

Assessment of Psychological Needs and Quality of Life of Penitentiary Security Agents in the State of Paraíba

Carmen Amorim-Gaudêncio^{1*}, Sayonara Pereira da Silva², Lucas Felício Gil Braz¹

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Abstract

The Penitentiary Security Agent (PSA) profession can expose individuals to risk, fear, and violence in the workplace, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety that can impact their quality of life. This study evaluated psychological needs and quality of life characteristics of a group of PSAs in João Pessoa, Paraíba. Anxiety levels, impulsiveness, and quality of life were evaluated in 64 professionals using various scales. The results showed that anxiety was moderate in men only in the Cognitive and Physiological scales and absent in the Motor and General Level of Anxiety scales. In women, moderate anxiety was observed in all four subscales. Quality of life was rated as regular in all four domains, with Social Relations being the best-structured and Environment being the lowest scoring domain. The evaluation of impulsivity showed a low score in the Lack of Concentration and Persistence factor, an extreme lower score in the Cognitive Control and Future Planning factors, and a medium score in the Audacity and Temerity factor. These results differ from the literature, indicating high anxiety scores and low quality of life for PSAs. Thus, further studies are needed to understand the impact of the work environment on the psyche of PSAs and develop actions to improve their psychological needs, manage anxiety and impulsivity, and positively impact their quality of life.

Keywords: Anxiety; Impulsivity; Quality of Life; Penitentiary Security Agent.

INTRODUCTION

The prison system is a product of the disciplinary society that affects both the incarcerated individuals and the employees of the sector. According to Macedo (2004), the prison is an example of a total institution that interferes with the physical aspect of the institution itself and the subjective aspect related to institutionalized individuals. As a result, these institutions tend to suppress the individuals who live there, whether they are incarcerated or employees, even though the latter play a necessary role in maintaining the "disciplinary society" (Alphin & Debrix 2021).

The employees working in these institutions occupy a unique position in the system, serving both as enforcers of

the law and as caretakers of the prisoners. This dual role imposes significant psychological and emotional demands, constantly balancing the responsibility of maintaining order and security with the duty of providing humane treatment to the inmates (Maculan & Sterchele 2022). This phenomenon is evidence of the chaotic and stressful life experienced by the Penitentiary Security Agent (PSA) (Ferreira, Menezes, & Dias 2012).

The Brazilian prison population continues to experience a significant growth trend (Ferreira, Menezes, & Dias 2012), which can contribute to overcrowding in correctional facilities, making inmate management increasingly challenging. The Statistical Information System of the Brazilian Penitentiary System (SISDEPEN), for instance, indicates a continuous growth in the imprisonment rate over 20 years from 2000, with only an 11% decrease in 2020 and a resumption of growth in 2021 (SISDEPEN, 2021).

PSAs are primarily responsible for maintaining the confinement of prisoners and detainees. As a result, these professionals become vulnerable due to the high-risk environment and frequent exposure to stressful and anxiety-inducing situations, such as intimidation, aggression, threats, and the possibility of rebellions. Additionally, in many cases, they are required to perform the work of an entire team on their own (Lourenço 2010; Soares & Bueno 2016).

The daily work demands intense emotional support, which can evoke a variety of feelings, including anxiety. This emotion, which physiologically involves a pattern of

¹ Federal University of Paraíba, João Pessoa, Brazil

² Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Brazil

*) *corresponding author*

Carmen Amorim-Gaudêncio, Ph.D.
Laboratório de Avaliação e Intervenção Clínica Forense – LAICF. Universidade Federal da Paraíba - UFPB. Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes – CCHLA. Campus I. Departamento de Psicologia. Jardim Cidade Universitária João Pessoa-PB, Brasil CEP: 58033-455
Tel.: +55 (83) 3216-7337 / Celular: +55 (83) 99675-4045.
E-mail: camoring@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5972-1601>

cognitive processing aimed at vigilance and anticipation in the face of potential danger, is characterized by apprehension, discomfort, and worry (Mathews 1990; Lakshmi 2022). Excessive and generalized responses of fear and apprehension to stimuli that do not pose a threat can become maladaptive and are associated with the pathological expression of anxiety (Wang et al. 2021), which can be considered a mental disorder depending on its intensity and duration (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

Given that PSAs perform an important and high-risk public service by safeguarding civil society, as determined by legal instruments, the objective of this study was to investigate the psychological needs of Penitentiary Security Agents in the city of João Pessoa based on the assessment of anxiety, impulsivity, and quality of life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Procedures

The study was carried out with authorization from the Department of Psychology (UFPB) and the State Department of Penitentiary Administration (SEAP) with a convenience sample. The research followed the ethical procedures established in resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council. Participants signed the Informed Consent Form, strictly respecting the ethical aspects of research involving human beings. After explaining the study's objectives and obtaining the participants' consent, the evaluation protocol began. First, anxiety levels were assessed using the Situational and Response Anxiety Inventory (ISRA), adapted and validated for the Brazilian context by Amorim-Gaudêncio (1998). The instrument consists of three anxiety scales (Cognitive [C], Physiological [F], and Motor [M]), four scales of specific anxiety situations (Evaluation [FI], Interpersonal [FII], Phobic [FIII], and Daily [FIV]), and a General Anxiety scale (T). The responses on the Cognitive (C) scale relate to thoughts and feelings of worry, fear, and insecurity, causing tension, lack of concentration, and decision-making difficulties. The responses on the Physiological (F) scale relate to symptoms of discomfort such as palpitations, tachycardia, difficulty swallowing, chills, and sweating, among others. The responses on the Motor (M) scale relate to motor agitation, difficulty in verbal expression, unwanted movements such as repetitive movements with feet or hands, and hyperactivity, among others. The responses on the situational scales relate to anxiety related to situations where the individual feels evaluated (taking a test or interview, speaking in public, etc.), relationship situations (meeting new people, initiating conversations, etc.), facing feared situations (taking an injection, crossing a bridge, traveling by plane, etc.), and every day or nonspecific situations. However, for this study, only the scales of cognitive anxiety, physiological anxiety, motor anxiety, and general anxiety scale were used.

Secondly, the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire, validated for the Brazilian context by Fleck (2000), was administered. This questionnaire consists of four domains of quality of life, aiming to assess physical capacity, psychological well-being, social relationships, and the environment in which individuals are situated, as well as the overall quality of life (Alves, 2010). The instrument comprises 26 items, and respondents provide their responses on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, indicating the degree of agreement with each item statement for each domain.

Next, the agents responded to the ESAVI (Impulsivity Assessment Scale) developed by Ávila-Batista (2011). Impulsivity is a complex construct that refers to hasty, unplanned behaviors with often detrimental consequences for individuals' lives. This instrument consists of 31 items, where respondents indicate their level of agreement on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) regarding each item. The scale is divided into four factors: I) Lack of Concentration and Persistence, which refers to the individual's inability to maintain focus on a specific task; II) Cognitive Control, which relates to the extent to which individuals reflect on their actions before acting; III) Future Planning, which assesses the ability to plan actions that extend beyond the present moment; and IV) Audacity and Temerity, which indicate the inability to assess situations that may involve some risk.

Finally, participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire consisting of 22 questions related to age, marital status, level of education, and family income. Additionally, questions regarding work-related factors were included, such as years of service, difficulties in performing the profession, and job dissatisfaction experienced in the work environment.

Participants

A total of 64 ASPs participated in the research, including 46 men and 18 women, with ages ranging from 24 to 61 years ($M = 34.26$; $SD = 7.2$). Among the respondents, 42.2% were single and 43.8% were married, with the highest percentage (46%) having completed a bachelor's degree as their level of education. The Agents were from five prison units in the city of João Pessoa, Paraíba.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from the assessment protocol were analyzed using the software SPSS - version 18. The responses were tabulated, and any missing values were replaced. From the factor scores, statistical procedures were conducted, including descriptive analyses to obtain means, standard deviations, frequency distributions, and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the qualitative observation, no visible behaviors of anxiety, such as restlessness, repetitive hand/foot movements, and hyperactivity, were identified. Such behaviors are classified by Amorim-Gaudêncio (1998) as responses related to anxiety in the motor scale.

In the evaluation of Anxiety, it was noticed that the Cognitive Response System [C] presented the higher percentile among men ($M = 46.2$; $SD = 27.7$), while the Physical Response System [F] showed a higher index among women ($M = 37.7$; $SD = 45.6$) (See Table 1). In this case, men tend to express thoughts and feelings of worry, fear, and insecurity to a greater extent than women. On the other hand, women tend to experience palpitations, rapid heartbeat, and chills more frequently than men. However, both groups are classified as having Moderate Anxiety. This result is intriguing since a significant difference between men and women is expected, considering that male ASPs have a more demanding workload due to tasks such as escorting, surveillance, and involvement in armed and operational procedures.

Table 1. Analysis of the sample regarding ISRA variables for men and women.

ISRA Subscales	Sex	M	SD	Percentile
C	<i>m</i>	46,2	27,7	35
	<i>f</i>	57,5	39,5	30
P	<i>m</i>	19,9	21,8	30
	<i>f</i>	37,7	45,6	45
M	<i>m</i>	14,8	20,8	25
	<i>f</i>	27,0	31,8	30
G	<i>m</i>	81,0	64,1	25
	<i>f</i>	119,3	113,6	30

Note: (C) - Cognitive; (P) - Physiological; (M) - Motor; (G) - General level of anxiety or trait anxiety; (M) - Mean; (SD) - Standard Deviation; (m) - Male; (f) - Female.

Based on the results, it was observed that women have moderate anxiety in all four evaluative subscales of the ISRA (Percentile > 30 < 50), while men have moderate anxiety only in the Cognitive and Physiological scales (Percentile > 30 < 50), but they have Absence of Anxiety or Minimal Anxiety (Percentile > 5 < 25) in the Motor and General Anxiety Level scales. This psychological assessment shows that despite the literature portraying the Prison Security Agent as a professional characterized by stress and anxiety, the analyzed sample shows normality regarding this characteristic. Moderate Anxiety corresponds to individuals with regular nervous system activity, absence of nausea, dizziness, and tremors, as well as ease in making decisions, concentrating, and lack of insecurity (Amorim-Gaudêncio 1998). Therefore, it raises the hypothesis that this group of analyzed agents is likely well adapted to their situation or has adequate emotional management of tension-related situations in their regular work.

Regarding Quality of Life, the respondents obtained a regular classification in all four domains. Among these, the lowest score was obtained in the Environment domain ($M = 3.4$; $SD = 0.4$). This result indicates the need for improvement and enhancement in terms of security conditions, financial resources, transportation, and healthcare and social care. On the other hand, the domain of Social Relationships showed the highest score ($M = 3.9$; $SD = 0.4$), indicating that the group has regular social support and personal relationships. These results are different when compared to studies conducted in other regions of the country. It can be inferred that this data may be influenced by the current support provided to Prison Security Agents in the city of João Pessoa, as well as reflecting the low rates of riots and violence in the local prison units. After all, according to Ferreira, Menezes, and Dias (2012), intimidations, degrading conditions, riots, and uprisings generate fear in individuals, leading to a series of difficulties that impact their quality of life.

The assessment of Impulsivity shows a percentile classification considered Low for the Lack of Concentration and Persistence factor ($M = 34.6$; $SD = 4.1$), which refers to individuals who are unable to maintain focus on a specific task or activity for an extended period without getting distracted. It shows an Extremely Low classification for the Cognitive Control ($M = 22.7$; $SD = 2.9$) and Future Planning ($M = 14.6$; $SD = 1.8$) factors, which pertain to individuals who reflect on their actions and seek to evaluate them before acting. Finally, it indicates an Average classification for the Audacity and Recklessness factor ($M = 18.6$; $SD = 3.4$), referring to individuals who are unable to assess situations that may involve some risk (Ávila-Batista 2011). In light of this perspective, there is a need to work on managing the impulsivity of Prison Security Agents, considering the importance of controlling this characteristic for their profession. After all, impulsive and poorly planned behavior

often has detrimental consequences for the individuals themselves and those involved in the prison context (Von Diemen 2006).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the emotional, behavioral, and quality of life characteristics of public security agents who work in maintaining daily prison operations in a city in northeastern Brazil.

According to the literature, these professionals are frequently exposed to tense situations with imminent risk of violence in their work routines. Overall, the results obtained show good emotional management and reveal satisfaction with the quality of life. However, it indicates a tendency towards impulsivity in the evaluated group. The study did not conduct group comparisons to determine the significance level of the differences found between male and female ASPs, nor did it aim to investigate personal and workplace variables that may have an impact on the results, as the results diverge from the literature, which suggests high levels of anxiety and low quality of life among ASPs. Therefore, further studies with larger samples and the participation of ASPs from other Brazilian states are needed to deepen our understanding of the impact of the work environment on the psyche and quality of life of ASPs, taking into account their differences and the resources available in the environment.

Finally, it is emphasized the importance of implementing preventive actions that contribute to the improvement of the mental health of this professional group through emotional management and behavioral control, aiming to enhance their work adaptability and, consequently, positively impact their quality of life.

DECLARATIONS

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About the authors:

Carmen Amorim-Gaudêncio – Psychologist. Civil and criminal specialist in a forensic clinic involving the Court of Justice in the Community of Madrid and in the Paraíba state courts of law. Master and Doctorate in Psychology from the Complutense University of Madrid. Currently Associate Professor (level 3) in the Department of Psychology at the UFPB. Coordinator of the Clinic-School of Psychology at UFPB. Coordinator of the Forensic Laboratory for Clinical Evaluation and Intervention (LAICF/UFPB). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5972-1601>

E-mail: camorimg@gmail.com / cwagb@academico.ufpb.br

Sayonara Pereira da Silva – Psychologist. MS.c in Neuroengineering. Doctoral Student in Neuroscience at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7865-1677>

E-mail: sayonara.pereira.098@ufrn.edu.br

Lucas Felício Gil Braz – Psychologist. Researcher at the Forensic Laboratory for Evaluation and Clinical Intervention (LAICF/UFPB). Diretor of the CASULU Collaborative Clinic. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5935-6605>

E-mail: lucasgilbrazfelicio@hotmail.com