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Tras las rejas y más allá de los límites: la tensión psicológica del personal penitenciario profesional en la República Checa

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Resumen. Este estudio explora la carga psicológica que experimenta el personal profesional que trabaja en el sistema penitenciario checo, incluyendo educadores, educadores especiales, psicólogos, trabajadores sociales y profesiones afines. El objetivo es identificar los principales factores de estrés psicosocial, evaluar el apoyo institucional percibido y proponer medidas sistémicas para apoyar la salud mental en entornos penitenciarios. Se realizó una encuesta cuantitativa a 34 profesionales que trabajan en dos centros penitenciarios de la República Checa. La encuesta consistió en preguntas cerradas y abiertas sobre la tensión psicológica, los síntomas de estrés, las estrategias de afrontamiento, el apoyo organizacional percibido y las motivaciones del personal. La gran mayoría de los encuestados (94%) reportó experimentar síntomas de estrés laboral, siendo la exposición crónica a un entorno altamente controlado y emocionalmente exigente un factor importante. El análisis temático destacó como principales factores de estrés la comunicación deficiente con el liderazgo, el comportamiento manipulador de los reclusos, la sobrecarga administrativa y la falta de reconocimiento institucional. Solo una minoría de los encuestados consideró efectivos los sistemas de apoyo a la salud mental existentes. El apoyo entre iguales, las rutinas estructuradas y las técnicas informales de autorregulación fueron las estrategias de afrontamiento más utilizadas. La motivación para permanecer en la profesión se basó principalmente en la percepción de la importancia del trabajo y la estabilidad financiera. Los hallazgos enfatizan la

urgente necesidad de apoyo sistémico en salud mental en el servicio penitenciario checo, incluyendo supervisión regular, capacitación en resiliencia al estrés, gestión participativa y terapia psicológica anónima. Promover una cultura organizacional de apoyo y fortalecer la identidad profesional del personal es esencial para mantener el bienestar y reducir la rotación en esta profesión de alto riesgo.

Palabras clave: Síndrome de Burnout, profesiones de ayuda, salud mental, personal penitenciario, sistema penitenciario.

Behind bars and beyond limits: psychological strain on professional prison staff in the Czech Republic

Abstract. This study explores the psychological burden experienced by professional staff working within the Czech prison system, including educators, special educators, psychologists, social workers, and related professions. The aim is to identify key psychosocial stressors, assess perceived institutional support, and propose systemic measures to support mental health in correctional environments. A quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted among 34 professional staff members working in two correctional facilities in the Czech Republic. The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended questions targeting psychological strain, stress symptoms, coping strategies, perceived organizational support, and staff motivations. The vast majority of respondents (94%) reported experiencing symptoms of work-related stress, with chronic exposure to a highly controlled and emotionally demanding environment identified as a major factor. Thematic analysis highlighted primary stressors including poor leadership communication, manipulative inmate behavior, administrative overload, and lack of institutional recognition. Only a minority of respondents considered existing mental health support systems to be effective. Peer support, structured routines, and informal self-regulation techniques were the most commonly used coping strategies. Motivation to remain in the profession was primarily rooted in the perceived meaningfulness of the work and financial stability. The findings emphasize the urgent need for systemic mental health support in the Czech prison service, including regular supervision, stress resilience training, participatory management, and anonymous psychological counselling. Promoting a supportive organizational culture and strengthening the professional identity of staff is essential for sustaining well-being and reducing turnover in this high-risk occupation.

Keywords: Burnout Syndrome, helping professions, mental health, prison staff, prison system.

INTRODUCTION

Prison settings are very specific environments that are closed, strictly hierarchical and highly regulated. This environment determines not only the living conditions of persons in prison, but also significantly influences the daily practices and psychological experiences of the staff involved in the running of these institutions. In this context, it is essential to see the prison system not only as an instrument of control or punishment, but as a complex psychosocial system in which there

is an interaction between repressive mechanisms, security procedures and efforts to resocialise and restore the social integrity of prisoners.

In recent years, the attention of the professional community has been growing towards the working conditions and mental health of prison staff, especially prison officers, but also professional staff such as educators, special educators, psychologists, social workers who are in direct contact with the prison population. The available research shows that these employees are exposed to an extraordinary level of psychosocial stress, stemming not only from the risks arising from working with conflicted and traumatised prisoners, but also from the nature of the institution itself, which is rigid, organisationally bound by fixed rules and, by the very nature of its existence, repressive.

The prison service occupies a unique position within the security forces, as it performs not only a security and repressive function, but also an educational, therapeutic and socially supportive one. Its aim is not only to ensure the execution of prison sentences and the protection of society from perpetrators of serious crime, but also to provide convicted persons with treatment programmes that increase their chances of resocialisation into society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. This dual role, i.e. punitive and social, places high demands on staff not only in terms of professional competence but also emotional resilience, ethical integrity and the ability to maintain a professional identity within a challenging institutional framework.

At the same time, the Czech prison system faces a number of other external and internal challenges. These include, in particular, the long-term overcrowding of prisons, the high costs of their operation and the still unsatisfactory results in the field of resocialisation and reduction of penological recidivism. In this context, the importance of qualified and stable staff as the main factor influencing the quality of educational and security work in prison establishments is increasingly discussed. In fact, the performance of the prison system is largely dependent on the ability of staff to maintain a professional attitude, mental balance and the ability to adapt in an environment that is characterized by high levels of control, security risks and psychological tension (Vlach, Stárek, 2025).

The European context in which the broader debate on the transformation of prison populations is taking place cannot be ignored either. In addition to the traditionally male-dominated prison population, there has been an increase in the number of women prisoners in recent years, which poses new challenges not only in terms of capacity and costs, but also in terms of adequate access to their specific needs. This trend is evident both in the Czech Republic and in countries such as Germany, Spain and France, whose penitentiary systems are characterised by different legal frameworks, socio-economic contexts and prison population structures (Vlach, Červenka, Kolouchová, 2024).

A specific challenge in the penal system is the maintenance of a human rights dimension in relation to incarcerated persons. Despite the seriousness of the crimes for which prisoners have been convicted, it is necessary to constantly remind oneself that they are human beings with the right to preserve their human dignity and protect their fundamental rights and freedoms. This approach should not only be a fundamental value orientation, but also the starting point for the daily work of staff, who are responsible not only for security but also for humane treatment and for creating an environment conducive to change and reintegration.

The nature of the prison environment and its psychological burden

The prison environment is a specific social and institutional system that differs significantly from most ordinary working and living environments. This system is characterised above all by a high degree of security measures, a strict management hierarchy, restrictions on individual autonomy and constant surveillance. Interactions between people, whether between staff or between staff and prisoners, are heavily regulated, both by formal (legal) rules and by unwritten norms (the process of prisionisation is at work here) that are naturally generated in this environment.

This 'world behind the wall' is closed, strictly structured and not very flexible to any changes. It is this closedness and high degree of control that affects the daily reality not only of prisoners but also of Prison Service staff. For this reason, staff are under constant pressure to meet demanding security requirements while managing emotionally tense situations and maintaining professional distance, often with little room for self-reflection or emotional release.

Prolonged exposure to these stressors can lead to significant psychological exhaustion, loss of motivation and, in extreme cases, burnout. Given the nature of the prison environment, this is not just an issue of work discomfort, but a serious psychosocial problem that requires targeted attention from employers, mental health professionals and society itself (Kolář, 2024).

In order to further understand these phenomena, Goffman's (1961) theory of total institutions can be used, which emphasizes the depersonalization of interpersonal relationships, the repression of individuality, and the institutionalization of behavior. In this context, employees are placed in a situation where they are expected to continuously exercise authority and simultaneously repress their own authentic emotional expressions. This condition leads to so-called emotional dissonance, i.e. a mismatch between inner experience and desired behaviour, which, according to Maslache et al. (2001), has a major impact on the psychological distress and professional integrity of employees.

Prison staff are thus exposed to chronic psychosocial stress, which stems from three main areas:

- 1) **The prison environment itself** (enclosure, routine, control, latent risk),
- 2) **the specific behaviour of prisoners** (frequent frustration, aggression, manipulative behaviour patterns and stigmatisation)
- 3) **institutional culture** (command management style, low staff participation, lack of support from management).

This combination of factors creates an environment with high levels of stress that can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout syndrome and overall psychological destabilisation (Jůzl, Vlach, 2022).

An important complement to this issue is the perspective of Stárek and Vlach (2025), who highlight the existence of informal power structures within prisons. These structures, often difficult to identify, distort the institutional balance and put psychological pressure on staff who find themselves in a dilemma between loyalty to the system and ethical treatment of prisoners.

The above factors must be understood in the context of the legal requirements imposed on the administration of punishment. Act No. 169/1999 Coll., on the execution of prison sentences, sets out the main objectives of punishment, such as the protection of society, the prevention of recidivism and the education of the convicted person for a proper life in society after serving his or her sentence. This triple function requires prison service staff not only to ensure security but also to be

actively involved in the process of re-socialisation. The process begins at the time of the prisoner's admission to the prison establishment and continues with the systematic work of the professional staff in preparing the prisoner for life at liberty.

This task is particularly challenging in view of the fact that a significant number of convicts suffer from personality disorders, addictions or repeated failures in social functioning. Thus, the treatment programmes implemented in the context of imprisonment serve as a key tool for targeted intervention, the purpose of which is to strengthen the skills necessary for successful reintegration, such as work and social skills, emotional management, conflict resolution skills and acceptance of responsibility for one's own actions (Vlach, Červenka, Kolouchová, 2024).

Structure, staffing and educational system of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic

From an organisational point of view, the Prison Service of the Czech Republic is part of the Ministry of Justice and cooperates closely with the Probation and Mediation Service of the Czech Republic. It currently operates 34 prisons and detention facilities, which house approximately 20 000 prisoners. The staff is divided into two main groups, namely uniformed officers (such as wardens, and guards, etc.) and civilian staff (e.g. psychologists, social workers, educators, health workers, administrative staff). The total number of staff is approximately 11 000, with approximately two thirds uniformed staff and one third civilian staff.

TABLE 1. Overview of the number of employees of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic and prisoners.

Year	Members		Civilian employees		Total VS CR	Number persons imprisoned
	Men	Women	Men	Women		
2014	5986	766	2081	1840	10673	18687
2015	6099	797	2125	1887	10908	20866
2016	6067	809	2128	1881	10885	22481
2017	6023	895	2137	1996	11051	22159
2018	6122	959	2123	2127	11331	21577
2019	6014	971	2170	2157	11312	21048
2020	6016	977	2181	2144	11318	19286
2021	5954	1010	2159	2097	11220	18748
2022	5547	1010	2128	2152	10837	19052
2023	5580	1083	2094	2116	10873	19569
2024	5359	1119	1990	1968	10436	19430

Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (2025).

The development of the number of prisoners in the Czech Republic over the last decade has shown some fluctuations. In 2012, the prison population was more than 23,000 persons, which led to an overcrowding of prison capacity (approximately 110%). After the presidential amnesty in 2013, there was a significant decrease, but since 2014 there has been an increase again, culminating in 2017. As of 2018, there has been a stabilization around the 20,000 prisoners threshold (see

Table 1). This trend is the result of the wider use of alternative sentences and the streamlining of post-penitentiary care (Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic).

Treatment programmes, professional training and the role of professional staff

Imprisonment has a clearly defined purpose, namely to protect society from offenders and to prepare them for their resocialisation into society after release. In this context, treatment programmes, which are a set of targeted activities prepared by prison staff, play a central role. These activities take into account the nature of the offence and the length of the sentence imposed and aim to prepare convicted persons for life at liberty so that they are able to participate in normal social life and respect its norms.

The success of these programmes, however, depends not only on the convicted person himself and his intrinsic motivation to change, but above all on the professional and personal qualities of the professional staff of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (see Table 2). They must not only be professionally proficient, but also able to resist various forms of manipulation by prisoners who often try to gain undue advantages or disrupt the prison security system (Jůzl, Vlach, 2022).

TABLE 2. Overview of the educational structure of the employees of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic.

Year	Basic	Secondary				Bachelor's	Master's	Total
		Secondary (+apprenticeship)	Graduation	Higher Vocational	Secondary Total			
2014	16	349	7207	197	7753	1127	1777	10673
2015	12	331	7245	218	7794	1209	1893	10908
2016	14	287	7194	218	7696	1310	1865	10885
2017	14	343	7177	244	7764	1325	1948	11051
2018	11	372	7340	254	7966	1382	1972	11331
2019	13	396	7240	262	7878	1407	1994	11312
2020	11	414	7201	265	7626	1430	1997	11318
2021	8	369	7164	244	7777	1400	2035	11220
2022	7	393	6816	260	7469	1401	1960	10837
2023	6	415	6878	280	7579	1381	1913	10873
2024	3	409	6597	271	7197	1334	1822	10436

Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (2025).

The Prison Service of the Czech Republic therefore emphasises systematic education and training of its staff. The Academy of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic in Stráž pod Ralskem is the only educational institution that provides basic training and subsequent specialisation courses as part of lifelong learning. As part of its activities, the Academy cooperates with experts from other security forces and academic institutions and also participates in scientific research activities in the field of penology and penitentiary science.

Jůzl and Vlach (2022) present the structure of education of the employees of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, where the system is differentiated according to function and professional classification. There are different types of basic vocational training (VET):

- ZOP/A for officers without distinction of rank (15 weeks)
- ZOP/B1 for staff in contact with prisoners but without direct implementation of programmes (1 week)
- ZOP/B2 for professional staff involved in treatment programmes (8 weeks)
- ZOP/B3 for medical staff (1 week)
- ZOP/B4 for part-time staff in direct contact with prisoners
- Type I for administrative staff not in contact with prisoners (individual training)

Professional staff, which includes special educators, psychologists, social workers, health professionals and others, play an indispensable role in the resocialisation process. The task of special educators is to systematically influence convicted persons through treatment programmes. Educators, under the expert guidance of special educators, conduct educational and recreational activities and their contribution is particularly significant when working with juvenile prisoners. Social workers ensure contact between prisoners and their families and facilitate their return to normal life. Psychologists focus on diagnosis, psychological support and crisis intervention, with the aim of preventing risky behaviour and promoting successful resocialisation. Addiction psychologists provide interventions to individuals with addictive behaviors and participate in specialized treatment and prevention programs (Drápal et al., 2021).

Although the educational system of the Prison Service has a high level of expertise and institutional support, challenges remain significant. According to the statistics of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, the penological recidivism rate is approximately 66%, which indicates the difficulty of working with personally complicated individuals who often suffer from addictions or personality disorders. This fact underlines the importance of setting up a systemic treatment, well-trained professional staff (see Figure 1).

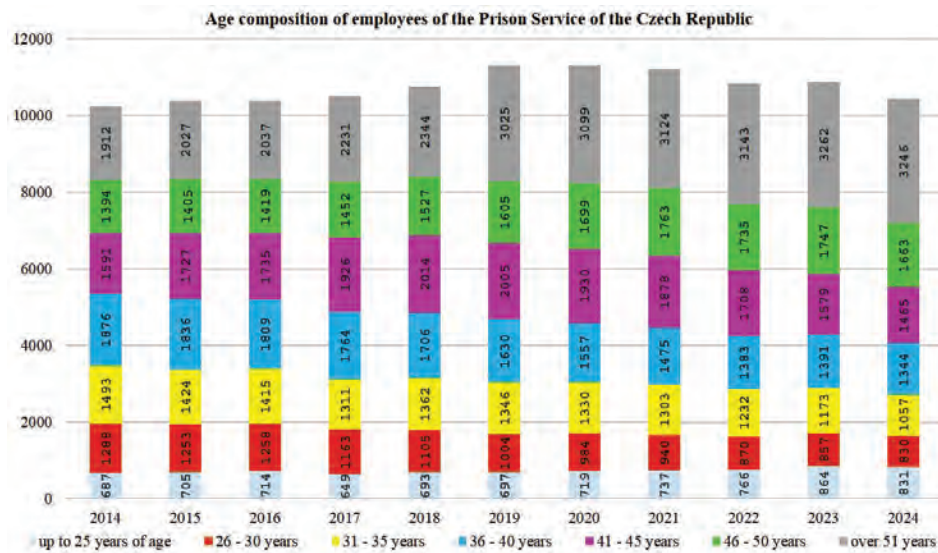
Professional staff in direct contact with prisoners

The execution of a prison sentence is understood in the modern concept not only as a repressive instrument, but mainly as a space for social intervention aimed at supporting the reintegration of the prisoner into society. A crucial role in this process is played by the professional staff of the prison service, who are in direct contact with prisoners on a daily basis. These staff form a multidisciplinary team, including in particular educators, special educators, psychologists, social workers, addictionologists and other specialists. Their activities are professionally anchored, methodically guided and subordinated to the legislative and ethical standards of penitentiary practice.

– Educators

Educators are the most important link in the system of treatment of convicted persons. Their main responsibility is to work directly with prisoners on a day-to-day basis within the individual correctional units, and their activities are focused on the controlled adaptation of the prisoner, promoting his or her intrinsic motivation to change and coordinating the implementation of the

FIGURE 1. The age structure of the staff of the SSR.



Source: statistical yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (2025).

individual treatment programme. At the same time, educators ensure communication with family members of convicts, participate in the evaluation of prisoners' behaviour and organise leisure, cultural and educational activities (Vlach, Stárek, 2025).

– Special educators

Special educators working in prison institutions form an important part of the professional staff, as their task is to conceive and conduct long-term treatment programmes adapted to the individual needs of convicts. These staff members focus on promoting social and communication skills, relapse prevention and the treatment of pathological behaviour patterns. In practice, they work mainly with people with personality disorders, deficits in social adaptation or low literacy levels. Their work with juvenile delinquents is significant, where educational, self-development and interest programmes (e.g. music or art clubs) play not only an educational but also a therapeutic role (Drápal et al., 2021).

– Psychologists

Psychologists in the prison system provide expert personality diagnosis, early recognition of psychopathological symptoms, individual or group therapeutic interventions and the provision of crisis intervention for psychological or adaptive difficulties. They are actively involved in the development and evaluation of treatment programmes, and provide recommendations for the reassignment of convicts, especially in cases of deterioration of the psychological state or the occurrence of suicidal tendencies. Their work is also indispensable in the context of preventing traumatising of prison service staff (Drápal et al., 2021).

– Other professional staff

Other important members of the multidisciplinary team are social workers, addictionologists and other professionals whose presence contributes significantly to the comprehensive care of prisoners. Social workers ensure contact between prisoners and their family background, provide

socio-legal counselling, assist with parole preparation and coordinate the preparation for release. Their role is particularly important in the case of persons without a stable background, juveniles or women with children (Stárek, Víšek, 2022).

Addiction specialists focus on clients with addictions, most often to alcohol, substance abuse or gambling behaviour. They provide specialist screening, individual and group therapy, collaborate with external specialist treatment facilities and participate in the development of the prison's drug strategy.

The specialist team also includes clergymen (prison chaplains) who provide spiritual support to prisoners regardless of their religion, contribute to stabilising their value system and play an important role in working with prisoners in difficult life situations.

Psychological impact of the profession and possibilities for intervention

The profession of a prison service employee has long been considered high-risk, especially in terms of psychological stress and the accumulation of stress factors. As reported by Schultz and Ricciardelli (2025), prison staff face a combination of acute and chronic stressors that are associated with the daily presence of violence, permanent control, high levels of responsibility and the absence of adequate support. This context contributes significantly to the development of burnout, which typically manifests itself in emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a decline in job satisfaction. Ricciardelli et al. (2024) further note that high administrative workload and lack of supervisory support are also significant triggers of burnout.

Similar to special educators working with children with support needs, prison service workers are in a 'helping profession' where they are constantly exposed to intense emotional interaction. Research by Stark and Kluger (2024) shows that special educators develop burnout syndrome precisely in situations where their efforts are not sufficiently appreciated (e.g., unavailability of feedback from clients). Figuratively, in the prison setting, this means that here too, unclear or unquantifiable benefits from entering programmes or lack of social support can lead to feelings of wasted effort. Moreover, the study highlights that for those working in demanding 'helping' roles, burnout occurs less in professional competence and more in personal appreciation of work, i.e. perceived meaning and recognition from those around them. In prison service practice, this means that professionalism alone is not enough: it is equally important that staff feel that their work has value - whether through peer support, supervisory conversations, from management and supervisors themselves, or reflection on the progress made by prisoners.

In addition to the burnout syndrome, the phenomenon of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is often diagnosed in prison staff. This phenomenon, as reported by Whitworth and Jacquin (2025), arises as a result of repeated contact with traumatised clientele, such as prisoners with suicidal tendencies, self-injurious tendencies or psychopathology. STS manifests itself in a wide range of difficulties: from anxiety and depressive states to insomnia, psychosomatic symptoms or loss of professional identity.

Evidence from the prison environment identifies an increasing number of cases of incapacity for work caused by psychological problems. The most common symptoms include sleep disturbances, chronic fatigue, somatic difficulties without an organic cause and persistent anxiety. These difficulties are often related to prolonged exposure to stressful conditions without sufficient defence mechanisms (Vlach, Stárek, 2025).

The prison service profession has long been identified as one of the most psychologically demanding jobs in the security sector. Prison staff, whether serving officers or professional civilian workers, are exposed to a combination of acute and chronic stressors. These factors include daily contact with conflicted or traumatized individuals, the presence of violence, constant control of movement and behavior, high responsibility for the safety of individuals and facilities, and often a lack of organizational or emotional support from supervisors.

In their study, Danek et al. (2023) highlight that prison service staff, similar to educational and social service workers, represent a particularly vulnerable group in terms of mental health. They base this conclusion on the fact that they are exposed to prolonged and repeated intensive contact with individuals who are experiencing severe frustration, stress or trauma. As the authors state, a particularly at-risk group is staff who are in intensive contact with persons experiencing severe frustration, stress or traumatisation, which has been repeatedly confirmed for prison officers, social workers and educational staff in educational establishments. This contact is often asymmetrical, as staff do not have full control over the dynamics of the relationship or the outcome of their intervention, which further exacerbates psychological exhaustion and feelings of ineffectiveness.

Prolonged exposure to these stressors can lead not only to burnout, but also to internal alienation from the profession, a distorted self-perception and a loss of a sense of meaningfulness at work. It is the combination of emotional exposure and lack of support that is one of the main triggers of negative mental health impacts on employees in the helping professions, which undoubtedly includes prison service. These findings clearly show that preventive measures in the field of mental health should not only be an additional tool, but an integral part of the institutional culture. The performance of work in the prison environment requires not only professional preparedness and psychological resilience, but also the presence of systematic support, whether in the form of supervision, crisis intervention, or opportunities to share experiences within a safe working climate (Daněk et al., 2023).

One of the significant risks associated with chronic occupational stress in the helping and security professions, including prison service staff, is the increase in maladaptive coping strategies. These may include, for example, the use of alcohol as a means of relief from psychological strain or as a means of temporary 'escape' from emotionally challenging environments.

As Daněk et al. (2024) state, alcohol dependence significantly disrupts an individual's value system, weakens the ability to self-regulate, and destroys relationships both personally and professionally. This finding is also of fundamental relevance to the prison service environment where trust, the ability to work as a team and accountability for the performance of a delegated agenda are key professional pillars. Due to prolonged exposure to stress, emotional numbing and the absence of systematic support, prison service staff may be more vulnerable to addictive behaviour than the general population. Alcohol can become not only a means of temporary calming, but also a factor that gradually impairs social functioning, work performance and the ability to regulate affect. This process is often latent, i.e. outside formal supervision and beyond the possibility of early intervention. Incorporating knowledge about the relationship between addictive behaviour and the destruction of relational values into the professional context of the prison service therefore allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the decline in work motivation, reduced loyalty and psychological exhaustion of staff. It also strengthens the case for

introducing programmes aimed not only at stress management and resilience building, but also at preventing addictive behaviour and strengthening staff values embeddedness.

An analysis by Ansah et al. (2025) summarises the findings of seven studies in the area of mental health care for prison service staff. Research has shown that targeted interventions aimed at managing stress and building psychological resilience can make a significant contribution to improving staff psychological wellbeing. The most commonly used methods include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based interventions (MBI), Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), regular physical activity and peer support programmes. Cognitive-behavioural therapy was found to be effective in reducing anxiety symptoms, depressive states and PTSD symptoms in the analysis, with positive effects reported in four of the six studies evaluated. Mindfulness-based interventions contribute to improved emotional regulation, enhanced psychological resilience and reduced burnout symptoms. CISM as a form of crisis intervention system helps staff to process extremely challenging events (e.g. prisoner suicide attempts, assaults, etc.), thereby reducing the likelihood of long-term consequences.

In the European context, the so-called trauma-informed TRiM (Trauma Risk Management) approach, which combines elements of early detection of mental distress, peer support and institutional accountability, is seen as very effective. TRiM helps to destigmatise help-seeking, fosters professional cohesion and enables staff to share difficult experiences in a safe environment (Greenberg et al., 2010). However, a crucial element of effective implementation of these approaches is their integration into the systemic framework of the prison service.

Based on these findings, it can be recommended that there should be a coherent model of institutional mental health care for staff within the prison service. Such a model should include regular monitoring of psychological distress, training of supervisors and team leaders, availability of crisis intervention, participatory forms of management and adaptation programmes for new arrivals. In this way, a significant contribution can be made to preventing burnout, reducing staff turnover and enhancing the overall sustainability of this demanding profession.

Research design for a study on the mental health of prison professionals

The research investigation carried out focused on mapping the level of psychological distress among professional staff working in the penitentiary system and their personal reflection on working conditions and demands. Particular attention was paid to those aspects that may contribute to long-term stress, emotional wear and tear or loss of professional satisfaction. Thus, the research did not only look at the harshness of the environment itself, but above all at the experience of professionals who are in daily contact with prisoners and whose work requires a high level of psychological resilience.

For the purposes of the research, a quantitative data collection strategy was adopted through an anonymous questionnaire survey to gain a basic understanding of the frequency of stressful symptoms, ways of coping with psychological distress and the level of support available within the organisation. This method was chosen to be time-efficient, to reach a larger number of respondents and to preserve their anonymity.

The self-constructed questionnaire contained 17 questions, 3 of which were identification questions (age, position, length of experience), 10 closed questions (e.g., level of perceived psychological strain, prevalence of stress symptoms, level of institutional support), and 4 open questions (e.g., subjectively most stressful aspects, suggestions for improving the work environment, motiva-

tion to pursue the profession). Emphasis was placed on clarity and simplicity of wording so that respondents could answer authentically and without fear of misuse of information.

The research survey was carried out with 34 respondents who work in various professional positions in two prison establishments (one detention prison and one prison with security) in the Czech Republic. For ethical reasons and to ensure anonymity, these facilities were not specifically identified. The selection of respondents was purposive, focused on those professional staff who have daily contact with prisoners and are involved in their resocialisation process, diagnosis or therapeutic-counselling care.

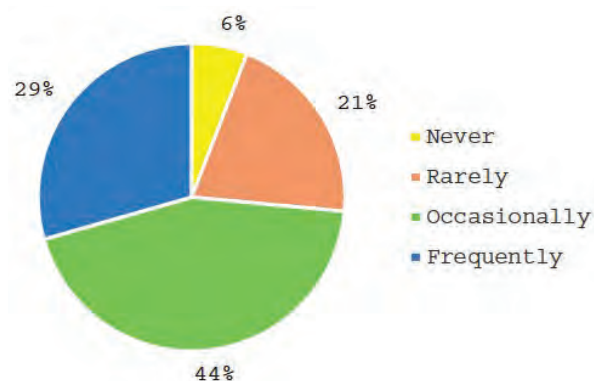
The main aim of the research was to analyse the influence of the prison environment on the psychological health of the employees, to identify the main stressors and to map the coping strategies.

In this paper, only the most relevant questions were deliberately selected from the questionnaire survey to best capture the main aspects of the issue under investigation. The selection focused on the areas of psychological strain, major stressors and availability of support in the prison work environment. These questions provide sufficient evidence for the formulation of relevant conclusions and suggestions for systemic measures in the area of staff mental health.

Question 1 - "Have you recently experienced any symptoms of stress, anxiety or tension as a result of work?"

The results of the questionnaire survey indicate that the vast majority of professional staff in the Prison Service (32 out of 34 respondents, or 94%) have recently experienced some symptoms of stress, anxiety or tension as a result of their workload. Respondents were most likely to report experiencing these conditions 'sometimes' (44%), followed by 'very often' (29%) and 'rarely' (21%). Only 2 respondents (6%) reported experiencing no such symptoms, which may be a result of greater psychological resilience, shorter length of time within the prison environment (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Frequency of work-related stress symptoms.



Source: own survey.

These findings confirm that psychological distress is a common and serious phenomenon in the prison environment, and the occurrence of stress, tension or anxiety is not an exception, but rather a regular part of the working reality of most employees. The high level of perceived stress points to the need for institutionally anchored mental health support, which should be systematically integrated into the organisational culture of prison establishments.

The survey also asked a follow-up question focusing on the specific frequency of stress. Respondents were given the opportunity to indicate whether they experienced stress 'daily', 'several times a week', 'several times a month' or 'rarely'. The results showed that more than half of the respondents experience stress on a daily or at least several times a week basis, indicating the presence of chronic stress and long-term psychological strain associated with the profession.

Repeated exposure to stressful stimuli in an environment with limited autonomy, rigid hierarchies and high security demands is a significant risk factor for the development of psychosomatic problems, including burnout syndrome. These findings are consistent with the findings of Finney et al. (2013) who note that cumulative work stress in prison service staff significantly increases the risk of anxiety disorders, sleep disturbances, general emotional instability and burnout syndrome. This context confirms the urgent need for systematic prevention, supervision support and implementation of strategies to promote resilience and mental balance of professional staff in the demanding prison environment.

Question 2 - Which specific aspects of your work do you find most stressful or mentally taxing?

The open-ended question allowed respondents to freely describe the aspects of their work that they subjectively perceived as most stressful. This type of question is particularly valuable because it reveals individually perceived stressors that would otherwise remain hidden in a standardized questionnaire. Respondents often combined several different stressors in their answers, which resulted in each relevant mention being recorded separately, and the results were then processed using thematic analysis.

The individual statements were grouped into content categories according to the main themes that recurred in the statements. This approach enabled the identification of major themes across the entire sample, as well as quantifying their frequency. The percentage representation of each category then reflects the frequency of a particular theme across all responses, rather than the number of unique respondents.

TABLE 3. Frequency of occurrence of psychologically stressful aspects of work.

Categories	Number of mentions	Percentage representation
Leadership problems/lack of understanding	9	26,50%
Communication with prisoners and their manipulative behaviour	8	23,50%
Lack of teamwork/relationships with colleagues	7	20,60%
Administrative burden and inflexible system	6	17,60%
Cynicism, burnout and negative atmosphere	6	17,60%
Feelings of powerlessness / low recognition of work	5	14,70%
High security demands / working with risk	4	11,80%
Unpredictable situations / crisis moments	3	8,80%
Emotional demands of work	3	8,80%
Imperfect organisational structure	2	5,90%

Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (2025).

The results obtained (see Table 3) show that the most frequently cited stressors are problems with management or lack of understanding (26.5%), manipulative behaviour of prisoners and difficulty in communicating with them (23.5%) and lack of teamwork among colleagues (20.6%). This was closely followed by administrative burden and inflexible system (17.6%), cynicism and negative working atmosphere (17.6%) and feelings of powerlessness or low recognition of work (14.7%). Other frequently mentioned factors were high security demands and risks (11.8%), unpredictable crisis situations (8.8%), emotional demands of work (8.8%) and imperfect organisational structure (5.9%). This shows that professional staff face not only acute stressful situations but also long-term structural and organisational problems that put a strain on their psychological well-being.

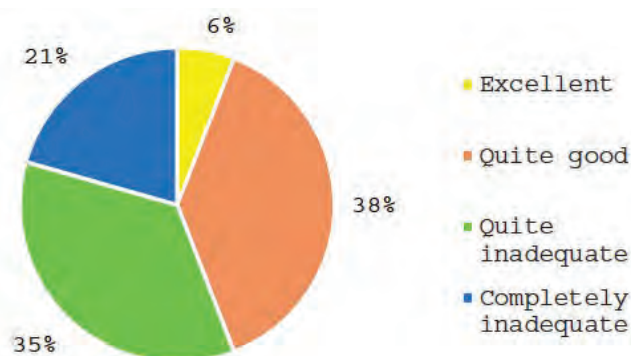
The importance of this type of question lies in the fact that it allows the capture of so-called latent stressors, i.e. factors that are not routinely mapped by standardised instruments but have a major impact on job wellbeing. As reported by Ricciardelli et al. (2024), it is these latent aspects, such as ethical pressure, cognitive overload, low levels of autonomy or moral dilemmas, that can be the trigger of secondary traumatization and long-term occupational dissatisfaction.

Question 3 - “How do you rate the support your organisation provides you in case of stressful situations at work (e.g. supervision, professional help, management support)?”

The question focused on the extent of perceived organisational support in challenging work situations and yielded fairly balanced but contradictory results, indicating a certain polarisation of opinion among employees. A total of 13 respondents (38%) described the support provided as rather good, which may point to the existence of certain support structures, for example in the form of informal collegial collaboration, availability of supervisors or basic interventions. However, only 2 staff members (6%) rated the support as excellent, indicating that only a small proportion of respondents perceived institutional support as fully functional and reliable (see Figure 3).

On the other hand, almost the same number of respondents, namely 12 persons (35%), described the level of organizational support as rather inadequate and another 7 respondents (21%) even described it as completely inadequate. These findings show that a critical view of the availability of help in crisis or stress situations prevails among more than half of the participants. The most frequent responses mentioned the absence of professional supervision, lack of feedback from management, but also the lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

FIGURE 3. Perceptions of institutional support in challenging workplace situations.



Source: own survey.

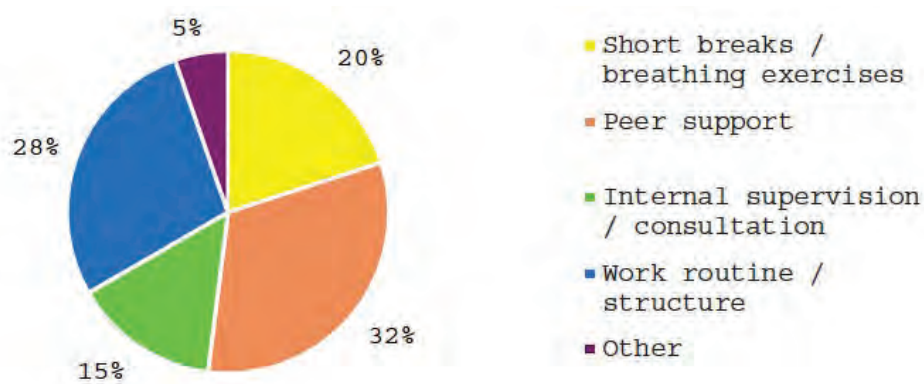
In terms of psychosocial aspects of the work environment, organisational support represents one of the most important stabilising factors for mental well-being. In the literature, the emphasis on institutional support has long been perceived as a crucial aspect of preventing burnout syndrome and ensuring long-term professional sustainability. For example, Armstrong and Griffin (2004) point out in their study that subjectively perceived support from an organization significantly increases work engagement, sense of belonging, and willingness to stay in a demanding job. Lack of such support, on the other hand, leads to loss of motivation, disruption of working relationships and ultimately higher turnover rates.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that providing a stable and effective support infrastructure should be a priority for any institution working with highly exposed staff. The introduction of regular supervision sessions, crisis interventions, and specialized stress management training could contribute significantly to improving perceived organizational support. Ideally, this should be a systemic change that is firmly anchored in the institutional culture and supported both methodologically and staff-wise.

Question 4 - "What strategies or techniques do you use to manage stress during working hours?"

Respondents' answers revealed that professional staff in the prison service use a wide range of strategies to manage stress, reflecting organisational conditions as well as individual preferences and personality settings. These strategies include a combination of formal and informal practices, and their choice is largely related to the availability of support tools, the quality of the team climate and the level of their own psychological resilience.

FIGURE 4. Ways of coping with workplace stress.



Source: own survey.

The most frequently mentioned means of coping with stress was support from colleagues, with 32% of respondents choosing this option. This figure confirms the importance of a functional work team as a primary protective factor in an environment characterised by high levels of psychological stress. Sharing difficult experiences, the opportunity to vent emotions informally and the feeling that the employee is not alone in challenging situations are the main aspects of team resilience to stress (see Figure 4).

In second place was the preference for a structured work schedule, reported by 28% of respondents. Clearly defined job descriptions, repetitiveness of tasks and predictability of daily routines have a stabilising effect and provide some form of control over chaotic or crisis environments. In the context of a prison facility, where the degree of autonomy is severely limited by security rules, structure can act as a psychological anchor and help to alleviate the internal tension of unpredictability.

Approximately one in three respondents (20%) reported using short breaks and breathing techniques. These forms of self-regulation help manage acute stress reactions during service and promote psychophysiological balance. Their popularity suggests that at least a proportion of employees have basic tools for crisis self-regulation.

Internal supervision and professional consultations were relatively less represented (15%). These figures may indicate either their limited implementation in individual prison establishments or a certain lack of trust in institutional support mechanisms. However, supervision practice is recommended in the literature as one of the most effective tools for preventing secondary traumatisation and professional burnout.

The "other" category (5%) also yielded interesting answers, where employees spontaneously mentioned their own coping strategies, ranging from a sense of humour, to sports activities, to rituals of calm, meditation or drinking tea. These individually shaped mechanisms confirm that coping with stress is a highly subjective process and often takes place outside of institutional structures.

From an analytical point of view, it can be concluded that the choice of coping strategies speaks volumes about the degree of personal psychological resilience of individual workers. As reported by Landenberger and Lipsey (2005), active coping strategies, based on solution-finding, support-seeking and reflective skills, are associated with lower rates of psychosomatic difficulties, higher job satisfaction and overall better adaptation to challenging occupational conditions over the long term. In contrast, passive or avoidance strategies such as denial of the problem, withdrawal or internal resignation increase the risk of chronic stress, emotional exhaustion and reduced professional performance.

It is clear from the above that promoting individual and group psychological resilience among professional staff in the prison system should be an integral part of institutional mental health care strategies. Implementing programmes aimed at raising mental health awareness, developing stress management skills and fostering teamwork are important steps towards increasing the professional sustainability of this demanding workforce.

Question 5 - "What specific recommendations or suggestions would you have for prison management to improve the mental wellbeing of professional staff?"

The open-ended responses from respondents revealed several recurring suggestions that prison service staff consider important to improve psychological wellbeing and prevent psychological exhaustion in their demanding profession. As this was an open-ended question, it was possible to capture a wide range of suggestions that are not commonly included in standardised questionnaires. Subsequent thematic analysis enabled the systematisation of each suggestion, with the frequency of occurrence captured in the table above (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. Staff priorities for support and prevention.

Recommendations/suggestions	Number of mentions	Percentage representation
Ensuring regular training in psychological hygiene	9	17,30%
Improving communication and accessibility of management	8	15,40%
Establishment of relaxation zones and opportunities for rest	7	13,50%
Promotion of teamwork and interpersonal relationships	8	15,40%
Possibility of anonymous psychological support	6	11,50%
Reduction of administrative burden	7	13,50%
Increase in wages and financial compensation	7	13,50%

Source: own processing.

The most frequent request was for regular training in psychological hygiene, which was mentioned by 17.3% of respondents. According to employees, such training should serve as a tool to prevent burnout syndrome, improve coping with stressful situations and generally strengthen psychological resilience. For example, a study by McKim, Shoemaker and Holland (2020) found that targeted mental resilience training significantly improved stress management in prison officers and contributed to an overall increase in job satisfaction.

Improved communication and accessibility to management was mentioned by 15.4% of respondents. Many staff referred to the difficulty in accessing supervisors, lack of feedback or low participation in decision-making. Good internal communication and transparent management have a major impact on the perception of the working climate and can alleviate feelings of insecurity or loneliness in decision-making processes.

The need to foster teamwork and interpersonal relationships was also expressed as significantly (15.4%), reflecting the importance of collective psychological resilience under challenging professional conditions. A collaborative team can not only share the workload but also serve as a source of psychological support, stress ventilation and compensation for lack of institutional support.

Establishing relaxation zones and short-term rest opportunities was suggested by 13.5% of respondents as a practical measure to alleviate acute tension during shifts. This gives employees a space where they can safely 'switch off' and regain their mental balance, even if only for a short period of time. In similar professions, such as healthcare or social work, similar measures have proven to be effective in preventing exhaustion. For example, a study by Tosone, McTighe, and Bauwens (2015) examining social service workers after Hurricane Katrina found that an approach involving short breaks, reflective meetings, and peer-support led to a reduction in symptoms of secondary traumatization and enhanced psychological resilience.

Equally important was the possibility of anonymous psychological support (11.5%), which could remove barriers associated with shame, stigma and fear of loss of professional reputation. Access to confidential consultation with a professional is, according to respondents, particularly crucial in situations where traditional forms of support fail or are not available.

Respondents also repeatedly mentioned the need to reduce the administrative burden (13.5%), which is perceived as excessive, inefficient and often limiting direct work with convicted persons.

This element has long been criticized in the literature, as it overburdens staff, reduces the meaningfulness of their work, and increases frustration levels (Schaufeli, Taris, et al., 2001).

Considerable emphasis has also been placed on wage increases and adequate financial compensation (13.5%), which workers believe should reflect the difficulty, riskiness and social responsibility of their profession. In this context, financial reward is not only a motivating factor but also an important symbol of recognition and respect for the work performed.

Overall, these findings show that prison service staff perceive mental well-being as the result of a combination of systemic changes (e.g. organisational culture, working conditions) and concrete, actionable measures. Their suggestions can therefore be an important starting point for institutional interventions aimed not only at eliminating stressors but also at fostering a positive work climate and professional sustainability.

As stated by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA, 2023), employee participation in shaping the work environment, i.e. active involvement in the design and implementation of changes, contributes to reducing sickness absence, increasing job satisfaction and strengthening organisational loyalty.

Question 6 - “What motivates you to stay in the profession despite the psychological demands?”

All respondents answered the open-ended question focusing on the motivation for remaining in the profession as a professional member of the prison service, with many giving more than one reason. A total of 45 individual mentions were recorded, which were then grouped into seven thematic categories, as shown in the table above. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of not only what motivates employees to pursue a profession, but also how various factors enter into their decision-making process in the context of a challenging work environment (see Table 5).

TABLE 5. Main motivational factors of employees.

Motivation categories	Number of mentions	Percentage representation
Meaningfulness of work and helping others	12	26,70%
Financial reasons (income security, benefits)	9	20,00%
Commitment to profession/habit	7	15,60%
Career growth/professional self-fulfilment	6	13,30%
Workplace location	5	11,10%
Vision of change (moving elsewhere, retirement)	3	6,70%
Varied and diverse workload	3	6,70%

Source: own elaboration.

The most frequent theme among the responses was that of meaningful work and helping others, which was mentioned in 26.7% of all mentions. In this context, respondents expressed inner satisfaction at the possibility of positively influencing the lives of prisoners, contributing to changing or at least stabilising their behaviour, and at the same time pursuing a profession that

they considered to have a deeper social impact. This type of motivation corresponds to the concept of intrinsic motivation (Ryan, Deci, 2000), where autonomy, competence and meaningfulness of action are considered to be the main factors of engagement.

Financial reasons represented the second most frequent category (20% of mentions). Respondents mainly mentioned the security of a regular income, job stability and associated benefits. This type of motivation can be described as extrinsic, and its importance increases in periods of economic uncertainty or in the case of limited employment opportunities in other fields.

The third significant category was commitment to the profession or long-term habit (15.6%). Many staff identify professionally with their role in the prison system and, despite perceived difficulties, find it difficult or unthinkable to leave the system. This factor may reflect professional loyalty but also inertia or fear of change, which is supported by the finding that staying longer in a profession can lead to cognitive rigidity.

Other responses also mentioned the possibility of career growth (13.3%), the location of the workplace (11.1%) and the variety of work (6.7%). These motivations suggest that respondents also reflect practical aspects of work, such as job availability, variety of activities or opportunities for professional development, which enable them to maintain their interest in the profession.

The category identified as seeing a change (6.7%) was quite specific, with responses such as 'waiting for retirement' or 'planning to move elsewhere'. These statements show that some employees are more likely to remain passively engaged in the profession rather than actively engaged, which may be due to psychological fatigue, loss of motivation or a perception of the professional closed system.

The responses show that employees' motivation to stay in the profession is multifaceted and ranges from intrinsic meaningfulness to pragmatic decisions. For most respondents, a combination of multiple motivators is evident, and the proportion of these may vary depending on the current work climate, personal life situation or institutional support.

These findings are not only consistent with the theory of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which points out that prolonged exposure to a challenging environment without sufficient feedback, recognition and support can lead to a weakening of original value motives and an increased risk of burnout. This also confirms the need to maintain and reinforce the positive aspects of professional identity that drive resilience and long-term career satisfaction.

Recommendations for penitentiary practice and the promotion of staff mental health

On the basis of the questionnaire survey and in relation to published studies, several specific recommendations can be formulated that can contribute to improving the working conditions and overall psychosocial stability of prison service employees.

The first essential measure is the introduction of **systematic supervision and stable support teams** within the individual organisational units of the prison service. Supervision should be regular, methodically guided and focused not only on professional performance but also on reflecting on the emotional aspects of working with prisoners. It was the absence of the possibility to safely share one's own psychological burden and reflect on challenging situations that was repeatedly identified by respondents as one of the main stressors. Research confirms that professionally conducted supervision contributes to reducing the incidence of burnout syndrome, strengthens team cohesion and reduces staff turnover in high-risk occupations.

Related to this is the second recommendation, namely an emphasis on **systematic education in stress management and building psychological resilience**. Intervention programmes aimed at developing coping skills, working with emotions and psychological hygiene should be a solid part of the prison service's education system. Methods such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, mindfulness-based interventions, crisis intervention techniques or the trauma-informed TRiM approach, which have been identified in international studies as effective tools for reducing the risk of mental illness and increasing the willingness of staff to actively seek help when needed, play an important role.

A third important measure is the **introduction of sophisticated adaptation programmes** for newly recruited employees. The transition to the environment of a security institution, characterised by a tightly structured regime and high demands on emotional self-control, places a significant burden on new recruits. Adaptation programmes should include not only training but also elements of peer support, mentoring and psychological accompaniment during the first months of service. These measures contribute to gradual stabilisation, reducing feelings of insecurity and building professional identity.

The fourth measure is the introduction of **regular screening of the psychosocial stress of staff**. Early recognition of mental distress is a prerequisite for the successful prevention of more serious problems such as burnout syndrome or the development of anxiety-depressive symptoms. It is recommended that anonymous internal surveys be carried out on job satisfaction, stress levels, motivation and general well-being. The results should be analysed at the level of individual establishments and serve as a basis for targeted interventions.

Another area that deserves attention is the **strengthening of participative management and teamwork**. Prison environments are traditionally characterised by a vertical management structure, which can lead to alienation of staff from decision-making processes and a sense of low autonomy. Involving staff in decisions about organisational changes, service schedules or the content of training activities increases their commitment, promotes trust in management and strengthens organisational loyalty. A participatory approach also helps to identify specific problem areas and enables the implementation of meaningful changes based on practice.

Systematically **breaking down preconceptions of mental health problems** and creating trusted mechanisms for seeking help are also essential steps in comprehensive mental health promotion. Employees often declare their fear of negative evaluation or career consequences if they admit to mental health problems. It is therefore important to build a safe environment in which seeking professional help is seen as a sign of maturity and responsibility. Suitable tools may include anonymous consultations with psychologists, crisis lines, mental health information campaigns or the introduction of internal mental wellbeing ambassadors.

In terms of organisational conditions, the **creation of rest and relaxation zones** in the workplace, which employees can use to take a short break during a busy shift, is also recommended. Even short breaks from the workload and the opportunity to regenerate have proven to be an effective tool for preventing emotional exhaustion in other helping professions. Similarly, reducing administrative burdens that take away from the time and energy staff devote to working directly with clients can contribute significantly to improving the working climate and sense of professional meaningfulness.

CONCLUSION

The psychological burden of professional staff in prison settings is a long-underestimated phenomenon that has a major impact on the quality of care provided, the stability of professional identity and the sustainability of the helping professions in the penitentiary setting. The results of the empirical investigation confirm that most professional staff are exposed to chronic stress, face high levels of emotional wear and tear and perceive a significant deficit of institutional support. This state of affairs can be interpreted not only as a consequence of the specificities of the prison environment, but also as a failure of systemic human resources care, which often remains primarily oriented towards performance and control within the security forces, rather than towards preventing psychological stress and strengthening the resilience capacities of employees.

Analysis of the main stressors identified through thematic analysis of open-ended responses points to a combination of structural, interpersonal and individual factors that create an environment at high risk of developing burnout syndrome, secondary traumatisation and psychosocial destabilisation. The most frequently cited determinants were ineffective intra-organisational communication, lack of supervisory support, manipulative behaviour of inmates, high administrative burden and lack of adequate recognition of professional activities. These identified determinants are not unique - they repeatedly appear in the literature on the psychological burden of workers in the security and helping professions, which confirms their structural nature.

A fundamental finding that emerges from this study is that the psychological resilience of professional employees is not determined solely by individual predispositions, but is largely shaped by the organizational climate, management style and the degree of employee participation in decision-making processes. It is the institutional framework that can significantly influence the ability of employees to cope with emotionally challenging situations, to deal with moral dilemmas and to maintain professional integrity in an environment that is inherently repressive and highly formalised.

The research results also show that motivation to stay in the profession stems mainly from internal beliefs about the meaningfulness of work, professional loyalty and the need for continuity, less from a sense of institutional support or the possibility of professional development. This finding has major implications for the prison service's personnel policy - it points to the need to reinforce the value anchoring of the profession through reflective, supportive and educational interventions that contribute to maintaining professional identity and reducing turnover rates.

In the context of the findings presented, the introduction of a systematically managed model of mental health care for employees that includes regular supervision, a structured adaptation programme for new employees, the availability of crisis intervention, participative management models and the development of a team culture based on trust, sharing and mutual support can be recommended. The key is to see psychological resilience not as an individual 'trait' but as a variable that is influenced by the environment, organisational processes and the degree of systemic support.

In conclusion, it can be stated that professional employees in the prison system represent a highly exposed professional group, whose mental health is a fundamental prerequisite for the fulfilment of the humanisation and resocialisation goals of modern prisons. Investing in the promotion of their mental well-being should not be seen as an optional benefit, but as an essential strategic tool that contributes to the quality of the public service, the protection of the human rights of prisoners and the overall stability and credibility of the prison system.

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