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Długość odbywania kary pozbawienia wolności a stan zdrowia psychicznego u osadzonych

The length of doing time and the mental health of convicts

Streszczenie

Wstęp. W dzisiejszych czasach problem przeludnionych zakładów karnych jest często poruszany w debacie publicznej. Izolacja od świata zewnętrznego, ograniczona przestrzeń, osadzenie wraz z grupą osób mających w przeszłości konflikt z prawem, napięte relacje pomiędzy służbą więzienną a więźniami, wydają się być czynnikami negatywnie wpływającymi na komfort psychiczny osadzonych. Interesujące jest, czy długi okres przebywania w wyżej opisanych warunkach może przyczyniać się do zwiększenia się częstości występowania zaburzeń psychicznych wśród osób odbywających karę.

Cel. Celem pracy było ustalenie stwierdzenia zależności lub jej braku, wynikającej z długości odbywania kary a występowaniem zaburzeń psychicznych u osadzonych.

Materiał badawczy i metody. Badaniami ankietowymi objęto 161 mężczyzn przebywających w zakładzie karnym na terenie miasta Lublina. Ankiety zawierały pytania dotyczące czasu odbywania kary, obecnych schorzeń oraz przyjmowanych leków. Badanych podzielono na 3 grupy: odbywających karę do 1 roku – 79 osób; od 1 roku do 3 lat – 34 osoby i powyżej 3 lat – 48 osób. Obliczono odsetek osób, u których stwierdzono psychozy, nerwice oraz przyjmujących leki psychotropowe, uspokajające i przeciwlękowe.

Wyniki. W grupie osadzonych do 1 roku było 27,8% osób z zaburzeniami psychicznymi, od 1 do 3 lat – 29,4%, a w grupie powyżej 3 lat – 33,3%. Ogółem odsetek zgłaszających zaburzenia psychiczne wynosił 29,8%. Różnice pomiędzy poszczególnymi grupami były istotne statystycznie ($p < 0,05$).

Wnioski. Wraz ze wzrostem długości czasu odbywania kary zwiększa się odsetek osób z zaburzeniami psychicznymi. Dłuższe przebywanie w niedostosowanych pod względem warunków bytowych zakładach karnych może sprzyjać występowaniu zaburzeń psychicznych. Wskazane jest podjęcie działań prewencyjnych i promocyjnych celem zminimalizowania występowaniu wyżej wymienionych zaburzeń. Istnieje potrzeba dyskusji społecznej na temat alternatywnych sposobów odbywania kary i kontynuacja pogłębionych, dalszych badań naukowych w kontekście zdrowia psychicznego osób odbywających kary więzienia.

Abstract

Introduction. Nowadays the problem of overcrowded penitentiaries often appears in public debate. Isolation from the external world, limited space, sharing the cell with reoffenders, tension between the guards and the convicts seem to be factors that have adverse effect on mental comfort of prisoners serving their time. The question whether the period of time spent in such conditions may contribute to increase in the incidence of mental disorders in convicts, seems an interesting issue.

Aim. The aim of the study is to evaluate whether or not there is a correlation between the time period spent in prison and the incidence of mental disorders in convicts.

Material and methods. One hundred and one male convicts from the Lublin penitentiary were surveyed. The questionnaires included questions concerning the length of imprisonment, presence of disorders and drugs taken. The respondents were divided in three groups: those who had been imprisoned for up to 1 year – 79 persons, those who had been imprisoned for 1-3 years – 34 persons, and those who had been doing time for more than 3 years – 48 persons. The percentage of people complaining of psychosis and neurosis as well as those who took psychotropic, sedative and anxiolytic drugs were calculated.

Results. The percentage of convicts reporting mental disorders or taking psychotropic, sedative or anxiolytic drugs was 27.8% in convicts serving their time for up to 1 year; 29.4% in convicts imprisoned for 1-3 years; and 33.3% in convicts who had been in confinement for more than 3 years. In general, this percentage was 29.8%. The difference between each group was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion. The longer serving time period, the higher percentage of convicts with mental disorders. Imprisonment in facilities with inadequate living conditions may conduce to mental disorders. Preventive and promotional measures should be taken in order to minimize incidence of highlighted disorders. There is a need for public debate on alternative methods of punishment, and more detailed studies should be carried out concerning mental health of people serving prison sentences.

Słowa kluczowe: zaburzenia psychiczne, więźniowie.

Key words: mental disorders, prisoners.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the problem of overcrowded penitentiaries often appears in public debate.

Serving time involves isolation from outside world and spending most of the day on limited space. Constant contact with other inmates who had infringed the law in the past and are likely to be contentious and aggressive may increase psychological stress. Furthermore, the relations between convicts and the guards, which are not always friendly, seem to have adverse effect on mental comfort of the inmates. It is worth noticing that people who infringe the law are often regarded as “dregs of society” that are likely to abuse alcohol and other substances affecting consciousness (61% in the USA according to Coolidge et al.) [1]. Sudden deprivation of such stimulants by the imprisonment may drive the inmates to seek substitutes in the penitentiary. All of these matters made the researchers analyse the mental condition of prisoners in penitentiaries and examine what is the influence of above-mentioned factors on their mental health.

AIM

The aim of the study is to evaluate whether or not there is a correlation between the serving time period and the percentage of persons with psychiatric problems in the population of inmates of prison in Południowa Street in Lublin and to compare the results with international literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out by the members of Scientific Club of the Department of Public Health of the Medical University of Lublin. A form including questions on general health condition, drugs and stimulants taken, education, living conditions and doing time period was used for the study. The study involved 161 male inmates. The questionnaires were filled up by the convicts having appointments in the prison's medical facility with the presence of the medical personnel. They could consult their uncertainties with accompanying doctor who had access to their medical history. The inmates were divided into three groups according to the length of time served. First one consisted of persons doing time for up to one year, second involved prisoners doing time from one to three years and finally third group contained convicts serving time longer than three years (Table 1).

TABLE 1. The questionnaire study involved 161 males.

	Group A <1 year	Group B 1-3 years	Group C 3< years
Number of questionnaires	79	34	48
Total	161		

Group A: serving time for up to 1 year – 79 persons, B: from 1 to 3 years – 34 persons and C: longer than 3 years – 48 persons

In each group a percentage of persons with mental disorders, neurosis, psychosis and taking sedatives, hypnotics and psychotropic drugs was calculated. The results were statistically tested with Chi2 test.

RESULTS

In the first group of people serving time for up to 1 year there were 27.8% considered as having mental problems. In the second group of people doing time from 1 to 3 years this percentage was 29.4% and in the last one that contained persons being imprisoned for more than 3 years it was 33.3% (Table 2). In general the percentage of inmates reporting mental problems was 29.8%. The differences between these groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE 2. The table presents the percentages of inmates qualified into groups „with problems” and „without problems” upon a questionnaire study in relationship with length of serving time.

	Group A <1 year	Group B 1-3 years	Group C 3< years	Total
Without problems	57	24	32	113
With problems	22	10	16	48
Percentage of inmates with problems	27.8%	29.4%	33.3%	29.8%
Test Chi ² :				
B vs. A: $p = 0.0000004$, C vs. B: $p = 0.012$, C vs. A: $p = 0.0004$				

DISCUSSION

Mental disorders among convicts constitute significant medical and legal problem. People with mental illnesses and overusing psychoactive substances run a higher risk of another conviction [2]. Retrospective cohort studies involving 79,211 recently booked prison inmates in the United States showed that the likelihood of previous incarceration during the period of 6 years preceding the study was higher among persons with severe mental illness than among healthy persons [3].

There is a higher prevalence of mental disorders among prison inmates than among the general population [4]. According to an American study involving a group of 3,962 inmates mental disorders occurred among 61% of them. The problem also affects juvenile inmates. Fazel's study shows that the prevalence of psychosis among juveniles at young offenders institutions was tenfold higher than in the general population, girls had higher rates of depression than boys (in contrast to adult inmates) [5]. Steadman et al. report that the rate of serious mental illness for female inmates was 31% and for male inmates was 14.5% [6].

Survey of remand prisoners at the prison in Południowa Street in Lublin, Poland showed mental disorders among about 30% of interviewed. These differences might result from various causes, mainly used methodology, and it requires further in-depth research. Dutch scientists' research shows that the prevalence rates of mental disorders among inmates in Europe are lower than in the USA. The difference results probably from better access to mental health care in European prisons [7]. The number of people qualified as mentally ill or having neurotic disorders depends on criteria used in the survey and the way the survey was conducted. A research team including specialists in the field of psychiatry would deliver the most reliable results. Despite differences in above-mentioned publications they all report that the rates of mental illness among

inmates are much higher than among the general population. The factors that can predispose towards such a situation require special consideration. One of the causes of this situation is a lack of adequate admission diagnosis of new remand prisoners. Some mentally ill convicts instead of receiving psychiatric care are being isolated in prisons. This hypothesis is supported by an Indian study, where among 3,871 examined people 10% were diagnosed with serious mental illness. Sixty four percent of inmates diagnosed with mental disorders were serving sentences for petty crime. After providing them with psychiatric care and further rehabilitation their quality of life improved [8]. Adaptation to a long-term incarceration is more difficult for mentally ill people. Study of Yang et al. involving a group of 59 inmates serving long-term sentences in France showed that seriously mentally ill persons had different attitudes towards incarceration than healthy persons. The former were more hostile to their incarceration, attributing causes of their imprisonment to external circumstances (failure to understand the punishment) [9]. Cuddeback et al. in their research were looking for correlation between the fact of incarceration and the rates of chronic medical illness among persons with mental disorders. They analysed data of 3,690 people with serious mental disorders who had a history of incarceration and data of 2,042 people who were never imprisoned. Persons with a history of incarceration were more likely than those without it to have infectious, blood, and skin diseases and a history of injury. Persons with an incarceration history were 40% more likely to have any general medical problem and 30% more likely to have multiple medical problems [10]. The authors cited above indicate the need for better coordination of action between the health services and the penal system, improvement of a basic psychiatric care, development of methodology conforming to evidence-based medicine (EBM), understood as an intentional use in medical practice not only of clinical experience and value system but also of data coming from reliable and diligent scientific research. These actions should aim at decreasing further effects of serious mental conditions among prisoners and social rehabilitation of persons with mental illness who are released from jails and prisons [10].

CONCLUSIONS

The difference in the ratio of inmates with mental problems depends on the length of their sentence demonstrated in the study involving inmates of the prison in Lublin could be explained by a higher tendency towards aggression among people with mental disorders, leading them to committing more serious crimes punishable by heavier sentences. One should not forget about the possibility of developing or intensifying mental problems among inmates during incarceration. Conditions in jails and prisons, isolation from the outer world and relatives, constant contact and relationships with aggressive individuals and recidivists, but also the need to find oneself in a new, difficult social situation, all are distinct stress-inducing factors, having adverse influence on health, which is described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of complete well-being, including a mental component.

Due to a multi-faceted approach, especially to the mental health of inmates and to determining an influence of environmental factors acting in penal institutions on the mental state

of those people, it would be desirable to conduct a prospective research involving a group of inmates serving long-term sentences, but such a research implies much higher costs. Nevertheless, there is a need for a further large-population study, according to a standardized methodology, involving many jails and prisons in order to obtain more precise and comparable results, thus implementing effective methods of prevention and promotion, aiming at a significant lowering of proportion of people for whom the incarceration facilitates or aggravates existing disorders in the mental sphere.

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