Burnout syndrome and work satisfaction in professionals of social work in prisons of Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The specialized literature has revealed the high prevalence of burnout syndrome in the workforce of different prisons worldwide, as well as the influence of various risk factors associated with sociodemographic and occupational factors linked to the emergence of this occupational health problem. The current study measures the level of burnout and job satisfaction among the group of social workers Spanish prisons.

Methods: A cross-sectional analytical study was carried out on 59 social work professionals at the national level during 2017. Using ad hoc questionnaires, the participants offered information regarding sociodemographic, labour, Maslach Burnout Inventory and job satisfaction from Warr, Cook and Wall information.

Results: The values obtained were 20.1 (standard deviation [SD]: 11.9) in the emotional exhaustion dimension, 10.6 (SD: 5.0) in depersonalization and 27.7 (SD: 23.2), for personal accomplishment, and a general level of satisfaction of 55.3 (SD: 11.9). We found statistically significant associations and predictive values between the different dimensions of burnout and job satisfaction at sociodemographic (age) and work level (time in the profession) level.

Conclusions: In line with the scientific literature, social workers in prison have a high level of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion, in addition to a moderate level of job satisfaction. The information offered could be useful in the elaboration of prevention strategies aimed at improving the occupational health of this group.

Keywords: workers; burnout; job satisfaction; working conditions; risk factors; social work; prisons; Spain.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scientific literature has brought to light the prevalence of several health issues directly affecting the imprisoned population worldwide, such as the prevalence of mental disorders¹, alcohol and drug abuse² or victimization³. However, there is a lack of studies addressing the working conditions of correctional and treatment staff in prisons.

Working in prisons is physically and psychologically demanding, since this environment entails health and safety hazards which are relatively unique in comparison with other workplaces⁴. According to Armstrong and Griffin⁵, “few other institutions are responsible for supervising and ensuring an unwilling and potentially violent population”.

As a consequence of working with people who are held against their will, workers must bear increased pressure which can lead to burnout syndrome⁶. This entails emotional exhaustion (referring to the depletion of the individual’s emotional resources), depersonalization (referred to the degree of indifference and apathy towards the rest of the society) or a low awareness of personal accomplishment (low degree of self-efficiency and presence of constant negative feelings about oneself). This all can imply the worker’s low performance⁷ or even impaired physical⁸ and/or emotional⁹ health.

For the last decade, several international studies have found a high prevalence of burnout syndrome among correctional staff in the United States¹⁰, Europe¹¹ and Latin America¹², with results signifi-
Several socio-demographic and work-related factors have been found to be associated with an increased risk for burnout syndrome among correctional staff, including being a woman, an older age, certain work shifts or a longer experience in the task developed. Nevertheless, prison overcrowding has been traditionally the main risk factor associated to the presence of this syndrome among correctional workers. An overcrowded prison directly implies that its workers are forced to develop more tasks due to increased needs and demands from people deprived of their liberty. For example, in the United Kingdom, since 2000 its imprisoned population has risen by approximately 25% yet its correctional staff has barely done so by 10%.

In Spain, previous studies have shown a high prevalence of the three dimensions of burnout among correctional staff from the Secretary General of Penitentiary Institutions. Mostly, the main tool used to measure this has been the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which has proven highly reliable for the correctional staff in Spain.

In the study by Bringas-Molleda et al. on 222 workers (aged between 18 and 60) from different prisons in Spain, there was a significant score in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion (M= 21.8, standard deviation [SD]: 12.6) and depersonalization (M=8.5; SD: 6.7). Both increased scores correspond with those concluded by Hernández-Martín, et al. (2006) on 133 correctional officers regarding emotional exhaustion (M=24.6, SD: 11.8) and depersonalization (M=12.6; SD:6.8).

Based on the position within the prison, surveillance staff presents a higher prevalence of emotional exhaustion (65.0% vs. 42.9%) and depersonalization (70.6% vs. 38.1%) together with lower personal accomplishment (51.5% vs. 90.5%), than treatment staff. In accordance with international literature, the main risk factors for its appearance are: gender, age, work hours, work status and previous experience in the current position.

According to the analysis of previous literature, the objectives aimed in this study among correctional social workers are: a) to know the prevalence of the different dimensions of burnout syndrome; b) to assess the degree of job satisfaction; c) to determine the socio-demographic and work-related variables associated to the appearance of burnout syndrome and to the degree of job satisfaction; and d) to analyse the potential association between the different dimensions of burnout and the degree of job satisfaction.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study on social workers in Spanish prisons has been carried out throughout January and February 2017. This is how, by means of the collaboration of the Association of Correctional Social Workers (Asociación de Trabajadores Sociales de Instituciones Penitenciarias [ATSIP]) the principal investigator (PI) contacted via email 81 social work coordinators from different standard correctional facilities (75) and centres for social inclusion (6) nationwide. Prior fieldwork, the president of ATSIP was contacted to request information on the number of social workers included in the organization. The inclusion criteria to participate in the present study were: a) to be member of ATSIP; b) to be currently active as a social worker in a correctional environment and c) to accept the corresponding informed consent to each questionnaire.

Finally, 59 social workers (56 from correctional facilities and three from centres for social inclusion) participated, 73% of the whole spectrum (81 members), by means of an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire. The reasons for not participating were not sought among those who declined to take part. In order to carry out the research, prior authorization by ATSIP was sought, and the information gathered was always in accordance to the dispositions of Act 15/1999 on the protection of personal data.

As to collect the relevant information, an ad-hoc questionnaire was prepared, adapted from previous studies, exclusively developed for this purpose and including the following sections:

1. **Socio-demographic and work-related variables**: adapted from a previous study, including information on the gender of the participant (male/female), age (continuous variable, in years), length of work experience (continuous variable), type of employment status (indefinite/ fixed-term) and work shift (exclusively morning/ morning and afternoon).

2. **Burnout-related variables**: the prevalence of burnout was determined by means of Maslach and Jackson’s MBI, which has proven to be highly reliable and internally consistent with correctional staff in Spain. It is divided into three dimensions: 1) emotional exhaustion (EE), which determines the possibility of being emotionally exhausted due to a high work demand (low 0-18; average 19-26; high over 26 points); 2) depersonalization which measures an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one’s service, care, treatment, or instruction (low: 0-15; average...
RESULTS

The sample included thirty-nine women (66%) and twenty men (34%), aged between 27 and 65. Table 1 depicts sociodemographic and work-related variables for the overall sample and according to genre. The average age of participants was 44.9 years (SD: 7.9). Most of them (93.2%) had indefinite contracts and over half of the sample (59.3%) exclusively had morning shifts. According to genre, the percentage of male participants with exclusively morning shifts was slightly higher than that of female participants (65.0% vs. 56.4%). There were no statistically significant associations between the genre and any of the variables studied.

The average scores for the dimensions of MBI and the questionnaire on job satisfaction for the whole sample as a whole and according to genre are depicted on Table 2. In the MBI questionnaire, for the whole sample, the average scores were 20.1 (SD: 11.9) for emotional exhaustion; 10.6 (SD: 5.0) for depersonalization and 27.7 (SD: 23.2) for personal accomplishment. According to genre, the scores for emotional exhaustion (22.6 vs 15.3; p= 0.014) were significantly higher for women than for men.

In the questionnaire on job satisfaction (see Table 2), the average score on overall satisfaction was 55.3 (SD: 13.8), this being significantly higher in women than in men (59.3 vs. 53.3; p= 0.043). Moreover, we found that the degree on job satisfaction for all participants as for intrinsic and extrinsic factors was 32.6 (SD: 7.3) and 22.7 (SD: 7.6) correspondingly, this being slightly higher among women than among men for both intrinsic (34.3 [SD: 8.6] vs. 31.7 [SD: 6.5]) and extrinsic factors (24.9 [SD: 7.6] vs. 21.6 [SD: 7.4]).

Table 3 shows the associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction with sociodemographic and work-related variables. Statistically significant associations were found between the dimensions of emotional exhaustion (EE) and personal achievement (PA) with the participant’s genre (r= 0.294; p=0.024; and r=0.075; p= 0.042 correspondingly) and their time worked (r=0.314; p= 0.016; and r=0.411; p=0.032, correspondingly). The variable depersonalization was not significantly associated with any of the variables included in the MBI questionnaire. None of the sociodemographic and work-related variables were statistically associated with any of the scales of the questionnaire on job satisfaction.

The results of bivariate correlation analysis between the dimensions of the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction are depicted on Table 4. Statistically significant variables were found between the variables.
dimension of emotional exhaustion and overall satisfaction (r=0.336; p=0.009), intrinsic factors (r=0.292; p=0.025) and extrinsic factors (r=0.328; p=0.011). The dimension personal achievement was statistically associated with overall satisfaction (r=0.316; p=0.015) and with extrinsic factors (r=0.350; p=0.007).

DISCUSSION

In this study we have observed how social workers from different correctional facilities in Spain present a high prevalence of burnout syndrome, a fact which had already been observed both in international\cite{10} and national\cite{11} assessments. Furthermore, we have observed how certain sociodemographic and work-related variables can act as risk factors for this syndrome, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization being positive and personal achievement, negative as in the original questionnaire\cite{19}.

As for the burnout questionnaire, average scores for the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, despite being high, are slightly inferior to those concluded in previous studies for this group of professionals in Spain, where average scores of 24.6 for EE and 12.6 for depersonalization were concluded\cite{21}. However, low personal achievement is more common in this study than in previous ones\cite{21}.

Among sociodemographic variables associated to burnout, alike in previous studies\cite{10} and in contrast to others\cite{21}, we have found higher average scores among women than men. Nevertheless, the age of participants played no significant role in the appearance of the syndrome, as it had been pointed out in other studies\cite{14}, where older ages implied higher degrees of burnout.

As for work-related variables, the duration of the current position as social worker was statistically associated to the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and low personal achievement, with increasing degrees of burnout syndrome as the time performing the same position passed, alike correctional staff in other countries\cite{12}. On the other hand, and in contrast with other studies\cite{15}, work shifts were not associated with any of the dimensions of MBI.

Previous research among staff depending of the Secretary General of Penitentiary Institutions\cite{11,21}, highlight that certain situations in the correctional setting, such as imposing a position of superiority to the imprisoned population can entail constant tension, and this can be directly linked to the high degree of burnout syndrome found among correctional staff. Nonetheless, the degree of overall job satisfaction is like that concluded by previous international studies on this collective\cite{25,26}. Despite none of the sociodemographic and work-related variables being statistically associated with the degree of job satisfaction, as in other studies which considered genre and age\cite{26}, we have found associations with different dimensions of the MBI questionnaire.

Thus, we have been able to establish that emotional exhaustion is associated to both the degree of overall job satisfaction and intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Then as well personal achievement does so with overall job satisfaction and extrinsic factors. The dimension of depersonalization was not associated to the questionnaire on job satisfaction\cite{24}.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total (N = 59)</th>
<th>Female (n = 39)</th>
<th>Male (n = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, years</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time worked, years</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of contract</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>% (95%CI)</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(86.4-98.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(83.3-99.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed term</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.8 (0.4-11.6)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work shift</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59.3 (45.8-72.9)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning and afternoon</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40.7 (27.1-54.2)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** SD: standard deviation; 95% CI: 95% confidence interval.

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Among the main limitations that we should consider when interpreting the results hereby presented, we should first examine the study’s methodology (cross-sectional analytical) where unlike longitudinal studies we can not assess the evolution of data through time or consider the efficacy of certain software aimed at reducing this problem. Moreover, insofar as this study exclusively targets social workers, we can not compare our results to those of previous papers since addressing exclusively correctional social workers we have a smaller sample than that of other studies which have considered all correctional staff\(^2\).

Last, the main limitation consists of the lack of specific information which can play a significant role in the appearance of this syndrome, as for example, the impact of the size and population of the correc-

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**Table 2.** Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfactions and sociodemographic and work-related variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Total (N = 59)</th>
<th>Female (n = 39)</th>
<th>Male (n = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \overline{x} )</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Rango</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>0-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>0-35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** SD: standard deviation; \(^*\) \( p \leq 0.05 \).

**Table 3.** Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfactions and sociodemographic and work-related variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Time worked</th>
<th>Work shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>( r )</td>
<td>( p )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>0.214</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.294(^*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>-0.126</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal achievement</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td>0.075(^*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.090</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>-0.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic factors</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>-0.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic factors</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>-0.206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** \(^*\) \( p \leq 0.05 \); \(^{**}\) \( p \leq 0.01 \).

**Table 4.** Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional exhaustion</th>
<th>Depersonalization</th>
<th>Personal achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( r ) ( p )</td>
<td>( r ) ( p )</td>
<td>( r ) ( p )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>0.336(^**)</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic factors</td>
<td>0.292(^*)</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic factors</td>
<td>0.328(^*)</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** \(^*\) \( p \leq 0.05 \); \(^{**}\) \( p \leq 0.01 \); \(^{***}\) \( p \leq 0.001 \).
ional facility\footnote{17}, the absence of support from other colleagues and/or supervisors\footnote{15}, or violent behaviours by the imprisoned population\footnote{17}.

Despite these limitations, we consider that the main weight of this study resides in the fact that it exclusively addresses correctional social workers, since we had not found studies on this population in national nor international literature. Furthermore, we have observed the impact of burnout syndrome in the degree of job satisfaction.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that correctional social workers present a high degree of burnout syndrome, in particular regarding the dimension of emotional exhaustion. We have also observed, as for the degree of job satisfaction, the impact of different sociodemographic and work-related variables in the occupational health of participant social workers.

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REFERENCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS