

Prison officers in Latin America: quality of life, working conditions and main difficulties

Cesia Abello¹, Margarita Pacheco¹, Guillermo E. Sanhueza²

¹Graduate in Social Work. University of Chile. Santiago. Chile.

²Associate Professor. School of Social Work. University of Chile and School of Social Work. Loyola University Chicago.

ABSTRACT

Although the number of empirical studies on prison inmates in Latin America has increased in recent years, an aspect that still remains little studied is the situation of prison workers. This article analyzes the labor situation of prison officers in Latin America, and considers their working conditions, quality of life and the problems that affect them, in a region marked by precarious, overcrowded and violent prison systems. To do so, a systematic review of articles published in Spanish or Portuguese on the Scielo platform between 2000-2021 was carried out.

Our main findings show that prison officers suffer from significant levels of stress and work overload; and carry out their work in poor conditions; with long working hours; performing an invisible and socially undervalued job; with important risks of negative consequences for their physical and mental health. Finally, some implications of the findings and some lines of intervention are discussed.

Key words: prison; internship and residency; working environment; Latin America.

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INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of the Latin American prison system requires a more detailed look at the social context, given that the continent presents very high levels of inequality and violence. The United Nations Development Programme¹ has reported that the territory contains only 9% of the world's population, but is home to 34% of violent deaths. Muggah² comments that the countries in this continent are amongst the most violent and insecure in the world. This can be seen in the rate of homicides in the region, standing at approximately three times that of the average worldwide, where one of every four persons murdered is Colombian, Venezuelan or Mexican.

Inequality tends to create a domino effect by causing more negative consequences for the population that lives there, thus producing more violence, while dispossessed individuals feel "frustration and alienation

because they perceive disadvantage, lack of opportunities and injustice, that, when combined, encourage criminal behaviour"¹, along with a greater attraction for illegal activities where more money can be made. However, it should be noted that the focal points of violence in the region are many and varied, since they are not only related to drug trafficking, but also to armed conflicts, organised crime, sexual violence, violence within the family, gang warfare and common crime³.

In such a context, Latin America has become "a promised land for the evangelists of more police and more severe criminal justice by the State"⁴, which in turn has led to greater expenditure on public safety, the predictable outcome being prisons with severe problems of overcrowding and little access to effective social reintegration⁵.

The complex social context of Latin American prisons has led them being regarded as some of the worst in the world⁶. This belief is due to the severe

overcrowding, the many deaths and crimes that take place inside the prisons themselves, and the violence and severe violations of human rights suffered both by the inmates and by prison staff⁵⁻⁷.

Despite this state of affairs, references are generally made only to those who are “serving their sentence”⁸, while prison officers, who are also affected by working in insecure conditions with little in the way of training, are forgotten. What training they receive has little to do with the realities of prison life, with the consequent negative effects that mainly impact lower ranking officers, who not only have to deal with work-related difficulties, but can also suffer from health problems⁹.

Some recent studies have emphasised the role played by prison guards and staff in the quality of life inside prisons⁶, and include some preliminary results on the social reintegration of prison inmates¹⁰. Azaola & Bergman¹¹ studied the working conditions of staff in federal prisons in Mexico. However, there is little in the way of empirical evidence about prison officers in Latin America.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO)¹², prison officers are exposed to disproportionately high levels of occupational risk, including psychosocial issues. Although some research exists on the situation of inmates in the region, there are very few studies on those who have the job of guarding and caring for them¹³.

An adverse working environment affects the wellbeing of the staff, which means that the job is no longer a source of satisfaction or happiness, but rather becomes a place where pain, suffering and fatigue predominate, which is further increased when there is no appreciation of their efforts¹⁴⁻¹⁶. This article sets out to investigate the issue of working conditions, quality of life and the main difficulties faced by prison officers in Latin America, and discover the findings in current research on these questions.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

To provide the answers to the central question of our research, we carried out a review of the literature with the Scielo browser in 2021. The search filters included: Latin American countries; in Spanish and/or Portuguese; articles available on the Scielo platform; including only those studies published on the platform between 2000 and 2021; and excluding theses, press articles and technical reports.

The key words for the systematic review were as follows: *agentes de prisión* (prison workers); *agentes*

penitenciarios (correctional workers); *funcionarios de prisión* (prison officials); *guardias de prisión* (prison guards); *oficial de prisión* (prison officer); *salud agentes penitenciarios* (health of correctional workers); *saúde agentes penitenciarios* (health of correctional workers); *agente prisional* (prison worker).

Main findings

14 texts that matched the above mentioned criteria were selected. Most of the bibliography we found came from Brazil, which obeys a certain logic given that Brazil is the largest country in the region in terms of general population, number of inmates and volume of scientific output.

Although each country experiences a range of specific issues, one of the most common findings is that prison officers operate in very poor working conditions, with overcrowded and deteriorating facilities and electrical and/or sanitary problems and long working shifts⁴⁻¹⁵. Another constant factor seen in the literature from different countries is the lack of infrastructures, human capital and tools necessary to carry out prison work¹⁶⁻¹⁸. This has a direct impact on the options available for carrying out social reintegration work with the inmates.

Jesus *et al.*¹⁹ state that factors such as overcrowding in prison units and the lack of prison staff to effectively cover the number of inmates aggravates the physical and mental tension of prison officers, which in turn has a negative impact on their job satisfaction. The studies also mention the constant tension and vigilance required of guards who may at any time face aggression, threats and even riots/insurrections by inmates, which are not uncommon in Latin America¹⁸⁻²⁹.

Several authors also point to the negative effects of what is known as “prisonization” amongst prison staff, caused by long periods of confinement and cohabitation in enclosed spaces with colleagues and inmates. Prisonization is also expressed in the internalisation or “contamination” of behaviours and attitudes by inmates to officers, who begin to adopt part of the prison culture in their own personal and family contexts¹⁰⁻³¹.

Several authors comment that many prison officers end up using prison as a kind of “second home”, which only serves to further aggravate the situation mentioned above.

Examples of this can be seen in the studies by González¹³, and Barra & Sotelo²⁸ in prisons in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago de Chile, which indicate that many of the personnel live in the prison setting as many of them come from the southern regions of the country, such as the Biobío, La Araucanía and

Table 1. Systematic review in Scielo of prison officers in Latin America.

Nº	Autor	Year	Country	Text	Methodology	Abstract/findings
1	Jaskowiak C <i>et al.</i>	2015	Brazil	O trabalho no cárcere: reflexões acerca da saúde do agente penitenciário	Qualitative and descriptive study. Semi-structured interviews with 26 officers at a prison in the north-eastern region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. A content analysis of the subject modality was applied to the information collected in the interviews and then links were established with the existing literature based on the research objectives.	This article sets out to explore the working conditions of prison officers and the effects of the job on their health, which is characterised by a violent and unhealthy environment. The main results indicate that prison officers are obliged to carry out their work in adverse conditions, since their occupation offers them stability, comradeship and the satisfaction of participating in the social reintegration of the inmates. However, they have to cope with a low budget, neglect by the government and appalling conditions that put their health at risk. Mention is made of the fact that not only their physical health suffers but also their mental health, leading to severe cases of stress that in some cases can require medication. The research shows that the prison officers' individual dynamics are also affected by the job.
2	Rudnicki D <i>et al.</i>	2017	Brazil	As máculas da prisão: estigma e discriminação das agentes penitenciárias	Bibliographical review and 34 interviews with prison officers of Rio Grande do Sul, 27 worked at the women's prison of Madre Pelletier while 7 others worked in other prisons in the region.	This article sets out to find if prison officers suffer from discrimination for the work that they do. The review of the literature and the interviews showed that prison officers are "labelled" by society for the work they do in prison.
3	Claus W	2015	Argentina	El trabajo penitenciario como 'trabajo sucio'. Justificaciones y normas ocupacionales	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 agents of the city of Santa Fe. The sample was intentional and comparisons were carried out, therefore the selection criteria are related to the level and role that they play.	The hypothesis of this article is that prison work is perceived as contaminated. The officer's points of view showed images of the job as a "dirty" one. They feel that other persons do not do this work because it is associated with the use of force and/or violence, risks and corruption, etc.
4	Jesus S et al.	2021	Brazil	Vulnerabilidade ao Estresse entre Agentes de Segurança Penitenciários	Field research, carried out with a cross-sectional study with a quantitative focus, to analyse some characteristics of stress amongst prison officers. Comparative studies were used to relate the socio-demographic and occupational variables with the scale of vulnerability at work (EVENT), making use of the t-test and variance analysis (ANOVA). Finally, chi-squared tests and the Pearson correlation were used for the relational analysis.	The article sets out to evaluate vulnerability to stress amongst prison officers in Minas Gerais. The general findings were that the officers were vulnerable to stress, and that single officers were even more likely to suffer from stress in all the factors that were evaluated. Public policies that deal with humanitarian, social and political issues are suggested. An example is given of the need to improve prison conditions. One proposal they make is to take family support into consideration, because the research shows that it is an important factor in enabling officers to cope with the stress that they face at work. Finally, public policies and measures taken to deal with the problem should involve strategies for action related to the organisational climate, pressure at work and the infrastructure and routine of the unit.

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Table 1. Systematic review in Scielo of prison officers in Latin America (*continuation*).

Nº	Autor	Year	Country	Text	Methodology	Abstract/findings
5	Lima A <i>et al.</i>	2019	Brazil	Prevalência de Transtornos Mentais Comuns e Uso de Álcool e Drogas entre Agentes Penitenciários	Quantitative study of prisons with high levels of break-outs, riots and medical vigilance interventions. 19 centres met these criteria. 403 prison officers of both sexes participated. The tools used to carry out the study were the SRQ-20, Self-Reporting Questionnaire, the ASSIST (Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test) and a socio-demographic questionnaire to obtain data to define the officers' profile: sex, income, marital status, education, relation with the job and mental health care.	This article studies the prevalence of mental disorders and alcohol and drug consumption amongst prison officers. The determining factors in the results are material, occupation and experiential. The results indicate the need for public policies that tackle the issue of officers' health, since the research shows that it is not only necessary to improve their mental health and quality of life, but it also essential to make structural changes, given that the way the system has functioned in recent decades has not brought about positive results for inmates or for prison officers.
6	Albuquerque N <i>et al.</i>	2020	Brazil	Percepções e afetos na prisão: Análise de narrativas de presos e agentes penitenciários	Semi-structured narrative interviews with 6 inmates and 6 prison officers. No criteria of experience were used, the participants were only asked to participate in the research report that was carried out beforehand.	This article sets out to analyse the "environmental perceptions" of prison amongst the interviewees (6 officers and 6 inmates), according to their experiences. The officers feel frustration in their work, which is due to the low number of officers and overcrowding in the prisons, which has other effects. The inmates feel that prison generates a socio-relational break with the exterior, which distances them from the aims of social reintegration.
7	Santos S <i>et al.</i>	2021	Brazil	Major depressive disorder in detention officers	Information questionnaire about the socio-demographic and mental health characteristics of 401 prison officers at the Mata Escura Prison Complex, in the Metropolitan Area of the Region of Salvador, Brazil. The officers interviewed work in the Complex, and no age or gender restrictions were applied when organising the sample.	The article shows that prison officers are obliged to face adverse conditions (material and social) when carrying out their duties. This makes them more likely to suffer from mental health issues, which have an impact on their personal and family lives. One important factor in the stress that officers undergo is the scarce or non-existent training that they receive to carry out the wide range of tasks that they have to do.
8	Campos J <i>et al.</i>	2016	Brazil	Burnout Syndrome and alcohol consumption in prison employees	Observational and cross-sectional study carried out on 339 prison officers between 2011-2012 at the prisons of São Paulo. The following instruments were used in the study: socio-demographic questionnaire, test to identify alcohol consumption disorder (AUDIT), and Maslach's Burnout Inventory – general study (MBI-GS).	This articles sets out to evaluate the association between alcohol consumption patterns and socio-demographic variables, and compare the mean scores of the related factors with burnout syndrome. The results indicate the smokers are more likely to develop a pattern of alcohol consumption, while those that consume alcohol are more affected by burnout syndrome. It is worth noting that in this context religion acts as a protective factor.

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Table 1. Systematic review in Scielo of prison officers in Latin America (*continuation*).

Nº	Autor	Year	Country	Text	Methodology	Abstract/findings
9	Figueiró R <i>et al.</i>	2018	Brazil	Controle a Céu Aberto: Medo e Processos de Subjetivação no Cotidiano de Agentes Penitenciários	Participant observation and semi-structured interviews at a prison in northeast Brazil. 14 prison officers and 5 wives participated in the interviews, which set out to contrast information acquired during the observation and analyse the discourses.	This article analyses the processes of subjectivisation experienced by prison officers in a city in northeast Brazil during their daily work. A notable feature is the construction of a figure called the "dangerous bandit", which contributes towards the construction of subjectivities that lead the police towards violence and violations of rights. These subjective processes have an effect on the lives of the officers and their families.
10	Ribeiro L <i>et al.</i>	2019	Brazil	Agentes penitenciários aprisionados em suas redes?	Data analysis of the research project "The inmates of the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte: who they are, how they live and who they relate with", where in-depth interviews with officers and inmates were carried out with isometric questionnaires. 29 interviews were conducted in the following prisons: Presídio de São Joaquim de Bicas II, Centro de Remanejamento de Presos Provisórios (CERESP) – Gameleira, Penitenciária Professor Jason Soares Albergaria, Complexo Penitenciário Nelson Hungria, Complexo Penitenciário Estevão Pinto, Penitenciária José Maria Alkmin, Presídio Regional de Santa Luzia. 13 participants were officers and 16 were inmates, the aim being to establish an overall view of the unit. The sample was made up mostly of men: the agents had a mean age of 33 years while the average age of the inmates was 36. All the data gathered was used to build a structure of interaction of officers and inmates.	This article shows that the officer's work is characterised by a constant state of tension that is not limited to their work. The data analysis shows that officers also experience incarceration and the emotional harm that this inflicts, and are also obliged to configure their spaces for socialisation according to the need to avoid danger.
11	Bezerra C <i>et al.</i>	2021	Brazil	Fatores associados ao sofrimento psíquico de agentes penitenciários do estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil	Quantitative and qualitative study carried out in 9 prison units on 217 men and 100 women who work as prison officers.	This project sets out to analyse the psychological suffering undergone by prison officers in Ríó de Janeiro along with the associated factors, focusing on the working environment. It concludes that the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions have a negative effect on the officer's mental health, while support and appreciation of their work act as protective factors for mental health.

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Table 1. Systematic review in Scielo of prison officers in Latin America (*continuation*).

Nº	Autor	Year	Country	Text	Methodology	Abstract/findings
12	Bezerra C <i>et al.</i>	2016	Brazil	Sofrimento psíquico e estresse no trabalho de agentes penitenciários: uma revisão da literatura	Bibliographical review that uses the Virtual Health Library (VHL), Web of Science and Scopus as databases. The key words in Portuguese used in the VHL were as follows: “ <i>inspetor</i> ” (inspector), “ <i>agente ou guarda penitenciário, prisional ou prisão</i> ” (prison agent or guard), “ <i>estresse psicológico</i> ”, “ <i>sofrimento mental</i> ” (mental stress or suffering), “ <i>saúde mental</i> ” (mental health), “ <i>sofrimento psíquico</i> ” (psychological suffering) and “ <i>estresse ocupacional</i> ”(occupational stress) "(VHL)". The following terms in English were used in the Science and Scopus browsers: “prison agent”, “prison worker”, “prison staff”, “correctional staff”, “correctional officers”, “working conditions”, “occupational health”, “occupational safety”, “stress”, “mental health” and “psychological stress”.	This article is based on a review of the worldwide literary output on the mental health of prison officers between 2000 and 2014 (40 articles were found). A notable feature is the number of articles (16) published in the USA on this issue. There were 5 studies published in Canada. 11 European articles were identified, and in Latin America the number of articles on the subject is limited to Brazil, with 4. 2 texts from Australia, 1 from Turkey and 1 from South Africa were also found. It should be noted that the articles on this question increased both in number and quality over the years. Notable findings include the existence of risk factors such as work overload, overcrowding and the lack of material resources, etc., and the presence of protective factors such as social support and psychological assistance
13	Fernandes C R <i>et al.</i>	2002	Brazil	Trabalho e cárcere: um estudo com agentes penitenciários da Região Metropolitana de Salvador, Brasil	Cross-sectional epidemiological study in which a random sample of 311 prison workers was selected. The instruments used were: a self-administered standardised questionnaire to collect information. The SRQ-20 was used to gather information about the presence of minor psychiatric disorders. The CAGE was used to assess excessive consumption of alcohol (suspected alcoholism). The name stems from the key words of each question “Cut-down; Annoyed; Guilty; Eye-opener”.	The aim of this article is to identify the possible links between working conditions and health of prison officers in Salvador de Bahía (Brazil). One of the conclusions is that lack of training and working weeks of over 48 hours may be related to a higher prevalence of stress.
14	Ferreira M <i>et al.</i>	2017	Brazil	Prevalência e fatores associados à violência no ambiente de trabalho em agentes de segurança penitenciária do sexo feminino no Brasil	Cross-sectional analytical study of prison officers at 15 women's prisons. The instruments used were: self-administered questionnaire, using an audio-interview; the SRQ-20, used to measure the levels of suspected common mental disorders; and the AUDIT test was used to identify different patterns of alcohol consumption amongst officers.	This article sets out to quantify the prevalence and factors involved in violence at work amongst female prison security officers in Brazil. The results show that the officers also develop violent dynamics amongst their peers, which leads the authors to indicate that Brazilian society and prison environments are characterised as violent, due to a range of factors.

Maule regions¹³⁻²⁹. They do this partly to save money and also to create links of “camaraderie” with their workmates. The problem then arises that the prison staff are exposed for longer to the prison environment and its hazards.

Along the same lines, Rumin *et al.*³² point out that prisonization also invades the workers' homes, as there is evidence that prison slang and expressions are used at home, which shows that officers internalise the values and standards of prison life and transmit them to their families. Thus, prison officers are exposed to a constant process of adaptation, which takes place instinctively and automatically, arising from the denaturalisation in by their frame of references created by their own personal and social setting. The behaviours that start to appear are violent attitudes and loss of affect²³, which also have an effect on their personal and family lives³³.

Several articles also mention issues relating to the career of a prison officer. Given that becoming a prison guard in Latin America is synonymous with job security and financial stability, the staff to some extent internalise and justify the fact that they have to put up with poor working conditions and risks to their lives and health. The studies highlight features such as low investment in continuous education for workers, few opportunities for promotion/pay rises¹⁴, tensions in working relationships between workmates and with supervisors and finally the conflict of roles between being a guard (responsible for security) and that of promoting social reintegration of the persons under their charge²⁵.

A symbolic aspect mentioned in several studies is the lack of social recognition experienced by prison personnel¹⁶. Society has created a discourse in which prison personnel are brought into disrepute. Rudnicki *et al.* highlight the comments made by Lourenço: “the news, films, and television series focus on facts and exaggerate them: they trivialise the pejorative image of prison personnel”¹⁶, and so add disrepute as another factor in the long list of stressful elements of their profession¹⁶⁻¹⁷.

The literature also warns of the high risks that prison workers are subject to in terms of their mental and physical health, which in turn have a negative effect on their personal and family life²³⁻³¹. another major risk mentioned is that of exposure to violence and diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV and, more recently, COVID-19. These infectious diseases are more prevalent in prisons and can affect inmates, their families and prison officers¹⁵, while young, single and male officers are more likely to be exposed to mental health issues¹⁹. Table 1 summarises the findings of this section.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This systematic review of the subject matter showed that there are few studies in the region on this issue and the ones that exist can be found mainly in Brazil, a country that faces one of the most complex penitentiary scenarios in Latin America, marked by high levels of violence, insurrections, killings amongst inmates (decapitations of rivals), overcrowded cells, inhuman conditions and a high number of inmates in preventive custody^{5,25-34}.

The literature also highlights a range of negative physical and mental effects from working in prisons^{14,19,22-24}. The work that prison officers do is also marked by discrimination, prejudice and myths that affect social perceptions of both them and their jobs, which in turn has a negative impact on recognition of the complex tasks that they carry out in the prison setting¹⁸. The prison officers themselves adopt these notions, which then form part of their own identity¹⁹. This can be seen in the many negative effects in the workplace, given that they believe that they receive no support from society or from the State²⁰.

An added problem is that in administrative and legal terms they are not recognised as forming part of the public security sector, and so are obliged to cope with “pressure, overwork, devaluation and lack of social recognition of the importance of their job”²¹, which has consequences for their personal lives, since they have to adopt specific behaviours and develop social strategies to protect their identity¹⁶.

In the workplace, prison officers are in a constant state of alert²⁴, which can have physical and mental consequences that can trigger common mental and psychiatric disorders, such as fatigue, anxiety, headaches, insomnia, paranoia and burnout^{17-22,25}, which make them more susceptible to substance abuse and alcoholism^{18,21,26-27}, especially when the officer is unmarried¹⁹.

Prison work also entails frequent contact with criminal behaviours and the prison culture, leading to feelings of insecurity due to the risks involved in guarding the prison population in a context of scarce material resources⁸. A consequence of these factors is that prison officers are more likely to suffer from occupational stress or burnout (a concept used to evaluate stress at work), which is characterised by emotional fatigue, depersonalisation, etc.²⁸.

According to Claus¹⁷ & Ribeiro *et al.*²⁴ this process is associated with the fact that prison officers learn the dynamics of prisoners when working with them, and adopt their language, way of thinking, customs and forms of behaviour, which has an impact

on prison officers' thinking and identity "since this means that the prison officer imitates what he perceives as his own negation"¹⁷.

Despite the crucial role that prison officers play in prison life and in social reintegration, given that they have a direct relationship with inmates during incarceration⁶⁻³⁴, prison staff receive little or no consideration from administrations in the region. This lack of recognition can also be seen in the shortage of studies and public policies on prison issues.

Special attention should be paid to prison staff who work in direct contact with inmates, and to those in groups with a high risk of developing mental health problems (young people, men), since they have no local support and containment networks. This can lead to mental and physical consequences, as some officers may try to cope with stress by consuming alcohol and other substances²².

To conclude, we consider that more effort is required for the protection and promotion of the rights of both groups (inmates and officers), along with a deeper understanding of the issues at stake, to highlight the realities that such forgotten sectors in our society are obliged to experience, and to cooperate in making them part of the public political discourse in the region.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Guillermo E. Sanhueza
Loyola University Chicago
E-mail: gsanhueza@luc.edu

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