

## The work in prison: reflections on the health of prison officers

*O trabalho no cárcere: reflexões acerca da saúde do agente penitenciário*

*El trabajo en la prisión: reflexiones sobre la salud del guardia penitenciario*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to understand the working conditions of prison officers and the repercussions of labor activity on their health. **Method:** qualitative and descriptive research. Data were collected through open interviews with the prison officers of a regional prison and the speeches were submitted to content analysis. **Results:** the results showed unsatisfactory working conditions due to poor material resources and neglect of governmental regarding rehabilitation of convicts, resulting in workers' exposure to psychosocial risks, dissatisfaction, and emotional distress. **Conclusion:** investments on the security of workers may contribute to their health promotion.

**Keywords:** Occupational Health; Prisons; Working Conditions.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** conhecer as condições de trabalho de agentes penitenciários e os reflexos do exercício da atividade laboral em sua saúde. **Método:** pesquisa descritiva, qualitativa. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevista aberta com agentes de um presídio regional e submetidos a análise de conteúdo na modalidade temática. **Resultados:** os resultados revelaram condições de trabalho insatisfatórias por deficiência de recursos materiais e descaso do poder público com as questões inerentes à ressocialização do apenado, resultando em exposição aos riscos psicossociais, insatisfação e desgaste emocional dos trabalhadores. **Conclusão:** investimentos na segurança dos trabalhadores podem contribuir para a promoção de sua saúde.

**Descritores:** Saúde do Trabalhador; Prisões; Condições de Trabalho.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** conocer las condiciones laborales de guardias de prisión y las consecuencias del ejercicio de la actividad laboral en su salud. **Método:** investigación cualitativa y descriptiva. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas abiertas con agentes de una cárcel regional y se sometieron a análisis de contenido en la modalidad temática. **Resultados:** los resultados mostraron condiciones insatisfactorias por la falta de recursos materiales y el abandono por parte del gobierno en los asuntos relacionados con la rehabilitación del condenado, lo que resulta en la exposición a riesgos psicosociales, la insatisfacción y el agotamiento emocional de los trabajadores. **Conclusión:** las inversiones en la seguridad de los trabajadores pueden contribuir a la promoción de su salud.

**Palabras clave:** Salud Ocupacional; Prisiones; Condiciones de Trabajo.

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## INTRODUCTION

The prison officer (PO) is an employee who performs a public service of high risk and importance for safeguarding the civil society. They perform medium complexity activities that involve planning, organizing and executing services of surveillance, custody and security of offenders in prisons, and they also run programs and actions of support to criminal treatment for their rehabilitation<sup>(1)</sup>.

Their activities cover the escort, discipline and security of prisoners; search and screening of entry and exit of people and vehicles in prisons; verification and search of inmates, control and daily count of the prison population in all prison areas; supervision and inspection of prison labor and conduct of inmates, observing the regulations and standards of the prison at all stages of criminal enforcement; carry out actions and procedures of disciplinary infractions. Such activities may involve risk to the physical and mental integrity of the worker, although the law requires that servers work under proper health conditions when developing their functional activities<sup>(1)</sup>.

Constant exposure to danger, state of alertness, pressure, tension, and the dangerous and unhealthy environmental conditions are relevant for developing stress. A study with agents from Educational Social Service Centers (CASE - Centros de Atendimento Socioeducativo) found that the health problems determining absence from work belonged to groups with high levels of psychological demands. Such fact suggests an association between the absences and psychological and physical demands at work. It also identified the importance of stimulating physical or leisure activities for minimizing the harmful effects of job stress<sup>(2)</sup>.

The emotional strain of workers can also be associated with other morbid conditions. The frequency of metabolic syndrome is knowingly higher among individuals undergoing major psychological demands in professional practice. A study on metabolic syndrome among prison officers found a possible association with occupational stress. The unfavorable work environment can also justify the cardiovascular risk in this group<sup>(3)</sup>.

These workers have direct contact with inmates, are responsible for maintaining the confinement in prison and repeatedly exposed to intimidation, assaults, threats and possibility of riots, which configures exposure to psychosocial risks.

A study with prison officers revealed that the death threats they suffered in the space inside jail were the most mentioned by the studied group. It also found that fear was what most tormented prison officers outside the prison walls: 70.4% of them had trouble sleeping, thinking of the violence; 62.7% had already awakened in the middle of the night thinking of violent situations and 64.4% avoided thinking about it<sup>(4)</sup>. The suffering experience resulting from work is related to the labor routine that involves its organization, conditions and relations<sup>(5)</sup>.

Occupational hazards are consequence of activities in which the work conditions or methods can generate injuries to the health of workers. The risks can be grouped into five

categories: physical, biological, chemical, mechanical, of accidents, ergonomic and psychosocial<sup>(6)</sup>. In general, they have a direct connection with work structure and conditions.

The psychogenic characteristics of the workloads to which prison officers are exposed may cause a higher incidence of psychological distress in this group of workers. A study in Iran aimed at identifying stressors related to work among prison workers showed that given the nature and environment of work, these individuals are exposed to high levels of occupational stress, which was even higher among workers of a sector called correction and rehabilitation center<sup>(7)</sup>.

Work is among the determinants and conditionings of health. It is essential to understand the conditions, risks and problems from the perspective of individuals experiencing work in order to have elements for discussing the problems found, and collectively search solutions, with active participation of workers and the macro-management. This way, there will be concrete possibilities to promote quality of life at work.

## OBJECTIVE

Given the above, this study aimed to assess the working conditions of prison officers and the consequences of exercising this labor activity to their health.

## METHOD

This is a descriptive study of qualitative approach, developed from data collected with 26 prison officers from a mid-size prison with 220 inmates in closed regime, located in the northwest of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Out of a population of 29 prison officers, one refused to participate and two were absent on sick leave. The criteria for participation was being working in the data collection period.

Data were collected in semi-structured individual interviews, through a script with open questions focused on working conditions, exposure to occupational risks, suffering and illness. The responses were recorded and transcribed, forming the empirical data of the study that was later subjected to content analysis in the thematic model<sup>(8)</sup>.

In compliance with the steps of thematic analysis, there was the reading of the material, organization of reports and data classification<sup>(8)</sup>. For this, repeated readings of the texts were made in order to gather data from which were captured the subjects of study and prepared the following empirical categories: Motivation, joys and sorrows of the PO; Working conditions and exposure to risks; and Contributions to qualify the working conditions of the prison officer. In the final analysis, were established connections between the data and the literature based on the proposed objective.

For the study development were respected the ethical aspects of research with human beings. The project number 121.0.282.000-11, was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões, in the Santo Ângelo campus. The study was also authorized by the director of the institution and the deputy sheriff of the referred Penitentiary Police. The research subjects

signed an Informed Consent form expressing their agreement to participate in the study.

There were no significant limitations in the course of the study. Difficulties inherent in studies involving bureaucratic obstacles were easily resolved.

## RESULTS

### Characterization of the subjects

Among the total of 29 prison officers, 26 agreed to participate. Most (65%) were of the male gender, aged between 27 and 53 years. They worked in the morning, afternoon and evening shifts, in 24-hour on-duty regime. Their level of education was between complete high school and post graduation. A great part had completed a degree in law.

### Motivation, joys and sorrows of the PO

The majority reported their motivations to become a prison officer were the job security and the relative feeling of job security for being a public servant, the salary and the fact of having relatives and friends in the system.

*At first, I wasn't sure about what it was like to be a prison officer, I applied more for the stability and for being a public servant. (PO1)*

*That old story of job security, a slightly better salary than in the private sector. (PO 23)*

One of the job satisfaction feelings was the joy of life and union with colleagues and to participate in the social reintegration of inmates.

*What really makes me happy is the thing of corporation. [...] We are not obliged to like the fellow but, in an hour of struggle, risk, everyone likes. Whether we like them or not, we're always together and united and at any risk situation there's 100% union. (PO 16)*

*A thing that makes me very happy are the prisoners who have been here for a long time, served their sentence and leave here better. [...] Because our job is not only to open and close the gate, is not only put the prisoner in a cell; there's all the social support, psychological support, medical support. So, all this work we do with them, we also help the families out there. (PO 19)*

However, the statements also reflect the feeling of sadness due to the system difficulties, the neglect of government with the singularity and subjectivity of prison officers, the difficulties caused by confinement that are inherent to rehabilitation and recidivism of inmates.

*The recidivism makes me sad, our inability with the recovery of human beings and their return to society. Because here the state is very paternalistic, here the prisoners have everything, doctor, healthcare, food at regular times, but*

*they don't learn to have responsibilities with themselves and their family. Because they leave here and don't know what they'll do, the state provides accommodation, a means of survival locked in here, but they don't prepare for the life outside, the vocational and responsibility issues, the cost of things ... (PO 5)*

*The lack of real commitment to serving the sentence [makes me sad]. In fact, the prison is an illusion, a mistake, it's an activity where you don't find a final result. [...] In our work it all comes down to a human contingency situation. We limit ourselves to make individuals remain here and not run away, forward them to social assistance, psychologist, to the hospital, to the forum, but nothing more than that. [...] Formally, the state has the expectation to rehabilitate individuals for their return to social life in the future, but in fact this ends up as one those phrases that say this is a school of crime. (PO 26)*

Another point of dissatisfaction was that the prison system is not properly structured to treat the increasing number of drug users inmates and the care to these subjects is being done precariously.

*Thirty years ago there was a scenario, but nowadays it's different. Thirty years ago there was no cell phone, crack and nowadays there are so many drugs. Today the offender is different, but the structure of the buildings remains largely the same. So I think that it needs to evolve as well, as things evolve. (PO 17)*

### Working conditions and exposure to risks

Most respondents reported that working conditions were not good, the atmosphere was unhealthy, with scarce equipment and materials, plus the old and deteriorated physical structure of the prison building. In addition, they considered the work organization poor, without investments in continuing education nor appreciation of workers.

*Terrible [conditions]. They are unhealthy; this is what society has determined as marginality, putting us as street cleaners to recycle society waste and we aren't given the opportunity nor the means to do it more effectively. (PO 3)*

*There is lack of stimulation to prison officers from the system itself; is non-existent, there is no interest in appreciating individuals who seek for a qualification. (PO 26)*

As for the work process of prison officers, among the mentioned problems is the fact of not being provided with means to develop their work effectively and safely. As reported by participants, the personal protective equipment offered to them are surgical gloves and some masks. They affirmed that all bulletproof vests were out of the expiry dates; the ammunition was old, and in most cases, not replaced; the armament was scarce and without periodic maintenance. Such conditions make the activity even more dangerous and shows the precariousness of work organization.

*We have these surgical gloves. There aren't any bulletproof vests at all, guns we have a few .38 revolvers falling apart. I use my private pistol and ammunition. Shotgun, there's 12 that you can't use because it is dangerous. [...] I don't trust the weapons we have, only carry my gun. And most of colleagues here don't use the institution weapons either. This is a time bomb, apparently it's ok, but when you see, a fight blows up there. (PO 20)*

Even with regard to occupational risk, the officials affirmed the subjects they work with are dangerous, the contact with violence is frequent, there is tension and insecurity. The whole working day is full of uncertainty about the safety of their workplace. Moreover, they are exposed to biological hazards as a result of contact with communicable diseases in prison, especially tuberculosis and AIDS.

*[...] more psychosocial, that's a risk I see the colleagues suffer a lot from, the tension with the routine, the stress of jail. Then your mind will create some defenses, some things you end up carrying outside of prison. (PO 21)*

*It's more the emotional side, really. I stopped doing daily shifts, which is when you work 15 days outside, in another prison. Then you end up staying only seven days per month at home. I stopped because there came a time when I looked at that gate, those bars, and I felt anguish, a desire to cry and run away, my wish was to abandon the shift. (PO 1)*

*The greatest risk is death. [...] At any time we can have a confrontation with the inmate and this can result in death, so much that we get a hazard pay due to the high risk of life. The risk is greater than any profession because at any moment this can happen. Another risk you have is the mental health, there's hardly anyone who doesn't suffer from it, there are colleagues who start to drink, use legal drugs and illegal too, and become more aggressive. Then, there's the risk of changing your structure. [...] There is a health risk, in which you live with HIV and tuberculosis every day. (PO 24)*

Stress was a psychosocial risk repeatedly mentioned, a consequence of daily contact with tension, fights between inmates, escapes, drug addiction, disagreements among colleagues and double shifts.

*There are several things that cause stress, especially when things "get nasty" here, when inmates set fire, fight, start riots. All this generates stress, when there are riots, escape attempts. All these things cause stress. (PO 12)*

*Everything [generates stress]. The frustration of do not seeing the final result of my work creates stress, the lack of professional growth prospects within the career, no expectation of a final career where you'll be in a good financial situation. (PO 26)*

According to respondents, in most cases, the professional illness is due to the tense moments lived inside the prison and what this represents in their lives, involving fear, insecurity and dissatisfaction.

*[Illness] related to stress. It is a sum of the health problems I had. I had a very serious problem of a torn Achilles tendon in the workplace and I had six surgeries because of that. So, the basic principle occurred inside the workplace. (PO 3)*

*I once had stress, a depression, and I was absent for a while. [...] Then, to avoid further problems, I decided to leave, take a break. To avoid depression, because it is complicated, in prison where everyone carries a gun, it's certainly very easy to pull a trigger and that's it, the person who's there, one will stay alive and the other dies. [...] It's depression, nothing more than that. It can happen to break a leg, get shot, hit a police car. Another thing that happens a lot is alcoholism. (PO 22)*

Among the 26 professionals interviewed, three use medication and two do psychological therapy to treat occupational stress. Five have already been on sick leave for treatment. The majority reported they seek means to deal with the universe of prison, such as reading and meditation activities.

*I practice meditation and do some reading. Each one has an own way of dealing with stress, because it's there all the time, and I do treatment on my own. I do psychoanalysis and family therapy because I have a teenage daughter and she throws it in my face and always says to me: "You keep seeing things where there's nothing because of your profession". [...] And we count on the presence of God to protect us. (PO 16)*

Even working under stress, the officers said they generally maintain good interpersonal relationships. Much of them considered their relations with the staff, managers and prisoners adequate and satisfactory. They stated to look for ways to do the job the best way, avoiding to complicate and make the environment even more tense and stressful.

*Look, I think it's good [the relationship with the inmates]. When I have to call somebody's attention, I don't ask for the colleague, I call the inmate and talk to him. The prisoner apologizes and I end the conversation. But I call him on the side, I will not give a speech, as they say, in front of everyone to show off. I try to respect their side, but demand respect for my side too. (PO 1)*

*As a rule, my relationship is normal. With the inmates too, for my attitude, I don't try to be the savior, but it is often necessary to be emphatic, energetic, tough, but not rowdy. (PO 26)*

*So, for every of my actions, I think there is a reaction, then, for everything I say, everything I do, I know there's a return. So I ponder, demand what has to be done, but I demand*

*with education. Even though some don't know what education is, I do it. (PO 24)*

Despite their statements of maintaining good interpersonal relationships, a certain vulnerability in the relationships between the prison officers and the prison system was noted in the reports. Some of the interviewed subjects feared for attacks to their physical integrity, others expressed feelings of apprehension, concern and fear for exposure of their families, who they believe to be in danger, too. In the reports, there was a kind of guilt because of the probable suffering caused to their families by violence.

*At home I do not sleep, if I hear any noise, I always wake up, go out and walk around the courtyard, the whole area of the house to make sure there's no one. So much so that I always carry a gun anywhere I go, only where it's not allowed. (PO 22)*

*Always. Really very, I'm very concerned about safety. So much so that I'm building a house now and I'm involved with the construction of the wall and already bought an alarm system with camera to put in my house. We live in a violent society, a society in which there's a devaluation of life. Theoretically, life is the main asset protected by the state, but actually it's not, the main asset protected by the state are the private goods. (PO 26)*

*I take care of myself outside, if I go to the bathroom I carry a gun, if I go bowling on the corner of my street I carry a gun. I have a pistol and a revolver, depending on where I go, I carry both. I always carry a gun, I'm never careless. (PO 20)*

Far from their shifts and jail bars, prison officers feel threatened and afraid of suffering some kind of revenge. Thus, security in their place of residence was mentioned as another concern. Given the characteristics of the Brazilian prison system and the criminal law enforcement, it is likely that the offender remains little time in the prison unit, which makes prison officers fear for the safety of their family and their own. However, there are those who do not get frightened and believe that by giving respect, they will be respected.

*I'm not afraid. Here in our town I've never felt threatened by them, never thought they could do something for my family because I also never provoked it. If you work respecting them, they'll respect you too, you only give them what they ask and is rightfully theirs. We don't get involved with what they did, I don't seek to know much of what they've done [...] judge them. We're here just to do our job, which is custody, escort and security. (PO 1)*

*I don't say fear, I say a healthy fear of survival instinct. Don't take untimely attitudes and the attitude that you take should be based on what you've learned, in empirical knowledge and with some reading techniques acquired throughout the working time. (PO 3)*

Of those interviewed, 11 said they had been threatened, mainly verbally, but have not taken into consideration because they believed to be momentary threats due to incarceration and times of pressure experienced by inmates, naturalizing the phenomenon of violence.

*We have all kinds of threats and some we consider as momentary threats, the type an inmate feels because of pressure from the society or the family. Then, the first person they find is the prison officer or the other inmates. (PO 16)*

*Not aggression, but threats yes. But I didn't take them very seriously given the situation of the individual being imprisoned, and perhaps at the time ... (PO 18)*

Due to this context, the PO pointed out limitations to participating of the social environment.

*[...] after a while I began to avoid places, parties and stuff, I never went anymore. Because if you cannot carry the gun, for me it's the same thing as being without the cell or without clothes. (PO 22)*

### **Contributions to qualify the working conditions of the prison officer**

Among the contributions offered by the institution for the health of prison officers, was the psychological treatment with a professional, but the service was cancelled, which caused dissatisfaction among them. The lack of a psychological support service reveals the lack of investment in workers' health. Those who need care have to search outside the institution and bear the costs.

*We had a psychologist who used to stay at the regional police station, but eventually she left and today we have a colleague who works here. There is this issue that we, prison officers, don't seek her. We think: Do you think I'm crazy? Then, there is also resistance, I think it'd be interesting to do a psychological work with the team. (PO 18)*

In view of the unsatisfactory working conditions and the precarious structure offered to professionals, they unite and with their own resources organize themselves to improve the structure of the place where they spend most of their time. According to statements, the state is negligent towards the prison infrastructure, which affects inmates and employees. They spend their own financial resources to buy the weapons used in the shifts to ensure their safety. When leaving work, they still carry their own guns and thus, feel better assisted in their relations outside of prison.

*[...] You have to buy private weapons, the revolvers stay there and the ammunition sometimes expires. Preferably, you need a private weapon, if you wanna be well. The vests are all out of expiry dates. We haven't got masks, and gloves we have the ones we use in the searches. (PO 8)*

As the physical and psychological work environment contributes to expose workers to physical and emotional suffering,

the transformation of the space with view to a healthy environment may be a source of satisfaction.

*Now, in this management, we created a fund, 'cause the government doesn't give everything, almost nothing. Then we, employees, created a fund and each one contributes with R\$ 10 each month, and then we buy what we haven't got, to make it better for us. We've already bought a water purifier, mattress and air conditioning for our room, cutlery and cups for our kitchen. Then, what we can't get from the state, we usually improve. (PO 1)*

When questioned about the adaptations they make to give greater quality to their lives and work, the answers involved studying and the development of ethical conduct in everyday life.

*Inside here my biggest contribution is the aspect of example, the behavior. It's having a high moral posture before them, so they'll have their greatest respect, to improve the work environment. (PO 5)*

*The personal development. I never stopped studying and I'm starting another college. I've taken several courses with money from my pocket. (AP 3)*

The statements reveal the commitment of these workers with the performance of their activities and a conduct of respect towards the inmates, as well as the initiatives to update their skills and expertise, showing their sensitivity and attention to the responsibility required in the exercise of profession.

## DISCUSSION

The condition of prison officers as social individuals involved in the rehabilitation of convicts emerges in the speeches as a source of joy. From this perspective, society must face and reflect on the problems it creates and seek strategies of humanization and social inclusion, of reducing social and economic inequality and guarantee of decent opportunities. Otherwise, the transgressions will grow rapidly and 'the problem of violence will continue penalizing everyone, including this same society that feels comfortable in its world of walls and security cameras, afraid of everything that is outside of it'<sup>(9)</sup>.

Thus, the differentiated disciplinary regime, which allows inmates' progression from the closed to the open regime, through the semi-open, can function as an important tool for the gradual reintegration of convicts in society, encouraging them to keep a proper behavior during the time serving the sentence<sup>(10)</sup>, a situation that contributes to minimize conflict and aggression, and the consequent tension in the daily work of prison officers.

There are other implications in the exercise of this activity, both inside and outside the prison walls. Drug trade is one of the negative aspects of penitentiary institutions that aggravates the peculiarity of the prison system. Many inmates begin addiction or trafficking within these establishments<sup>(10)</sup>. A study that aimed to identify the sociodemographic and health characteristics of

female prisoners, found that in 83 of the 90 medical records investigated there were remarks on drug use; alcohol or tobacco use in 62 (76%) and other psychoactive substances in 32 (52%), including marijuana, cocaine and crack<sup>(11)</sup>.

There should be reflection on these results, considering that drug users need follow-up with specialized professionals, given the complexity of this disease. A study that characterized admissions of teenagers for detoxification found that none of them used alcohol or cigarette isolatedly. In 45.7% of cases, these drugs were associated, and in 83.8%, in addition to one of these, they also used marijuana or crack. The study also showed that in the period of 12 months, 27.1% of users had been readmitted, one of them was readmitted five times and there were 15 escapes from hospitalization<sup>(12)</sup>. The scenario is especially complicated when incarceration is associated with drug use and poor treatment, a situation that composes an unsafe environment to workers.

Feelings such as insecurity and fear of violence, as well as leisure limitations, prejudice arising from the stigma of prison labor, long working hours, dangerous and unhealthy situations, work with obsolete equipment and scrapped vehicles can contribute to the physical and mental illness of prison officers.

Regarding the aspect of physical and mental health, an investigation showed, among other data, that 63.38% of the investigated prison officers said this factor has great influence in the work they develop; 22.53% said it interferes considerably, indicating the importance of biopsychosocial balance for the satisfactory development of their activities. 'At the same time that physical and mental health interferes with the work of prison officers in the prison unit, the work they develop also influences substantially the quality of the physical and mental health they present'. The work of these professionals still needs consideration and recognition<sup>(13)</sup>.

Fear, one of the feelings that most afflicts the officers outside the prison walls, is responsible for events such as trouble sleeping or waking up at night thinking of violent situations<sup>(14)</sup>. Constant fear due to unsafe conditions at work was also described by workers of two prisons as what most bothered them, assuming different forms: fear of dying, to be held hostage, rebellions, danger and constant uncertainties imposed by the activity, among others<sup>(15)</sup>. Aggressions from inmates against workers are not uncommon.

A study with 301 workers of two prisons in São Paulo (state of SP) found that more than half of the subjects had suffered physical or verbal assaults or threats at work, 57.5% were victims of verbal abuse and 55.5% received death threats and physical attacks on themselves or their family members. The exercise of repressive activity and direct contact with prisoners was significantly associated with aggressions<sup>(15)</sup>. Many prison officers avoid comments on the profession and their recreational possibilities are often restricted to alternatives that do not involve contact with crowds or public places, as a protective measure<sup>(14)</sup>.

The characteristic demands of the activity imposed on workers, without favorable working conditions in return, generate situations that can lead to psychological distress. A study conducted in Porto Alegre (state of RS) identified factors that contribute to this state, such as lack of motivation and

the feeling of powerlessness by improper working conditions, lack of recognition and the poor quality of life, considered 'highly prejudicial, influencing the behavior of individuals, making them more fatigued, with few prospects for the future, frustrated, anxious'<sup>(5)</sup>. The threat to personal integrity generates emotional stress, psychosomatic manifestations, stress and the search for means to alleviate them, which may explain why many officers become alcohol users<sup>(2)</sup>.

A study carried out in France with 235 prison guards found that those who worked with incarcerated prisoners for more than five years had higher rates of emotional exhaustion than their colleagues who worked with those who had not been convicted yet. The fatigue was associated with characteristics of the prison and the prisoners. It is noteworthy that the suffering and frustrations of inmates are expressed to them at first, because of their daily relationship with prisoners, a factor that increases the possibility of stress<sup>(16)</sup>. It is believed that exhaustion situations can interfere with the performance of professional activities, such as running in an unexpected situation, the use of force to stop an aggressive convict, actions that require not only physical fitness, but emotional balance.

Initiatives involving group dynamics, continuing education and health promotion workshops can be positive, like a mental health training program developed with prison officers in Indiana (USA). After the first session, a total of ten professionals stated in monthly reports that incidents and the use of force had decreased significantly<sup>(17)</sup>.

Although psychosocial agents are the major cause of suffering and illness among these workers, biological agents can also cause diseases. Among 248 prison professionals who performed the tuberculin test to identify the prevalence of the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, those who had contact with prisoners constituted the largest percentage of reactors to intradermal test with PPD (Pure Protein Derivative). Of every 100 professionals working directly with inmates, 62.4 were infected with tuberculosis, and therefore at risk of becoming ill, a significant finding, given that the prevalence of the disease is much higher among individuals deprived of freedom, if compared to the general population<sup>(18)</sup>. As for the tuberculin tests applied to inmates, a study conducted in two prisons pointed out that most of them had strongly positive tuberculin skin test, accounting for 84% in a prison unit and 77% in another, which shows a large exposure to tuberculosis bacillus<sup>(19)</sup>.

The law stipulates that servers shall work under appropriate conditions to develop their functional activities, with the provision of personal protective equipment. However, legislation is partially fulfilled by the institution, which exposes workers to illnesses due to exposure to risk without or with minimal

personal protective equipment (PPE). Such equipment must be for the protection of risks that threaten the safety and health of workers, should be appropriate to the risks to which they are exposed<sup>(20)</sup> and offered for free by the company in the required quality and quantity.

Suffering and illness at work can become an obstacle to quality of life. It is necessary to sensitize managers to the fact that the type of work requires attention to the needs of prison officers, especially psychological support to alleviate the constant tension. Furthermore, it is essential to have working tools in good condition and in appropriate quantity. The bodies responsible for the regulation of workers' health must exercise constant surveillance of the working conditions.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study showed that prison workers are exposed to suffering and illness, especially by exposure to psychosocial risks resulting of tension and violence, and biological hazards by contact with communicable diseases. Working conditions are not good, because the infrastructure is poor, the environment is unhealthy and the equipment and materials are scarce, hindering the effective and safe development of work.

The prison officers expressed mixed feelings, since joy due to the interaction with colleagues and group union, until sadness in face of the difficulties imposed by the prison system, the neglect of public power with workers and inmates, and little investment in the rehabilitation of individuals.

Nursing, through health education, can be an agent of change for a healthier life of prison officers, acting in the prevention of diseases resulting from exposure to occupational hazards, in the promotion of health, and helping in discussions about ethics. Through transdisciplinarity, nursing can also promote spaces of update. However, the most important thing to minimize the suffering of these workers is the awareness of managers, so they hear the voice of those who experience the work, in order to find ways to promote the health and safety of workers.

The solutions should not be limited to academic texts, but incorporated into practice. Otherwise, in a short period of time work can be a disease factor, if it is not already, which goes against the assumptions of the Organic Law of Health that legislates on disease prevention and health promotion of workers. Effective policies for rehabilitation of convicts can also be a response to the expectations of most subjects and therefore, give satisfaction to workers.

More studies on the consequences of work to the health of prison officers are suggested, and specific studies on the relationship of the profession with stress.

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