cited in Madu & Poodhun, 2006) asserts that alcohol abuse among police officials is the norm because they are ostracized by the rest of society for the type of work that they do. This rationale for drinking is defined in accordance with the label used in the literature as "drinking to cope". Little is known about the prevalence of psychotropic drug use among correctional officers. The present result has shown that emotional exhaustion is significantly associated with psychotropic drug use among Bulgarian prison employees. The prevalence of substance use is higher among men. Correctional officers who use maladaptive coping skills (e.g. excessive alcohol intake, substance use and abuse, smoking) are more likely to experience chronic, long-term stress. Consequently, ongoing and long-term stress can result in burnout, reduced motivation and, ultimately, withdrawal from work (He, Zhao & Archbold, 2002).

Conclusion

This is the first study in Bulgaria to assess the level of burnout syndrome among the prison staff. The results have shown that the correctional officers do suffer from severe job burnout. The high levels of burnout among prison employees were related to maladaptive coping skills. Depersonalization and emotional exhaustion are significantly related to alcohol consumption, while emotional exhaustion is significantly associated with psychotropic drug use among correctional officers.

There is a need for more research on correctional staff burnout, particularly in terms of identifying and understanding its potential causes.

Limitation

This article is a part of a large study on burnout among prison employees in Bulgaria. It should be noted that the results presented in this article were from only one study.

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Conflict of interest: None to declare

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