

Epidemiological evidence on the mental health status of prison officers: an unresolved issue in occupational health

Jorge Arias de la Torre^{1,2,3}, Vicente Martín^{2,3}

¹Care in Long Term conditions Research Division. King's College London. London. UK.

²CIBER Epidemiology and Public Health (CIBERESP). Madrid. Spain.

³Institute of Biomedicine (IBIOMED). University of Leon. Leon. Spain.

Text received: 24/05/2025

Text accepted: 28/05/2025

The work environment is an essential determinant of the mental health status of the working population¹. Due to the particularities of the prison environment, prison officers are one of the working groups that could present a higher prevalence of mental health problems^{2,3}, particularly those with worse working conditions⁴. However, despite the large number of epidemiological studies carried out worldwide that focus on the mental health of people in prisons^{5,6}, epidemiological evidence regarding the mental health status of prison officers is, to date, very limited.

The study by Sanhueza G, et al. (2025)⁷ focuses on determining the prevalence of possible mental health problems among prison officers in Chile, along with their possible relationship with absenteeism. Despite the study's clear methodological limitations, including possible problems linked to the representativeness of the selected sample and the use of a non-specific screening tool for assessing possible mental health problems (the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire - GHQ-12), it is worth noting that, to date and to our knowledge, this work is one of the largest epidemiological studies conducted worldwide that focuses on assessing the mental health of prison officers, and the largest one to be carried out in Chile. The results of the study show that the prevalence of possible mental health problems in this working group may be higher than in the general population. They also suggest that this prevalence could be

related to an increase in absenteeism rates, in line with previous research^{2,3,8}. The evidence presented in this study highlights the potential relevance of mental health problems in this working group. It also shows the possible implications of mental health problems for prison officers at a personal and professional level, and indirectly for people in prison^{4,9}.

The structural differences in prison systems around the world mean that research focusing on prisons should always consider the specific context, including the country or administrative region where it is carried out¹⁰. Future studies that are methodologically rigorous, population-based (or based on representative samples of specific contexts), using reliable and valid instruments for assessing mental disorders, and considering other factors relevant to both prison officers and people in prison, may help in accurately determining the prevalence, burden and factors related to the mental health status of prison officers. This information would also be useful for designing, implementing and assessing preventive strategies to improve the mental health status of this population group^{11,12}.

Therefore, given the scarcity of methodologically rigorous studies that focus on prison officers, the results of Sanhueza G, et al.⁷ underscore the relevance and impact of mental health problems in this population group. Furthermore, these results highlight the need for new epidemiological evidence

focused on a particularly vulnerable population - in this case prison officers - and the potential consequences that using such evidence could have for this working group and the people under their charge.

Contributors

JAT and VM contributed equally.

Declaration of interests

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

CORRESPONDENCE

Jorge Arias de la Torre
King's College London, London. UK
JCMB, second floor, Office 2.16. 57 Waterloo Road,
SE1 8WA, London, UK.
E-mail: Jorge.arias_de_la_torre@kcl.ac.uk

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Harvey SB, Modini M, Joyce S, Milligan-Saville JS, Tan L, Mykletun A, *et al.* Can work make you mentally ill? A systematic meta-review of work-related risk factors for common mental health problems. *Occup Environ Med.* 2017;74(4):301-10.
2. Kinman G, Clements AJ, Hart J. Job demands, resources and mental health in UK prison officers. *Occup Med.* 2017;67(6):456-60.
3. Silva ALE, Cruz CRB, De-Almeida FSES. Common mental disorders in prison workers. *Rev Bras Med Trab.* 2021;19(3):314-23.
4. Nurse J, Woodcock P, Ormsby J. Influence of environmental factors on mental health within prisons: Focus group study. *BMJ.* 2003;327(7413):480-3.
5. Baranyi G, Fazel S, Langerfeldt SD, Mundt AP. The prevalence of comorbid serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders in prison populations: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health.* 2022;7(6):e557-68.
6. Emilian C, Al-Juffali N, Fazel S. Prevalence of severe mental illness among people in prison across 43 countries: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health.* 2025;10(2):e97-110.
7. Sanhueza G, Zúñiga L, Candia-Cid J. Salud mental y absentismo laboral en funcionarios penitenciarios chilenos. *Rev Esp Sanid Penit.* 2025;27(2):53-62.
8. Ghaddar A, Mateo I, Sanchez P. Occupational Stress and Mental Health among Correctional Officers: A Cross-Sectional Study. *J Occup Health.* 2008;50(1):92-8.
9. Fazel S, Baillargeon J. The health of prisoners. *Lancet.* 2011;377(9769):956-65.
10. Walker J, Illingworth C, Canning A, Garner E, Woolley J, Taylor P, *et al.* Changes in mental state associated with prison environments: A systematic review. *Acta Psychiatr Scand.* 2014;129(6):427-36.
11. Arias de la Torre J, Ronaldson A, Vilagut G, Martínez-Alés G, Dregan A, Bakolis I, *et al.* Implementation of community screening strategies for depression. *Nat Med.* 2024;30(4):930-2.
12. Arias-de La Torre J, Ronaldson A, Dregan A, Serrano-Blanco A, Valderas JM, Martín V, *et al.* The relevance of engagement: Maximising the benefits of screening for major depressive disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry.* 2025;226(4):245-6.