



# The Pains of Imprisonment and Mental Health Issues

Dr. Olga Themeli  
University of Crete

# What is Prison ?



- ❖ Prison is a total institution (Goffman, 1961)

- ❖ Prison is a place where you are deprived not only from your freedom but almost from all your rights, even your life (suicides in prisons)

- ❖ Prison is a place where the individual's private sphere gets exposed. The individual is seen as a subject and object at the same time.

- ❖ Prison is an institution where punishing the soul (that is, the mental life of convicts) took the place of punishing the body (Foucault, 1977/1995)





- ◆ Goffman (1961) defines total institutions as *social arrangements* that are regulated according to one rational plan and that occur under one roof.
- ◆ The 'total institution', then, is a 'living space' in which people who share a similar social situation are cut off from the wider society for a considerable time
- ◆ In civil society we work, play and sleep in different places with different persons under different authorities. In total institutions these three activity spheres of life, lose their separate boundaries in various ways.



- ◆ First, life is experienced and controlled in the same place by the same central authority.
- ◆ Second, activities of daily living are conducted often in the presence of a large group of people in similar circumstances.
- ◆ Third, all phases of daily activities are carefully planned, with one activity leading into the next at a prearranged time and often to meet organisational rather than individual needs.



All these areas of life are placed under the territory of the total institution, which means, that it is the same authority.

This is one of the tools a total institution manage by removing all possibilities for an individual to perform interaction technique

Decisions are taken on the behalf of the prison inmate collective and from the top of the organisation, without taking the individual's need into consideration.



# The pains of Imprisonment

Gresham M. Sykes (1958) argued that five fundamental deprivations characterized daily prison life, known collectively as the “**pains of imprisonment.**” These were:

- ◆ The loss of **Liberty**
- ◆ The loss of **desirable goods and services**
- ◆ The loss of **heterosexual relationships**
- ◆ The loss **autonomy**
- ◆ The loss of the **security.**

## The loss of Liberty

Effects of the loss of liberty include the dissolution of bonds to family and friends due to restrictions or difficulties associated with receiving visitors, sending and receiving letter, having a work, taking care of your health, etc.

## The Deprivation of Goods and Services

Most inmates will experience lack of tobacco, alcohol, varied foods, individual clothing, furniture, and ....  
**privacy.**







## The Deprivation of Heterosexual Relationships

- ◆ The loss of heterosexual relations is a profound loss for inmates. Is the absence of voluntary sexual relations, heterosexual or otherwise

## The Deprivation of Autonomy

- ◆ The inmates lose the ability to make even the most basic decisions about their daily life. The loss of autonomy is extremely harmful



## The Deprivation of Security

- ◆ Prisons can be violent and unsafe places (Prison rape, substance use, etc). Are reducing self-control and increasing violence.



Having one's life "hemmed in by four white walls" resulted in "intense misery," since inmates were deprived of the powers of autonomous decision-making and subjected to intense isolation (Mayhew, 1862: 127)

# Mental Health in prisons

Mental health is a positive sense of wellbeing . . . which enables us to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. Prison should provide an opportunity for prisoners' . . . personal development, without harming themselves or others.

In order for this to happen, prisoners must:

- feel safe
- be treated with positive expectations and respect



# For the majority of prisoners, imprisonment was likely to have the following effects:

- Isolation from families and social networks w austere surroundings
- Loss of privacy and poor physical and hygienic conditions w aggression,
- Bullying, fear, suspicion
- Lack of purposeful activity, of personal control, of power to act and loss of identity
- Pressure to escape or to take drugs
- Feelings of shame and stigmatisation
- Uncertainty, particularly among remand prisoners, and concern about re-integration into the outside world.





- Rates of mental illness and suicide are significantly higher in prisoners than in the general population.

- Poor physical health influences criminal involvement, the onset of offending, and crime escalation

- Research carried out with prisoners found that 40% of inmates of both sexes have mental disorders



- Studies showed that symptoms of depression are associated not with specific mental disorders, but rather with the insalubrious environment of prison settings, including factors such as:
  - overcrowding, which means that prisoners have to sleep together in the same bed or on the floor
  - poor diet
  - living with violent and aggressive people (including correctional officers)
  - confinement in “solitary”, where physical space is minimal;
  - being deprived of sunlight and human contact



- ◆ Experiencing stress in a prison environment is related to depression, is generally more common among new prisoners, and associated with a greater risk of prison suicide

The provision of health care to people deprived of their liberty is a human right



# What to do

- ◆ A need of greater investment in the prison system to improve the availability and quality of mental health services in prisons
- ◆ Family ties and involvement is several activities (as work, art, sports) are important protective factor against mental health problems.
- ◆ Improvement of prison conditions






*“If you study prison populations as I have, you see a common preponderance of childhood trauma and mental illness. The two go together. So a lot of the people are being punished for being mentally ill and they are mentally ill because they were traumatized as kids.*

*So what we have in prisons are the most traumatized people in our society”*

Dr. Gabor Mate

# The Questions

- 
- Do we still believe that the Prison System has the rehabilitative function of resocializing?
  - Do we still believe that there is a strong link between mental health problems and crime?
  - Do we still believe that we can improve prison conditions only by investing on mental health services in prisons?
  - What kind of reforms do we need to reduce - the real cause of the high rates of mental health problems – “the Pains of Imprisonment”?



“If the prison  
does not underbid the slum in human misery,  
the slum will empty and the prison will fill.”

George Bernard Shaw’