



From Security to Risk: Work Conditions and Their Influence on the Psychological Well-Being of Prison Staff



De la seguridad al riesgo: las condiciones de trabajo y su influencia en el bienestar psicológico del personal penitenciario

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the negative impacts of high-risk work environments on the mental health of employees of the Brazilian federal prison system. The research specifically focused on understanding the psychological challenges faced by 15 federal correctional employees engaged in management activities within the prison system. To capture their experiences and perceptions, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data were analyzed using the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) method. The findings reveal that several factors contribute to the emergence of psychological issues among employees of the prison system. Key challenges identified include structural constraints within the prison system, as well as direct and indirect exposure to the prison population, which exacerbate stress and anxiety. Additionally, the sense of being overwhelmed is amplified by the deterioration of both horizontal and vertical relationships among employees, excessive bureaucratic processes, and a perceived lack of organizational support. These psychological problems not only affect the well-being of the staff but also have broader implications for the functioning of the prison unit. The study highlights the urgent need to reconsider and reform public and management policies in federal prison units. By doing so, it is possible to foster a healthier work environment, reduce stress-related issues, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the prison system.

Keywords: Work context; Mental health; Correctional system employees, Collective subject discourse, Federal penitentiary.

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar los impactos negativos de los entornos de trabajo de alto riesgo sobre la salud mental de los empleados del sistema penitenciario federal brasileño. La investigación se centró específicamente en comprender los desafíos psicológicos que enfrentan 15 funcionarios federales que participan en actividades de gestión dentro del sistema penitenciario. Para capturar sus experiencias y percepciones, se realizaron entrevistas

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semiestructuradas y los datos se analizaron utilizando el método del Discurso del Sujeto Colectivo (DSC). Los hallazgos revelan que varios factores contribuyen al surgimiento de problemas psicológicos entre el personal penitenciario. Los desafíos clave identificados incluyen restricciones estructurales dentro del sistema penitenciario, así como la exposición directa e indirecta a la población penitenciaria, que exacerban el estrés y la ansiedad. Además, la sensación de estar abrumado se amplifica por el deterioro de las relaciones horizontales y verticales entre los miembros del personal, los procesos burocráticos excesivos y la percepción de falta de apoyo organizacional. Estos problemas psicológicos no solo afectan el bienestar del personal, sino que también tienen implicaciones más amplias para el funcionamiento de la unidad penitenciaria. El estudio subraya la necesidad urgente de reconsiderar y reformar las políticas públicas y de gestión en las unidades penitenciarias federales. De esta manera es posible fomentar un ambiente de trabajo más saludable, reducir los problemas relacionados con el estrés y mejorar la eficacia general del sistema penitenciario.

Palabras clave: Contexto laboral; Salud mental; Empleados del sistema penitenciario; Discurso del sujeto colectivo; Penitenciaría federal.

Introduction

Work is essential to human existence and necessary for promoting health (Borges et al., 2013; Mendes, 1999). Individuals build their identities, organize their lives, insert themselves into society, and develop their subjectivity through work. They also practice trust, good coexistence, solidarity, and respect for others to favor aspects pleasurable in work activity (Dejours, 2004). However, work often does not fulfill this role, causing a negative perspective on the individual's life, which can generate factors such as suffering and psychological illness (Dejours, 1992, 1994; Mendes, 1999).

The world of work has undergone transformations, and organizational theories advocated by Taylorism have been subjected to severe criticism regarding the neglect of servants' health in favor of high productivity levels (Dejours, 1992). The more rigid the organization, the more likely the individual is to develop psychosomatic illnesses (Dejours, 1999).

In this context, the work carried out in Brazilian penitentiaries can be considered a source of risk and stress, not only due to the rigidity of the organization but also due to the confrontation with a series of agents that are harmful to their physical and mental health (Lima et al., 2019). Paradoxically, even though correctional officers' work is related to preserving public order, these occupational groups still suffer from the stigmas associated with the profession (Ramos et al., 2021).

The concept of *mental health* adopted in this study follows the World Health Organization (World Health Organization - WHO, 2018), which defines it as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to the community." This perspective emphasizes that mental health goes beyond

the absence of mental disorders, encompassing subjective well-being, social functioning, and emotional balance.

In other words, the work conducted in prison units is characterized by low social recognition, lack of decision-making power during riots, risks in the work environment when dealing with adverse situations with inmates, and low pay (Kalinsky, 2008). Added to this are undesirable working conditions (Tschiedel & Monteiro, 2013), implying a high-stress level and physical and mental illness (Marques et al., 2018; Ramos et al., 2021).

Concerning the psychological burden of prison staff, these are in many ways similar to those of other careers, such as police officers, involving the confrontation and containment of violence, which can directly or indirectly affect their private, family, and social lives (Castro et al., 2019). Even those who do not perform functions that require direct relationships with prisoners, just because they work in a penitentiary, also experience their vulnerabilities.

The studies that investigated adverse working conditions for prison staff in penitentiaries focused, for the most part, on the reality of prison officers (Becker-Pestka, 2018; Marçal et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020; Winter & Alf, 2019). In this sense and based on recent searches in databases such as SCOPUS and Web of Science, we noticed that other relevant careers operating in the same prison context continue to be underrepresented. This question guides the following research question: How does the high-risk work environment of Brazilian federal prison units negatively affect the mental health of employees of the prison system?

Thus, this article aims to understand how the work context affects mental health issues in professionals at a federal prison unit in the interior of the Brazilian Northeast. From a theoretical point of view, this research contributes by filling gaps in studies regarding the work context and its relationship with the health of professionals involved in penitentiary activities, mainly in maximum security units. In practical terms, this study highlights the importance of establishing public actions and policies to promote the health and well-being of prison officers, prevent psychological illnesses, and improve working conditions for these occupational groups.

Despite the growing body of research on occupational stress and psychological well-being among correctional employees, little is known about how the high-risk work environment of Brazilian federal prison units negatively affects the mental health of their employees. This gap is particularly evident in studies that focus on the lived experiences of workers in these contexts. The central research problem of this study is to understand how the specific conditions of work within a high-risk prison environment shape and deteriorate the mental health of employees of the prison system.

Considering the impact of working conditions on the mental health of correctional staff is of utmost importance and relevance not only to the field of social sciences but also to society as a whole. From a social perspective, the psychological well-being of these professionals is directly linked to public safety and the effectiveness

of inmate rehabilitation processes. In the professional sphere, understanding and mitigating adverse psychosocial factors can reduce absenteeism, sick leave, and turnover rates, thus enhancing institutional efficiency. Finally, from an academic standpoint, investigating this topic helps fill existing theoretical gaps concerning the relationship between work context and mental health in high-risk environments, while also providing evidence-based insights for the formulation of public policies and the development of more human-centered management strategies.

These considerations highlight the broader significance of this topic and underscore the need to investigate how such dynamics manifest in the specific context of Brazilian federal maximum-security prisons, the focus of this study.

Theoretical Framework

In contemporary times, the process of globalization and constant changes emerge. From then on, the concept of work was introduced by Protestant reformers in the 16th century. However, in recent years, this approach has been linked to the themes of psychology and organizational behavior, evoking organizational values (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

Because of this, conceptual changes regarding work undergo sudden changes, in the sense that flexible working hours and mobile working hours are valued, intending to promote the physical and mental health of servants (Liu et al., 2018; Shidende et al., 2016). However, it should be noted that flexible schedules can result in excessive and harmful loads for the individual when not well managed.

It is clear that, for many years, work was considered an obligation driven by the need for survival. However, little time was devoted to this activity. The scenario changed after the Second World War when the industrial era emerged (Enriquez, 2014).

Dejours (1992) argues that work evokes pleasure and suffering when considering the involvement of physical and mental aspects. Therefore, work is a great driver of the psychic function of individuals, as it helps construct identity and subjectivity. Considering the basis of everyday life, these, in turn, allow individuals to know their emotions and bring out their virtues (Santos & Menta, 2016).

From then on, we must start over, look for solutions, investigate possibilities, and innovate, which can increase human sensitivity through knowledge of our extremes and generate pleasure through explorable qualities (Azevedo et al., 2018). When permeating the social, objective, and subjective spheres, work involves practical elements, deliberations, and decisions, not limited to technical-scientific rationality (Dejours & Molinier, 1994).

Generally speaking, there is a gap between prescriptive and actual reality; working is about filling that gap. This dichotomy, the difference between prescribed and actual work, consists of the formalized and instructed division and what is daily

performed and implemented, respectively (Therriault et al., 2004). Therefore, it is up to individuals to seek to achieve pre-established objectives, using wisdom to deal with controversies and adversities arising from their work context.

Work Context

The work context is the social space where the organization, conditions, and socio-professional relationships are inserted in the work environment. These three dimensions are assessed in the Work Context Assessment Scale (WCAS) by Mendes and Ferreira (2008, p. 113) to “provide bases for understanding the work activity of individuals, and individual and collective mediation strategies employed in managing the demands present in the work context”.

Therefore, the work organization dimension involves organizational aspects, such as how tasks are divided, the breaks between shifts, and the rhythms and norms established between the organization and servants (Dejours, 1994).

The working conditions dimension involves material aspects, such as adequate lighting and furniture, instruments necessary to conduct activities, conditions of the physical space, and servant safety, among others (Dejours, 1992). Furthermore, elements linked to hygiene and safety must also be considered. In this sense, Mendes and Ferreira (2008) include variables such as raw materials, equipment, and remuneration, among others, in this dimension.

In turn, the socio-professional relations dimension comprises social aspects, such as relationships existing in the work environment, integration and communication between management and subordinates, peers, and internal and external clients (Mattos et al., 2015; Mendes, 2007; Mendes & Ferreira, 2008). Sousa (2021) highlights that work relationships involve aspects associated with hierarchical, collective intra- and intergroup or external interactions.

Understanding these three dimensions has a positive or negative impact on servants' performance (Fagundes, 2017) and, consequently, on the results expected by the work organization (Campos & David, 2011). Therefore, understanding a professional's assessment of their work context is essential for organizations to adopt strategies that improve their well-being and quality of life at work organizations (Carmo & Silveira, 2013; Fagundes, 2017; Maissiat et al., 2015; Mendes & Ferreira, 2008).

In short, the dimensions of the work context are associated with elements that involve physical, organizational, and interactional aspects present in the work environment. Thus, in addition to involving structural, safety, and hygiene aspects, there are hierarchical levels and divisions of work, and, finally, social relations, in which social bonds and interactions stand out (Dejours, 1992, 1994; Dejours et al., 2010; Mendes & Ferreira, 2008; Sousa & Santos, 2017).

In this study, mental health is understood according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively

and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community. From this perspective, mental health is not limited to the absence of mental disorders but encompasses the subjective experience of psychological balance and social functioning.

Accordingly, the term “psychological impacts” used in this research refers to the perceptions and narratives reported by the participants concerning their emotional states and subjective experiences in the workplace, rather than to clinical or psychometric measurements.

Context of Work in Prison Units and its Implications for Professional Activity

The prison environment is characterized by organizational challenges that can put the physical and mental health at risk, not only of prisoners but also of the teams that work there (Testoni et al., 2021). Furthermore, penitentiaries are institutions that focus on the social recovery of inmates but that operate in a distressing and high-risk area for the mental health of their servants, in this case, prison officers (Boaron et al., 2021).

Prison officers are individuals hired to guarantee control, order, and security and minimize physical and psychological harm to the prison population in the penitentiaries they serve (Nweze et al., 2021). However, these professionals are exposed to harmful factors that put their mental health at risk.

Recent studies have shown that limited access to natural lighting, presence of noise, dirty environment (Bierie, 2012), lack of water and inadequate work facilities (Okoza et al., 2010), lack of resources to perform tasks and work overload (Rizkiyani & Saragih, 2012), excessive demands from superiors, limited autonomy, less decision-making freedom, less work control (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018), overcrowding and poor health prisoners' status (Nweze et al., 2021), insufficient support in the workplace (Sygit-Kowalkowska et al., 2021), lack of recognition for the work performed (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000), family-work conflict, divorce and lower life expectancy (Carleton et al., 2019), in addition to the prevalence of disorders and infectious diseases, since the overcrowding of cells favors the proliferation of epidemics and contagious diseases (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018; Tyler et al., 2019), have generated substantial consequences for the work and its professionals.

As a consequence, these adverse prison factors can lead to sleep disorders (Sygit-Kowalkowska et al., 2021), high stress levels (Jesus et al., 2021), and reduced resilience and productivity (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018; Trounson et al., 2016), burnout syndrome (Brough & Williams, 2007; Gould et al., 2013; Sygit-Kowalkowska et al., 2021; Tewksbury & Higgins, 2006), heart attacks, increased blood pressure, ulcers (Carleton et al., 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2019), anxiety (Carleton et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2018; Obidoa et al., 2011), fear (Ben-David et al., 1996), post-traumatic stress disorder (Fusco et al., 2021; Rumin et al., 2011; Taylor & Swartz, 2021), and depression (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018), in addition to resulting in an increase

in requests for sick leave, absences, and dependence on medication (Bierie, 2012) and greater use of substances, such as cigarettes and alcohol (Shepherd et al., 2019).

The prison environment affects all professionals, but its impact is particularly pronounced among those who interact directly with inmates. For example, correctional officers have the role of ensuring that the individual rights of prisoners are fulfilled. According to Oliveira et al. (2020), it is up to these professionals to promote the resocialization of those who committed crimes punishable by imprisonment, concomitantly with maintaining discipline and physical and mental integrity. Thus, correctional officers are responsible for searching inmates, cells, and visitors and monitoring the conduct of inmates and the unit. Because they have direct contact with inmates, they see them as responsible for maintaining their confinement, which is why they are exposed to stressful situations, such as intimidation, aggression, threats, and possible rebellions, even at the risk of death (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018).

In addition to correctional officers, other categories working on the front lines in prison environments also suffer from similar mental problems. For example, a recent study by Lazzari et al. (2020) shows that correctional nurses experience moral distress when dealing with prisoners in the work environment. Carnevale et al. (2018) explain that structural and relationship factors can generate problems like this and trigger other symptoms, whether for nurses, educational professionals, or prison officers. Boaron et al. (2021) point out that mental health impairment can be more significant for officers who believe they do not have the vocation to work within prisons, increasing tensions for those who work in this condition.

As a result, the activities conducted by employees of the prison system associated with poor working conditions also influence the physical and mental illness of this category (Carleton et al., 2020; Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018; Ricciardelli & Power, 2020; Trounson et al., 2016). Additionally, the social stigmas attributed to these professions negatively impact the servants' health. Thus, the presence of stressors in the work environment of security professionals can evoke a myriad of pathologies that represent inefficiency in the execution of their services, which evokes the need for constant measures to mitigate these effects in the lives of their officers (Moran et al., 2016).

Although several studies have addressed psychological distress and working conditions among prison officers in Brazil, most are quantitative, cross-sectional, and limited to state or regional penitentiaries, not delving into deeply contextualized, qualitative analyses in federal maximum-security settings. For example, Bezerra et al. (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews to examine psychological distress among prison officers in Brazil, pointing to high levels of stress and mental health symptoms but without focusing on the specific institutional environment of high security units. Pauli et al. (2022) investigated working and health conditions in state prisons in Paraná, finding associations between organizational risks, physical environment, and minor psychiatric disorders among the officers. Additionally, Schultz

et al. (2025) provide a broad overview of correctional worker health but call for more context-sensitive qualitative studies to understand how work environments shape mental health outcomes. Thus, none of these studies offers a qualitative, in-depth exploration of how the work context of a federal maximum-security prison unit negatively affects the mental health of its employees from their own perspective. This study fills that gap by interpreting the lived experiences of correctional system employees working in high-risk institutional contexts and analyzing the negative psychological impacts they report.

Methodology

To understand how the work context negatively affects mental health issues among employees of the prison system, this study was conducted in a federal maximum-security correctional facility located in Mossoró, in the Northeast region of Brazil. The institution houses individuals considered to pose a high level of social risk and operates under strict security protocols within a highly controlled environment, factors that profoundly shape the daily experiences and psychological demands of its employees. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 of the 17 civil servants working as managers at the unit. The participants included the Director, the Heads and Deputy Heads of the Divisions (Security and Discipline, and Intelligence), the Heads of Services (Health, Administrative, and Rehabilitation), two Heads of Duty, and those responsible for Internal Affairs and Legal Advice. The two remaining Duty Managers did not participate because they were not present during the interview period due to rotating work shifts. Furthermore, as recommended by Falqueto et al. (2018), regarding theoretical saturation, we observed that the reports collected, even without these two additional interviews, were sufficient to achieve the objective proposed in this study.

This research is characterized as a case study, focusing on a single federal prison in Brazil. The methodological choice aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the psychosocial and organizational dynamics experienced by correctional staff. Although the findings cannot be generalized to all federal correctional facilities, they offer valuable insights that may reflect similar patterns in comparable institutional contexts.

The work context was evaluated concerning work organization (a division of tasks, rhythm, breaks, working hours, and norms), working conditions (physical and material structural conditions), and socio-professional relationships (quality of interpersonal relationships established with managers, peers, subordinates, clients and partners). For this reason, in addition to issues of identification of the subjects, such as age, marital status, children, position and current role, time in the role and the prison unit, and when was the last vacation, specific questions were asked for each dimension of the work context.

Regarding the work organization, the research subjects were encouraged to describe their work, its rhythm and breaks, and the perceived risks and regulations involved in conducting their activities. Regarding working conditions, the subjects were invited to analyze their physical and material structures to conduct their work tasks. Finally, regarding socio-professional relationships, the subjects were asked about their interactions with colleagues, management, prisoners, their families, and lawyers.

The interviews were conducted in the prison unit in person, during the participants' working hours, in a private room. They lasted, on average, an hour and a half and were not recorded due to the impossibility of entering the unit with any technological devices. We chose to note only the central ideas or anchors and critical expressions, which would enable a subsequent analysis based on the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) method (Lefevre & Lefevre, 2014). The key expressions, which correspond to excerpts extracted and synthesized from the collected statements, are exposed in quotation marks in the Results and Discussions topic, and their respective central ideas are highlighted in bold to present an integrated and sequenced collective discourse of the interviewees (Lefevre & Lefevre, 2006).

The CSD method is particularly suitable for this type of research as it allows for the reconstruction of collective thinking through individual discourses, preserving the richness of qualitative data while ensuring anonymity. Its structured approach contributes to the validity of the results by faithfully representing the participants' shared perceptions, and to the reliability by using a systematic process of identifying key expressions and central ideas across multiple interviews.

The data collected were analyzed manually, following the steps proposed by the CSD methodology: identification of key expressions, formulation of central ideas, and construction of collective discourses. No specific software was used due to the restrictions in data collection and the qualitative nature of the analysis. The information was categorized thematically based on the recurrence and convergence of meanings expressed by the participants.

It is essential to highlight that the results are displayed as prescribed for the CSD analysis, which says that the statements must be presented in the first person (Lefevre & Lefevre, 2006). However, in some sections, these personal pronouns were removed from the statements presented to provide greater fluidity to the text. Furthermore, these results were previously presented to the participating subjects, who validated the analyses and felt welcomed as a way of constituting an "expanded self" (Lefevre et al., 2010).

All participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interviews, in which the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity were clearly explained. These concerns were met by not recording the interviews and by collectively synthesizing the data.

Results and Discussions

Of the 15 civil servants involved in the research, only one still needs to complete his degree, and more than half have a law degree or are studying law. Most respondents are male, aged between 29 and 51, married, without children. Thirteen are Criminal Execution Agents (CEA), and two are Specialists. Most interviewees have worked in the prison system in Brazil for more than ten years.

As for the last vacation, most took it less than six months ago. However, information that deserves attention is the fact that a third of the participants reported that “the number of days spent **was not enough** to replenish energy and rest”. Furthermore, some also reported that “**I did not completely disconnect** from my activities during the vacation period”.

Regarding aspects related to work organization, it was possible to observe that the service conducted in the penitentiary investigated generated antagonistic perceptions from the interviewees’ perspective. The words that were most repeated were: “**rewarding**”, “**stressful**”, “**dangerous**”, and “**bureaucratic**”.

A relevant factor that interviewees consider concerns “**contact with the prisoner**”, mainly when conducted by rehabilitation and health services. Such activities “[...] **require time and resources, which are often inexistent**” and are seen as “**unnecessary activities**” for the prisoner’s profile in the unit; “[...] **highly dangerous, with no possibility of resocialization**”. Associated with this is also the “[...] **dealing with the prisoner**”, which exposes them to physical and mental risks, “[...] **commonplace indirect threats and veiled threats**”. Therefore, many feel they are “[...] **walking on eggshells, measuring my actions and words**”.

The analysis also highlights that those employees who maintain direct contact with inmates experience a unique emotional burden. Their daily interactions occur within an environment of constant vigilance, yet they must also recognize the human dimension of the incarcerated population. This dual condition—balancing security demands with ethical and interpersonal sensitivity—places them in a position of heightened psychosocial vulnerability. Such dynamics reaffirm that correctional work is not only a matter of institutional functioning but also a profoundly human activity, in which workers deal with the suffering and complexity of others while managing their own emotional balance.

Despite the previously reported difficulty in staffing, monitoring inmates for services involving their physical, mental, and social rehabilitation is an essential step toward the recovery of the prison population. It should be encouraged by prison management because the good physical health conditions of prisoners can prevent a series of illnesses that can affect officers (Nweze et al., 2021; Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018) and, in the mental aspect, minimize possibilities of conflicts, riots, deaths and suicidal ideation disorders in prison cells and yards (Tyler et al., 2019). Furthermore, the discredit given by interviewees to resocialization is not echoed in the literature (Boaron et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020). On the contrary, it is at the

heart of the institutional mission and should not be forgotten or underestimated by its officers. On the other hand, the concerns observed in their speeches cannot be ignored. Prison architecture, for example, is an institutional element to be considered and must be adequate to what is desired in terms of improvements in the well-being and mental health of officers and offenders, with good light and space conditions (Moran et al., 2016).

Still on the risks, for the other categories that do not have direct contact with the prison population and feel safe inside the unit, “[...] **due to the recent executions of colleagues, I do not feel safe outside the unit**, especially on the way for work”. They reported that the simple fact of working in a prison unit, all possibilities of identification already expose them to risks, which makes many limit their friendship circles or even omit the nature of their work, perhaps one of the key points to explain why categories highly exposed to offenders have had increasing numbers of mental problems. In this sense, studies investigating the relationship between direct exposure to prisoners and the precarious work of prison officers report changes in their personal, family, and daily social lives (Albuquerque & Araujo, 2018).

Professionals are constantly afraid, whether on the way from home to work, and vice versa, or staying at home or going out to a public environment. Consequently, “[...] I live **in a state of constant alert**, and I avoid routine”. Such risks, sometimes, “[...] **spill over into my relationships and experiences outside of work**, especially with my spouse and children”. Ben-David et al. (1996) reinforce that this fear of work is present in all prison professionals involved directly and indirectly with prison inmates, often making officers feel incapable, vulnerable, insecure, unprotected, and constantly in danger. Disorders may develop without institutional support and monitoring, leading to extreme violence against the prison population (Rumin et al., 2011).

Concerning regulations, as already evidenced by most of the officers, “the work in the unit is **bureaucratic**”. “With **many procedures, regulations and work routines**, although necessary for the smooth running of activities, in some cases **they hamper the process and make work difficult**”. Such standards are often considered “[...] **inadequate and obsolete** for the reality of the unit, created by those who have never worked here”. “This is made worse by the **low, insufficient staffing**” for more than half of the officers participating in the research, which means that these standards cannot be met by meeting the incongruous requirements of speed and quality.

These findings reflect a psychosocial dynamic in which excessive bureaucracy and lack of autonomy contribute to a sense of helplessness, a phenomenon already discussed by Dejours (1992) in his analysis of the gap between prescribed and real work. The respondents’ perception that “my hands are tied” reveals not only organizational rigidity but also the internalization of institutional control mechanisms that amplify psychological strain. This aligns with findings by Paraguassú-Chaves et al. (2018), who reported that such structural constraints are key predictors of burnout among correctional staff. Similarly, the narratives about fear and hypervig-

ilance outside the prison environment illustrate the blurring of boundaries between work and private life, supporting the notion that correctional work extends its psychological impact beyond institutional walls (Carleton et al., 2020). This continuity of anxiety between professional and personal spheres underscores the need for organizational strategies that promote emotional decompression and resilience.

Furthermore, according to them, “the trials also get stuck due to **the lack of harmony** between the Divisions and Services”. This, in turn, makes it difficult to perceive autonomy over the results of their work. Consequently, they explain that “**my hands are tied** because **I need information and activities from the other part** which, often due to either **disagreement or lack of knowledge of the need** for these or even due to **lack of either personal or internal conditions**, are not, respectively, made available and carried out”.

Still, concerning the availability of information to conduct their functions, many reported that “**the information comes at the last minute or is not complete**”. Such facts create insecurity and demand more time from the servant to further clarify the information provided.

Regarding the pace of work, more than half of the respondents characterized it as “**hectic**”, “**intense**”, “**strong**”, “**heavy**”, and “**high**”. More than a third reported, “**I do not have a break**, not even for lunch. I eat at the desk, facing the computer”. They feel that they have “[...] **pressure from all sides**”, “[...] mainly from the System, for issuing documents, within short deadlines; carrying out standard procedures and reports for accountability that **require time**”. In addition, “[...] there is still my **self-demand, the pressure from prisoners, colleagues and Management**”. This finding corroborates the study by Bezerra et al. (2016), which shows how the intense pace of work increases levels of work stress, which, if not corrected promptly, can lead to significant problems such as burnout syndrome, considering persistent symptoms, as accumulation of fatigue, depersonalization, and exhaustion, among others (Asante et al., 2019; Bakhshi et al., 2019).

As **for physical working conditions**, in general, concerning lighting and ventilation, it is good. However, there were adverse reports regarding the comfort and quality of the furniture, “[...] especially the chairs”, which, according to them, “**are not ergonomic**”, and concerning the space, “**poorly designed and small in some units**”. Regarding the quality of the uniform, the complaint was more recurrent, especially regarding the pants that are provided, since, from their perception, it is of “**poor quality**”, “**uncomfortable**”, and “**inadequate cut**”. Therefore, most people prefer to acquire it on their own. The other items, referring to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), combat boots, and others “[...] **are generally good**”. However, when it comes to specific work instruments, they feel that “[...] **they leave something to be desired** in terms of **quality, updating or adequacy**”. For example, “Deprecated Body Scan”, with “obsolete technology”, and “unarmored vehicles”. Additionally, “I feel the **need for more training for specific activities**, particularly for activities relating to the use of Body Scan, and bidding and contract processes”. In general, there needs to be more

development of these officers for their roles as managers. “I recognize that I need to improve my management and intra- and interpersonal relationship skills.”

Finally, regarding socio-professional relationships, “[...] they are generally satisfactory, even if strictly professional”. However, we observed that the problems diagnosed in aspects relating to work organization generate “[...] ideological conflicts, often veiled”, which impact the quality of interpersonal relationships experienced in the work context. Speeches such as “[...] they do not want to work in partnership, they do not see the bigger picture” demonstrate the existence of these conflicts. Concerning problems involving horizontal relationships, team formations should be flexible and consider common elements among members, which can reduce interpersonal conflicts, minimizing risks that already exist in the organizational climate (Ricciardelli et al., 2019). Managers and shift leaders need to know each subordinate in-depth and ensure that they work during their shifts with colleagues with whom they have affinities and good partnership relationships. Wrong grouping choices can increase stress and take away from officers one of the few sources of relief on highly stressful days in the workplace.

The relationship between bosses and subordinates is also affected by two complementary reasons: “lack of training and management development, mainly due to the lack of knowledge and ability to deal with people”, and the “existence of either negligent, uncommitted or unqualified officers to work in a prison system”.

Two sides must be observed regarding the findings of the past. On the one hand, a lack of commitment and greater vulnerability to psychological illnesses on the part of officers is a problem that is familiar when looking at similar research (Boaron et al., 2021). On the other hand, negligence and lack of organizational commitment have also been influenced by vertical relationships. It can be implicitly deduced that there are situations such as excessive demands, lack of autonomy, organizational support, encouragement of officer self-control, and lack of recognition from leaders (Paraguassú-Chaves et al., 2018; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000; Sygit-Kowalkowska et al., 2021), which have affected the motivation of those subordinates. In this case, the institution needs to review its work processes and analyze whether it promotes a healthier work environment for its officers. Multilevel training, for example, can be a first step toward correcting broken vertical relationships (Taylor & Swartz, 2021).

Taken together, the results demonstrate how the interdependence between organizational structures, material conditions, and interpersonal dynamics shapes a complex web of psychological risks. The findings reinforce Dejours’ (1994) psychodynamics of work, particularly the dialectic between pleasure and suffering, by showing that correctional employees derive meaning and satisfaction from their roles while simultaneously experiencing exhaustion and fear. This ambivalence emphasizes that institutional design and managerial practices are not neutral but play a decisive role in sustaining or alleviating mental strain.

Conclusions

This study analyzes how the high-risk environment of a Brazilian federal maximum-security prison affects employees' mental health. Constant exposure to threats, strict security routines, and daily operational pressures contribute to stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. The findings demonstrate that the nature of the prison environment not only affects individual mental health but also influences organizational dynamics, decision-making processes, and interpersonal relationships within the institution. From a practical perspective, these results underscore the urgent need for institutional strategies aimed at promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm in correctional settings. Initiatives such as continuous psychological support, regular mental health assessments, stress management training, and organizational policies that foster healthier work environments can mitigate the risks identified in this study. Additionally, the results suggest that leadership practices and organizational culture play a significant role in shaping workers' mental health, pointing to the importance of management approaches that prioritize well-being alongside security and control.

This study also contributes to the academic debate by addressing a notable gap in the literature: the lack of qualitative research focused on the subjective experiences of employees working in Brazilian federal maximum-security prison units. It highlights the importance of understanding how institutional factors intersect with psychological outcomes, thereby broadening the discussion on occupational health in correctional contexts. Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations, including its focus on a single institution and a limited number of participants, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the absence of audio recordings may have led to the loss of some nuances in the discourse, despite the careful note-taking process. Potential biases in the participants' perceptions, shaped by their roles and experiences, may also have influenced the results.

Nevertheless, the insights provided offer a valuable foundation for further research. Future studies could expand on these findings by conducting comparative analyses across different types of prison facilities, examining variations in mental health outcomes among various professional categories, and employing longitudinal designs to assess how psychological impacts evolve over time.

Moreover, research evaluating the effectiveness of specific institutional interventions could inform evidence-based policies aimed at improving working conditions and mental health in correctional environments. In summary, this study highlights the complex interplay between institutional structures and psychological well-being in a high-risk occupational setting. It calls for sustained academic attention and practical action to safeguard the mental health of those who work daily to ensure security and order within correctional institutions.

It is important to emphasize that the conclusions related to mental health are based on the perceptions and narratives of the participants, not on psychometric or clinical evaluations. As a case study, the results reflect the lived experiences of workers in a specific federal institution, which may, however, resonate with similar dynamics in other prison settings.

Although the theme of mental health in correctional work has been addressed in several international studies, there is still a lack of evidence from Latin American contexts. In this regard, the present research offers an important contribution by analyzing a federal Brazilian penitentiary, an institutional setting rarely explored in regional literature. The findings, therefore, not only confirm patterns identified in other countries but also highlight context-specific factors—such as bureaucratic rigidity, social stigma, and limited managerial autonomy—that shape the psychosocial experience of correctional staff in Brazil.

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Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and all information collected was used exclusively for academic and scientific purposes.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Agostinha Mafalda Barra de Oliveira: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Supervision; Writing – Review & Editing.

Juliana Carvalho de Sousa: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal Analysis; Supervision; Writing – Review & Editing.

Aline Francilurdes Nery do Vale: Investigation; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing – Original Draft.

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Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the conception, analysis, interpretation of results, or writing of this manuscript.