

What has been written about burnout syndrome in prison officers?

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Working with prison inmates involves constant contact with a stigmatized population, in hostile conditions where the working environment facilitates burnout syndrome among prison workers. The objective of this study is to carry out a bibliographic review to find pioneering and current publications, recognize the authors specializing in the subject and identify the most common findings of their research.

Material and method: The tree of science (ToS) reference search method was used, which applies an analysis of data networks to find the most relevant scientific articles on a specific topic, in this case burnout syndrome. This tool shows the results in the form of a tree, where the root is formed by the classic publications, the trunk for the ones that have shaped the subject and the leaves are the most recent articles.

Results: We found 140 published documents. The ToS selected 92 articles. The studies contained in the three parts of the ToS were analyzed; some of the determining factors were related to organizational structure, participation in decision-making, satisfaction and commitment to work, and lack of service and programs to help with depression or other mental conditions.

Discussion: Some factors related to the work that these workers do, combined with the organizational shortages present in prisons, impose stress that leads to burnout syndrome in these employees. To reduce the syndrome, structural changes are needed in the institutions, as well as the strengthening of personal and professional skills and the social integration of prison workers.

Key words: burnout syndrome; psychological burnout; mental health; occupational health; prisons.

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INTRODUCTION

Prison staff are responsible for the control, custody and application of restrictive confinement measures, they have the difficult task of re-socialising offenders to ensure that they can live in society without putting their or other people's lives at risk¹.

The hostile conditions in the work setting predispose staff to illness, including mental issues, cardiovascular diseases² and substance abuse, making work in such settings even more difficult. Employees have problems with developing a positive professional identity that can help them to maintain their self-esteem, even when they are persons with a high professional reputation³.

Political and economic variables, budget shortages, casual labour and corruption have also been identified as other structural factors that have a direct

impact on the prevalence of burnout syndrome among prison workers⁴.

The mental health issues found among prison staff include the incidence of homicide, suicide, occupational accidents, difficulties with sleeping, anxiety, social dysfunctions caused by feelings of anger with others, and depression, along with somatic problems such as high blood pressure, peptic ulcers and heart disease, suicidal ideation and suicide^{5,6}.

Braun¹ and other authors³ have warned of the high probabilities of suffering from burnout syndrome, resulting in difficulties in achieving job satisfaction. However, the consequences of burnout go beyond the workplace.

Further research is needed on burnout syndrome among prison staff, commencing with a search and analysis of the studies carried out in recent years, the

most widely recognised authors and then seeing how knowledge about the syndrome among prison officers has been generated.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to carry out a bibliographical review to discover the pioneering and current publications on burnout syndrome, and find authors who specialise in the subject and identify the most common pathologies found by the authors in their research.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The Virtual Health Library and its descriptors in health sciences (DeCS) were used to verify the terms accepted in the medical field studied in this review. A search strategy was then designed with different word combinations in English. These were: “burnout syndrome”, “emotional burnout”, “prison guards”, “prison staff”, “correctional officers”; while terms in Spanish included, “síndrome de agotamiento”, “síndrome de burnout”, “guardia de prisión”, “guardia carcelario”.

The Boolean operators “AND”, “OR” were applied, using the *MedLine* base and its descriptors of medical subjects (MeSH, medical subject headings) to find the most common key words in use. The Thomson Reuters Web of Science (WoS) data base was consulted in June 2020, with a search range in time for the tool of 20 standard years.

The search code TS = (burnout AND correctional officer) was used with the most popular terms obtained in *MedLine*, to obtain the necessary bibliographical references and download them in text format (.txt), and use these to create the tree of science with the Tree of Science. This web tool uses graph theory to select scientific articles⁷, and build an information tree, placing the classic articles in the roots, the ones that give structure to knowledge about the subject in the trunk, and the most recent articles in the leaves⁸.

The tree was obtained by uploading the downloaded bibliographical information in text format to the Tree of Science website (available at: <https://tos.coreofscience.com/>), where ToS has inclusion criteria, such as articles with main search terms in English: burnout syndrome and correctional officers. The software also applies the exclusion criteria by selecting articles that are repeated or do not include the selected key words.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 140 bibliographical references were obtained from the *MedLine* data base. The ToS cri-

teria selected 90 articles to form the tree of references and excluded the other 50 (Figure 1).

The articles include five that were published in the 1980s, while 6.17% and 2.46% were published in 1996 and 1998, respectively; 14 were published in the 2000s (17.28%) and 74.07%, (62 articles) were published between 2010 and 2020.

The most notable author in the review was professor Eric G. Lambert, who was identified in all the sections of the tree as the principal author or co-author. Professor Lambert has specialised in criminal justice, prisons and correctional officers since 1999.

Root of tree

The predominant factors in the studies that made up the root of the tree (Table 1) were identified as stress and overwork among prison officers (Table 2), which were attributed to supervision at work, and the organisational structure and climate^{9,10}, which affected the commitment of prison staff to their job¹¹. These factors have been identified in more extensive occupational literature.

Maslach et al.¹² showed individual stress within a organisational context that is broader than the relationship between people and their work. Likewise, Whitehead and Lindquist¹³ found that administrative processes cause distress to officers, while direct contact with inmates does not.

Annstrong and Griffin¹⁴ also found differences between prison officers and healthcare staff, and the personal and environmental precursors for stress in these two groups.

Maslach and Jackson¹⁵ applied a scale to measure burnout syndrome in a number of human service professions, the result of which was the subscales of burnout, depersonalisation and personal fulfilment. Cheek and Di Stefano¹⁶ also found consequences for

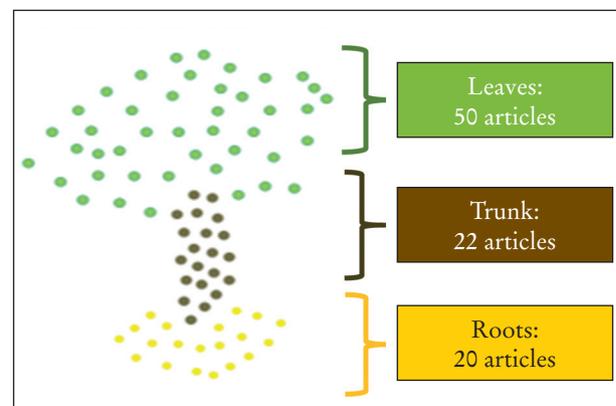


Figure 1. Shape of references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

Table 1. Articles extracted from the roots of the references tree with the Tree of Science.

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| Cullen, FT. (1985). <i>Justice Q</i> , 2. | Gerstein, LH. (1987). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 14, 352. |
| Triplett, R. (1996). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 24, 291-308. | Dollard, MF. (1998). <i>J Occup Health Psychol</i> , 3, 243. |
| Cheek, FE. (1983). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 11, 105. | Lambert, EG. (2004). <i>Prison J</i> , 84, 208. |
| Whitehead, JT. (1986). <i>J Res Crime Delinq</i> , 23, 23. | Maslach, C. (1982). <i>Burnout Cost Caring</i> . |
| Maslach, C. (1981). <i>J Occup Behav</i> , 2, 99. | Hurst, T. (1997). <i>Am J Crim Justice</i> , 22, 121. |
| Annstrong, GS. (2004). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 32, 577. | Carlson, JR. (2006). <i>J Offender Rehabil</i> , 43, 19. |
| Finney, C. (2013). <i>Bmc Public Health</i> , 13. | Whitehead, JT. (1989). <i>Burnout Probation Co</i> . |
| Lindquist, CA. (1986). <i>J Offender Counsell</i> , 10, 5. | Griffin, ML. (2001). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 29, 219. |
| Maslach, C. (2001). <i>Annu Rev Psychol</i> , 52, 397. | Finn, P. (1998). <i>Fed Probat</i> , 62, 65. |
| Vanvoorhis, P. (1991). <i>J Res Crime Delinq</i> , 28, 472. | Lambert, EG. (2005). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 33, 165. |

Table 2. Predisposing factors found in the roots of the references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

| |
|---|
| Predisposing factors related to supervision, job structure and organisational climate |
| Stress and overwork |
| Interpersonal relationships |
| Labour relations |
| Job performance |

physical health, emotional and interpersonal relationships and occupational performance. On the other hand, Carlson et al.¹⁷ stated that prison officer show greater feelings of personal achievement.

Tree trunk

A review of the studies in the tree trunk (Table 3), showed the most prevalent factors associated with the job (Table 4) are overwork, demanding social con-

tacts and low social status¹⁸, along with a lack of commitment, little participation in decision making, work satisfaction and perceived danger¹⁹.

Morgan et al.²⁰ also commented that less experience and more responsibilities at work create higher levels of depersonalisation, emotional burnout and low personal fulfilment. Other factors found by Garland²¹ were a perceived lack of administrative support and contact with inmates. Lamber et al.²² studied different dimensions of burnout, and found that each one was influenced by some kind of social support.

Brough and Williams²³ found a considerable lack of attention to complaints by prison officers. They concluded that improvements need to be made in training supervisors and in the measures to deal with complaints. Griffin et al.²⁴ also concluded that work burnout is damaging to officers and the organisation, and that there is a growing need to provide job stability to prison officers.

Table 3. Articles extracted from the trunk of the references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

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|---|--|
| Griffin, ML. (2012). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 39(9), 1131. | Lambert, EG. (2010). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 37(11). |
| Schaufeli, WB. (2000). <i>Int J Stress Manage</i> , 7(1), 19. | Garland, B. (2004). <i>Prison J</i> , 84(4), 452. |
| Harizanova, S. (2020). <i>Work</i> , 65(1), 71-77. | Viotti, S. (2016). <i>Work</i> , 53(4), 871. |
| Keinan, G. (2007). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 34(3), 380. | Mitchell, O. (2000). <i>Justice Q</i> , 17(2), 333. |
| Cieslak, R. (2008). <i>Pers Indiv Differ</i> , 45(7), 666. | Kinman, G. (2017). <i>Occup Med-Oxford</i> , 67(6), 456. |
| Morgan, RD. (2002). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 29(2), 144. | Lambert, EG. (2010). <i>Prison J</i> , 90(1), 94-114. |
| Useche, SA. (2019). <i>PLoS One</i> , 14(2). | Farnese, ML. (2017). <i>Work</i> , 58(3), 319. |
| Oliveira, RV. (2016). <i>Work</i> , 55(1), 215. | |
| Brough, P. (2007). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 34(4), 553. | Lambert, EG. (2012). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 39(7), 938. |
| | Kinman, G. (2016). <i>Int J Workplace Heal</i> , 9(3), 290. |
| Dowden, C. (2004). <i>J Crim Just</i> , 32(1), 31. | Lambert, EG. (2015). <i>Sage Open</i> , 5(2). |

Table 4. Predisposing factors found in the trunk of the references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

| Stress producing factors related to the job |
|--|
| Overwork. |
| Lack of commitment. |
| Little participation in decision making. |
| Job satisfaction. |
| Perceived danger. |
| Little experience and more responsibility at work. |
| Perceived lack of administrative support. |
| Contact with inmates. |

Leaves of the tree

The leaves of the tree (Table 5) included data analysis studies. Jaegers et al.²⁵ identified predictors of depression in their study, which was found to be high

among prison officers and was strongly influenced by burnout at work, above other health indicators. Ricciardelli et al.²⁶ found barriers such as lack of medical benefits, low salaries and shift work, which impeded access to mental health services.

Blanco-Álvarez and Thoen²⁷ found that occupational stress was significantly related to stress, anxiety and depression, but was not linked to burnout.

The authors found no significant differences between men and women in any variable that they studied. When considering other outcomes of burnout in prison officers, Shepherd et al.²⁸ stated in their results that prison staff have emotional demands that are positively associated with burnout, and with alcohol use.

Jaegers et al.²⁵ emphasise the fact that mitigating the factors of stress in the workplace and identifying specific interventions are necessary to reduce the risk of depression among prison officers.

Ricciardelli et al.²⁶ proposed quarterly, bi-annual or annual appointments with a mental health profes-

Table 5. Articles extracted from the leaves of the references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

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|--|--|--|---|--|
| Ricciardelli, R. (2020). <i>Front Psychol</i> , 11. | Wagenfeld, A. (2018). <i>Occup Ther Ment Heal</i> , 34(3), 285. | Shepherd, BR. (2019). <i>J Occup Health Psych</i> , 24(4), 438. | Wooldredge, J. (2016). <i>Prison J</i> , 96(4), 576. | Brough, P. (2015). <i>Stress Health</i> , 31(2), 138. |
| Rania, N. (2020). <i>Prison J</i> , 100(6), 747. | Lambert, EG. (2018). <i>Secur J</i> , 31(2), 618. | Reeves, DW. (2012). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 39(10), 1361. | Lambert, EG. (2020). <i>Psychiat Psychol Law</i> , 27(4), 558. | Halsey, M. (2017). <i>Prison J</i> , 97(1), 52. |
| Choi, J. (2020). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 47(7), 905. | Lambert, EG. (2017). <i>J Appl Sec Res</i> , 12(3), 337. | Law, FM. (2016). <i>Int J Offender Ther</i> , 60(11), 1257. | Jaegers, LA. (2020). <i>Prison J</i> , 100(2), 240. | Lambert, EG. (2019). <i>Int Crim Justice Rev</i> , 29(4), 361. |
| Tohochynskyi, O. (2020). <i>Postmod Open</i> , 11(2), 161. | Wooldredge, J. (2016). <i>J Crim Law Crim</i> , 106(1), 125. | Eide, HMK. (2019). <i>J Prison Educ Reentr</i> , 6(3), 316. | Hogan, NL. (2017). <i>Crim Justice Stud</i> , 30(4), 421. | Lambert, EG. (2018). <i>J Crime Justice</i> , 41(1), 98. |
| Viotti, S. (2017). <i>G Ital Med Lav Ergon</i> , 39(4), 240. | Worley, RM. (2019). <i>Deviant Behav</i> , 40(8), 1007. | Holloway, ED. (2019). <i>Eur J Probat</i> , 11(2), 72. | Walker, EJ. (2018). <i>Int J Offender Ther</i> , 62(14), 4528. | Esposito, F. (2015). <i>Bmc Int Health Hum R</i> , 15. |
| Ricciardelli, R. (2021). <i>J Foren Psychol Res</i> , 21(1), 40. | Vogel, J. (2020). <i>Front Psychiatry</i> , 11. | Holt, TJ. (2017). <i>J Crime Justice</i> , 40(1), 34. | Jin, XH. (2018). <i>Int J Offender Ther</i> , 62(2), 551. | Dodd, S. (2020). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 47(9), 1190. |
| Isenhardt, A. (2019). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 46(10), 1405. | Kowalski, MA. (2020). <i>Prison J</i> , 100(1), 98. | Kras, KR. (2019). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 46(3), 475. | Schiff, M. (2019). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 46(1), 136. | Cho, S. (2020). <i>Curr Psychol</i> , 39(5), 1521. |
| Piotrowski, A. (2020). <i>Int J Env Res Pub He</i> , 17(21). | Blanco-Álvarez, TM. (2017). <i>Rev Costarric Psicol</i> , 36(1), 45. | Lin, YS. (2017). <i>Asian J Criminol</i> , 12(3), 217. | Jin, XH. (2018). <i>Int J Law Crime Just</i> , 52, 36. | Suliman, N. (2018). <i>Crim Justice Behav</i> , 45(5), 628. |
| Botek, M. (2019). <i>J E Eur Manag Stud</i> , 24(4), 545. | Lambert, EG. (2020). <i>Soc Sci J</i> , 57(4), 405. | Hernández-Martín, L. (2006). <i>Int J Clin Hlth Psych</i> , 6(3), 599. | Ricciardelli, R. (2020). <i>Int J Env Res Pub He</i> , 17(13). | Schlosser, LZ. (2010). <i>Psychol Serv</i> , 7(1), 34. |
| Kinman, G. (2019). <i>Prison J</i> , 99(3), 363. | Liu, JH. (2020). <i>Int J Offender Ther</i> , 64(8), 791. | Valentine, C. (2012). <i>J Fam Violence</i> , 27(6), 531. | Lambert, EG. (2017). <i>Int J Offender Ther</i> , 61(16), 1892. | Bademci, HO. (2016). <i>Psychodyn Pract</i> , 22(4), 351. |

Table 6. Factors found in the leaves of the references tree with the Tree of Science web tool.

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| Predictive factors of fatigue, anxiety and depression. |
| Lack of medical benefits, low salaries and shift work impede access to mental health services. |
| Stress, anxiety and depression. |
| Ambiguity and overwork. |

sional, to evaluate any changes in employees' mental health. The appointments would take place outside the prison to ensure confidentiality. Team training was also proposed to reduce interpersonal conflicts at work and increase morale in an improved work setting.

Bademci et al.²⁹ studied the before and after of a psychosocial support programme and found that it helped to reduce levels of fatigue, depression and anxiety among the prison officers who participated. At the end of the programme, participants reported greater job satisfaction, reduced emotional burnout and depersonalisation and increased personal fulfilment.

DISCUSSION

Most authors agreed that one of the triggers of stress is the performance and working environment of prisons. Tewksbury and Higgins³⁰, and Cantisano and Domínguez³¹ agree in their conclusions about conflicts over occupational roles., Lambert et al.³² also add that job ambiguity and overwork are dominant factors. Dowden and Tellier¹⁹ and other authors³³ identify aspects such as participation in decision making, job satisfaction and professional commitment.

Minuzzi and Kieling³⁴ also identify lack of organisation, poor working conditions and labour relations as predisposing factors for burnout syndrome. Bracco et al.⁴ and other authors³³⁻³⁵ relate workers' distress to lack of job experience.

When considering more controversial factors in stress, Cantisano et al.³¹ and Hernández³⁶ observed that psychosocial factors are important in predicting burnout syndrome. Lovell and Brown³⁷ mention personality variables, especially neuroticism. Another factor defined as controversial is the perceived low status described by Schaufelli¹⁸ and Reagan³⁸.

Most of the authors of the basic articles share the idea that the best way for prison staff to cope with stress is through support from family, friends and

workmates. Oginska³⁹ confirms the fact that personal and social resources and support help to reduce stress at work.

Dvoskin and Spiers⁴⁰ explain the importance of acknowledging the roles played by prison staff, and that encouraging such activities is a way of reducing stress among employees.

Bracco et al.⁴¹ indicate that structural changes are needed in institutions to reduce professional burnout syndrome. Other proposed changes include strengthening personal and professional skills and the social integration of prison officers.

CONCLUSIONS

Interest in the health and working conditions of prison officers has increased in recent years. It is important to continue with research into this population, since they are the most valuable people in the system, and awareness of the physical and mental health conditions at work will help to determine their level of wellbeing and their performance.

Changes also need to be made in prison organisations to strengthen prison officers' personal, professional, occupational and psychological skills, and so reduce the incidence of burnout and other health issues among these employees.

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