

EMOTIONAL STABILITY AND AFFECTIVE DISTRESS AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY FOR CRIMES COMMITTED WITHOUT VIOLENCE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26758/14.1.18>

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Abstract

Objectives. This study aimed to investigate the affective state of young people in custody of the penitentiary system for nonviolent crimes.

Material and methods. The answers provided to the *5-Factor Personality Questionnaire* (CP5F) (*emotional stability scale*) and the *Affective Distress Profile* (PDA) of 52 boys aged between 18-25 deprived of liberty were processed. The main statistical techniques used were the independent samples *t*-test and effect size calculation (Hedges' *g* indicator).

Results. Convicted persons from the urban environment presented higher scores of emotional stability in contrast to those from the rural environment ($t(47) = 2.28, p = 0.02$). Young people who did not receive a visit in the last month presented a higher level of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category ($t(50) = 2.46, p = 0.01, g = 0.68$), reported higher levels of total ($t(50) = 2.03, p = 0.04, g = 0.56$) and global distress ($t(50) = 3.78, p = 0.00, g = 1.05$), but also a higher level of positive emotions ($t(50) = 3.42, p = 0.00, g = 0.95$). Participants involved in an intimate relationship obtained higher scores for dysfunctional negative emotions in the "worry/anxiety" category ($t(50) = -2.32, p = 0.02, g = 0.62$) and for total distress ($t(50) = -2.02, p = 0.04, g = 0.53$). Those who grew up in a disadvantaged area registered higher scores of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category ($t(50) = -2.10, p = 0.04, g = 0.60$) and of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" and "worry/anxiety" categories ($t(50) = -2.04, p = 0.04, g = 0.58$).

Conclusions. Policies to prevent recidivism among young people deprived of liberty for nonviolent crimes need to target actions aimed at reducing the level of emotional distress.

Keywords: nonviolent crime, emotional stability, affective distress, young people.

Introduction

Current changes in society make it difficult to distinguish adolescence from youth. Verza (1993, pp. 104-105) mentioned that adolescence is divided into three sub-periods: preadolescence (14-16 years), adolescence proper (16-18 years), and prolonged adolescence (18-20/25 years). However, referring to the subperiod of prolonged adolescence, Verza (1993, p. 105) stated that

although many authors included it in the period of adolescence, some consider it to belong to the period of youth.

The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines adolescence as the age range between 10-19 years, while young people are defined as people aged 15-24 years.

Arnett (2000, p. 470, as cited in Roth et al., 2016, p. 13) proposed the redefinition of life stages, introducing a new age stage, which he called "emerging adulthood", placing it in the interval 18-25 years old. According to this model, people between the ages of 18 and 25 are neither teenagers nor adults, but rather can be called "emerging adults" (Roth et al., 2016, p. 13).

Currently, the United Nations (n.d.) uses the term "youth" to refer to people aged 15-24, highlighting that the definition of this term changes according to circumstances.

Adolescence and youth can be seen as an age of intensification of the person's desire for affirmation, accompanied by some affective instability (Verza, 1993, p. 105), which sometimes leads to conflicts with authority figures, be it parental, school, or social authority. This attitude is normal as long as it does not exceed the limits imposed by law and society. When these boundaries are violated, the young person is considered a delinquent.

To better understand the phenomenon of delinquency among young people, it is necessary to take into account inter-individual differences. In this sense, the theory of the criminal personality developed by Jean Pinatel (1966, as cited in Turliuc, 2007, p. 99) is relevant. According to this theory, what drives some people to commit and others to refrain from committing criminal acts is the delinquency threshold: while some people commit crimes under strong internal and external incentives, others may switch to the criminal act on the background of mild incentives. Two of the essential factors that can contribute to the commission of crimes are the emotional distress felt and the level of emotional stability available to the person.

Stability in the context of personality was defined by "few emotional or mood changes" (VandenBos, 2013/2020a, p. 534), respectively by "predictability and consistency of emotional reactions, in the absence of rapid mood changes" (VandenBos, 2013/2020b, p. 535). Its opposite is neuroticism, which indicates a chronic level of emotional instability and the existence of the person's tendency toward psychological distress (VandenBos, 2013/2020c, p. 380). Distress consists of a negative response to stressful situations, characterized by excessive stimulation, the effects of which can be harmful to health (VandenBos, 2013/2020d, p. 180).

One of the characteristics of adolescence is affective instability, which begins to improve with advancing into adulthood (Trentacosta & Izard, n.d.). However, the life context in which the young person is or was at a given time (the environment in which he lives or which he lived, the events encountered, and the support received from those around him) can exert some influence on his emotional balance (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Kawamoto, 2016; Scardera et al., 2020).

Emotional stability and distress have frequently been the subject of psychological research in the judicial field. Most of the time, however, they are discussed in the context of violent crimes (eg: Ortiz-Tallo, Cardenal, Blanca, Sánchez, & Morales, 2007; Shoham, Askenasy, Rahav, Chard, & Addi, 1989; Garofalo & Velotti, 2017). Violence attracts more public attention, as it stimulates the reticular activating system (Barber, 2016). This can explain the abundance of news about murders, rapes, human trafficking, etc., but also the interest shown by researchers in the field of forensic psychology in the study of violent criminality.

In Romania, the age at which the person acquires criminal liability is 14 years, this being limited up to 16 years (the minor is criminally liable only if it is proven that he had discernment at the time of committing the act), following that from this age, the young to obtain full criminal liability (*New Criminal Code; New Code of Criminal Procedure - 2nd Ed., revised by Petruț*

Ciobanu, 2014, p. 58). According to the Romanian legislative system, minors who have committed criminal acts and are criminally liable are subject to educational measures that may be non-custodial or custodial (*New Criminal Code; New Code of Criminal Procedure – 2nd Ed., revised by Petruț Ciobanu*, 2014, p. 58). The present paper focuses on adolescents and young people aged between 18-25 years, to whom were applied the educational measure of internment in an educational or detention center, respectively on those in penitentiaries.

According to the latest report of the National Administration of Penitentiaries, in April 2022, 801 of the persons deprived of liberty in the custody of the Romanian prison system were youths between 18 and 21 years old, and 252 were minors (ANP, 2022). Although the total number of minors and youths in penitentiary units decreased compared to April of previous years (ANP, 2021; ANP, 2020; ANP, 2019; ANP, 2018), the fact that it still remains in the order of hundreds, makes criminality among them to continue to constitute a pressing social problem.

The level of emotional balance that the young convict has and the emotions he has during the detention period can influence the efficiency of the social reintegration process carried out in the penitentiary system. A high level of emotional distress during deprivation of liberty, coupled with a low level of emotional stability as a personality trait, can maintain conflicts with staff and fellow inmates, affecting the purpose of placing the young offender in an educational or detention center, respectively of serving the sentence in a penitentiary.

At the same time, taking into account the fact that disadvantaged areas present a higher level of criminality (Krivo & Peterson, 1996), this paper takes into account the characteristics of the neighborhood in which the participants grew up. Knowing that beyond the low socioeconomic status, specific to disadvantaged areas, the residents of these environments may face several social stressors, such as exposure to drug use and trafficking (Shaw, Egan, & Gillespie, 2007) or violence (de Courson, Frankenhuis, Nettle, & van Gelder, 2023), the disadvantaged area in this study was defined as a poor neighborhood where violent incidents occurred or where drugs were sold.

Non-violent crimes are defined as those criminal acts that do not involve harm or the use of force against another person, most often taking the form of theft (Bussa, 2016). Taking into account this definition and taking into account the criminal law in Romania (*New Criminal Code; New Criminal Procedure Code - 2nd Ed., revised by Petruț Ciobanu*, 2014), within the category of crimes that do not involve violence can be including theft, aggravated theft, drug trafficking, smuggling, fraud, driving a vehicle without a license, setting up an organized criminal group, etc.

In Romania, theft represents the second criminal act, in descending order of frequency, for which minors and young people end up carrying out custodial educational measures (ANP, 2022). As the share of crimes committed without violence represented, according to the reporting for April 2022, approximately 26.30% of the total crimes committed by minors and young people (ANP, 2022), the percentage remaining constant compared to April 2021 and registering a slight upward trend compared to April of 2020 (25.31%) (ANP, 2020), this paper aims to analyze the affective state of those convicted for crimes committed without violence, to identify some levers aimed at reducing the risk of repetition of this antisocial behavior after release.

Material and methods

Participants

The 52 participants were selected from a sample made up of 186 boys between the ages of 18 and 25 interned in Buziaș Educational Center, Târgu Ocna Educational Center, Brăila-Tichilești

Detention Center, and Arad Penitentiary. Out of the 186 questionnaires, only those completed by young people who, at the time of data collection, were serving the educational measure of deprivation of liberty, respectively the prison sentence for acts committed without violence, were retained.

Research purpose and objectives

To achieve the purpose of the research, the following objectives were formulated:

- To identify differences in the level of emotional stability and affective distress depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, their criminal history and the social support received by them during detention.
- To develop recommendations as guidelines for the process of social reintegration of adolescents and youth detained for non-violent crimes.

The socio-demographic variables taken into account were age, background, marital status, history of placement in a foster care center, and living in a disadvantaged area. The criminal history was defined by the variables of criminal recidivism, the duration of the sentence received and the time served in the penitentiary institution until completing the questionnaire. The social support received during the execution of the custodial sentence was assessed by the following elements: the frequency of visits received in the last month and the moral support received from fellow detainees and staff from penitentiary institutions.

Research methods and tools

The questionnaire-based survey method was used for collection. The data collection tools were:

- An omnibus questionnaire with 58 simple or compound questions (divided into several items). It was made up of several sections, a first section referring to some socio-demographic data (age, background, marital status, level of school education, etc.), another section referring to the criminal history, following, in order, the section relating to situations within the family where the participant grew up, within his group of friends, within the penitentiary institution in which he was in custody at the time of completion, a section on alcohol consumption, one on drug consumption, a another about sexuality and one about risky behaviors;
- *The 5-Factor Personality Questionnaire (CP5F)*, validated on the Romanian population by Albu (2008, as cited in Albu & Porumb, 2009). It contains six scales, totaling 130 items, with response options ranging from 1 – "it suits me very little" to 5 – "it suits me very much";
- *The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*, adapted on a sample of Romanian teenagers by Robu (2013). This scale allows both the calculation of a global self-esteem score and the calculation of a score for the following two dimensions: own qualities and self-acceptance;
- *The Affective Distress Profile (PDA)*, validated on the population of Romania by Opreș and Macavei (2007). The complexity of this questionnaire lies in the seven subscales made up based on the 39 items describing both functional and dysfunctional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" and "worry/anxiety" categories, but also positive emotions. At the same time, PDA also allows the calculation of a global score of affective distress;

The toolkit used ends with a question that invites the participant to describe in approximately 200 words the circumstances of the offense for which he was convicted.

This questionnaire, which requires mainly quantitative answers, is complemented by an interview guide, which initially consisted of seven items. Having been revised following a pilot survey, the current version of the guide totals 16 questions. These refer to the change in the perception of one's own person after incarceration, to the models that the young person follows, to his needs, to the experiences lived in childhood, etc.

For this study, the answers obtained to some of the socio-demographic items, those recorded on the emotional stability scale of the CP5F, and the scores recorded on the PDA were processed.

Procedure

The data was collected between November 15, 2021, and August 24, 2022. To involve the participants from the Buziaș Educational Center in the research, online visits were scheduled, via Skype, with the principal investigator, during which they provided verbal answers for each item, the answers being recorded by the researcher.

At the Târgu Ocna Educational Center and the Brăila-Tichilești Detention Center, all young people in custody were notified about the possibility of participating in the research activity, being involved in the investigative approach all those who consented.

In the case of the data collection at the Arad Penitentiary, given the larger number of eligible inmates and the short time allotted for the application of the questionnaire, young people from three detention wards intended for the execution of custodial sentences in a closed regime were recruited for the research.

Ethical aspects of research

To start the investigation, the approval of the Ethics Commission of the "Constantin Rădulescu-Motru" Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy (no. 80 of 19.03.2021) and the agreement in principle of ANP (no. 7786 of 29.04.2021). In addition, at the request of the Buziaș Educational Center, a collaboration protocol was concluded between the penitentiary unit (no. 36381/02.12.2021) and the "Francisc I. Rainer" Institute of Anthropology of the Romanian Academy (775/19.11.2021).

CP5F and PDA instruments were applied for research purposes based on approval sent by email by COGNITROM, respectively *International Institute for the Advanced Studies of Psychotherapy and Applied Mental Health*. To apply the selected RSES variant, the agreement of the author of the validation study of this scale was obtained.

Before completing the questionnaires, the participants were instructed regarding the confidentiality of the answers, the anonymity of the respondents, the conditions for keeping the questionnaires, possible risks and benefits, etc. Each participant involved in the study first completed an informed consent form and an acceptance form. All respondents were rewarded with a predetermined number of credits.

Research hypotheses

H1: Younger participants (18-21 years old), those who grew up in disadvantaged areas (ex: a poor neighborhood, where violent incidents took place or where drugs were sold), those who were

admitted to a foster care center, and those who are not in an intimate partner relationship show a lower level of emotional stability and a higher level of affective distress.

H2: Criminal recidivism, longer length of sentence received, and serving a larger portion of the sentence are associated with lower levels of emotional stability and higher levels of affective distress.

H3: Young people who receive social support during detention are more emotionally stable and have a lower level of emotional distress.

Data analysis

The resulting data were entered and processed in the SPSS Statistics 17.0 program (SPSS 17.0 Statistical Analysis for Social Science, 2022).

For the items with multiple answer options (marital status and the number of visits received in the last month) and for those with free answers (the duration of the conviction and the fraction of the sentence served), two groups were created, as follows: alone/in a relationship, visited/not visited, length of sentence less than three years/length of sentence more than three years, less than one year/more than one year. To apply the *t*-test for independent samples, these categories were made, to establish the appropriate statistical framework.

Little's MCAR test was used to test the null hypothesis that responses to items that were omitted by participants are not missing at random. This statistical analysis revealed that the null hypothesis was rejected for the CP5F emotional stability scale (Chi-Square = 234.39; *DF* = 215; *p* = 0.17), for the PDA scale (Chi-Square = 505.49; *DF* = 469; *p* = 0.11), but also for the following PDA subscales: functional negative emotions from the "sadness/depression" category (Chi-Square = 15.97; *DF* = 14; *p* = 0.31), functional negative emotions from the "worry/anxiety" category (Chi-Square = 17.28; *DF* = 19; *p* = 0.57), functional negative emotions from the "sadness/depression" and worry/anxiety" categories (Chi-Square = 46.26; *DF* = 51; *p* = 0.66), dysfunctional negative emotions from the "worry/anxiety" category (Chi-Square = 13.24; *DF* = 12; *p* = 0.35), positive emotions (Chi-Square = 82.77; *DF* = 65; *p* = 0.06), meaning that data were missing in a completely random way. However, the null hypothesis could not be rejected in the case of the dysfunctional negative emotions subscale from the "sadness/depression" category (Chi-Square = 56.48; *DF* = 34; *p* = 0.00), which is why this subscale was excluded from subsequent data analysis.

Missing data were replaced through the expectation-maximization algorithm, this procedure being applied separately for each retained PDA subscale and separately for the CP5F emotional stability scale.

To find out the effect size, the calculator available at Social Science Statistics (n.d.) was used.

Results

Following the process of sorting the questionnaires, it emerged that 52 of the participants were convicted of non-violent crimes: theft, aggravated theft, fraud and organized criminal group, driving without a license, driving under the influence of alcohol, smuggling, drug trafficking, fraud, computer fraud, escape. Table 1 shows the frequency of specific offenses within the sample.

Table 1
Frequency of crimes within the sample

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|----------|
| Theft | 13 | 25.0 |
| Aggravated theft | 23 | 44.2 |
| Driving without a license | 5 | 9.6 |
| Smuggling | 2 | 3.8 |
| Drug trafficking | 2 | 3.8 |
| Escape | 2 | 3.8 |
| Other crimes (privacy violation, driving under the influence of alcohol, fraud, computer fraud, deception, and organized criminal group) | 5 | 9.6 |

The convicted persons ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($M = 20.40$; $SD = 2.52$), mostly from urban areas. Most were in an undocumented relationship, and the last graduating class was most commonly reported as belonging to middle school. At the time of data collection, most of the young people surveyed were not continuing their studies. More than half of the participants had not previously lived in a foster home and had not grown up in an underprivileged area, such as a poor neighborhood where violent incidents occurred or a neighborhood where drugs were sold. As for the infrational trajectory, the majority of the sample was at their first conviction. The duration of the sentence received was less than 3 years in more than half of the respondents, the minimum sentence was nine months and the maximum of seven years and 3 months, and most had served less than one year by the time of completing the questionnaire. Most of the sample reported visits in the past month, as well as moral support from fellow inmates and staff. Among the mentioned visitors were parents, brothers, concubines, uncles, grandparents, cousins, brothers-in-law, and friends, while the staff who offered moral support to the young people were supervisors, psychologists, educators, social workers and including the director of the center (in the case of a young person interned in one of the educational centers). Table 2 provides an overview of the sample structure.

Table 2
Sample structure

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Place of detention | | |
| Buziaş Educational Center | 6 | 11.5 |
| Târgu Ocna Educational Center | 16 | 30.8 |
| Brăila-Tichileşti Detention Center | 15 | 28.8 |
| Arad Penitentiary | 15 | 28.8 |
| The environment of origin | | |
| Urban | 39 | 75.0 |
| Rural | 10 | 19.2 |
| No answer | 3 | 5.8 |
| Marital status | | |
| Single | 22 | 42.3 |
| In a relationship | 29 | 55.8 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |

| Variable | <i>N</i> | % |
|--|----------|------|
| Last school graduated | | |
| No school, primary school (4 grades) | 17 | 32.7 |
| General school (5-10 grades), vocational, apprentices | 30 | 57.7 |
| High school | 5 | 9.6 |
| Continuing school courses at the time of data collection | | |
| No | 29 | 55.8 |
| Primary school (4 grades) | 6 | 11.5 |
| General school (5-10 grades), vocational, apprentices | 15 | 28.8 |
| No answer | 2 | 3.8 |
| History of placement in a foster care facility | | |
| No | 39 | 75.0 |
| Yes | 10 | 19.2 |
| No answer | 3 | 5.8 |
| History of living in a disadvantaged area | | |
| No | 27 | 51.9 |
| Yes | 24 | 46.2 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |
| Criminal history | | |
| Imprisoned with execution on first conviction | 27 | 51.9 |
| Recidivists | 24 | 46.9 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |
| Sentence length | | |
| Less than three years | 33 | 63.5 |
| More than three years | 18 | 34.6 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |
| Period executed | | |
| Less than a year | 30 | 57.7 |
| More than a year | 22 | 42.3 |
| Exercising visitation rights in the last month | | |
| No | 24 | 46.2 |
| Yes | 28 | 53.8 |
| Moral support received from colleagues in difficult situations | | |
| No | 10 | 19.2 |
| Yes | 41 | 78.8 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |
| Moral support received from staff in difficult situations | | |
| No | 16 | 30.8 |
| Yes | 35 | 67.3 |
| No answer | 1 | 1.9 |

The *t*-test for independent samples revealed that emotional stability did not differ significantly in young people aged 18-21 years compared to those aged 22-25 years ($t(50) = -0.13$, $p = 0.89$). The scores obtained on this CP5F scale did not differ significantly depending on marital status, history of admission to a placement center, living in a disadvantaged area, criminal

recidivism, duration of conviction received, period served, exercise of visitation rights in the last month, support received from fellow detainees and support received from staff. The only independent variable according to which the two groups of participants registered significant differences in the scores obtained for emotional stability was the environment of origin, with the convicted persons from the urban environment showing higher scores of this trait ($t(47) = 2.28, p = 0.02$).

Regarding affective distress, most differences were registered between those visited in the last month and those not visited. Young people who did not receive a visit during the last month before applying the questionnaire showed a higher level of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category. They also reported higher levels of total and global distress, as well as higher levels of positive emotions. The statistically significant differences obtained according to the exercise of visitation rights in the last month are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Significant affective differences depending on the exercise of visitation rights

| PDA subscale/scale | Unvisited | | Visited | | $t(50)$ | p | Hedges' g |
|---|-----------|-------|---------|-------|---------|------|-------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category | 17.77 | 5.94 | 13.96 | 5.20 | 2.46 | 0.01 | 0.68 |
| Total distress | 68.59 | 23.81 | 55.51 | 22.51 | 2.03 | 0.04 | 0.56 |
| Global distress | 113.02 | 22.71 | 90.58 | 20.03 | 3.78 | 0.00 | 1.05 |
| Positive emotions | 44.43 | 10.06 | 35.07 | 9.62 | 3.42 | 0.00 | 0.95 |

$N=52$

Another factor involved in the differences obtained on two of the PDA subscales was marital status. Participants involved in an intimate relationship scored higher on dysfunctional negative emotions in the "worry/anxiety" category and on total distress.

At the same time, differences regarding distress were also outlined depending on the negative characteristics of the environment in which the young convicts grew up. In this regard, those who grew up in a disadvantaged area, described either by poverty or by selling drugs or violent incidents, recorded higher scores of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category, as well as functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" and "worry/anxiety" categories.

The statistically significant differences obtained according to marital status and history of living in a disadvantaged area are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
Significant affective differences depending on marital status and environment of origin

| Independent variable | PDA subscale/scale | No | | Yes | | <i>t</i> (49) | <i>p</i> | Hedges' <i>g</i> |
|---|---|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|---------------|----------|------------------|
| | | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| In an intimate relationship | Dysfunctional negative emotions in the "worry/anxiety" category | 10.32 | 4.39 | 13.88 | 6.52 | -2.32 | 0.02 | 0.62 |
| | Total distress | 54.20 | 17.48 | 66.83 | 27.02 | -2.02 | 0.04 | 0.53 |
| History of living in a disadvantaged area | Functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" category | 14.18 | 4.18 | 17.60 | 6.94 | -2.10 | 0.04 | 0.60 |
| | Functional negative emotions from the "sadness/depression" and "worry/anxiety" categories | 28.95 | 7.97 | 35.02 | 12.40 | -2.04 | 0.04 | 0.58 |

N = 51

Discussions

Implications of the developmental environment for young people deprived of liberty

The environment in which a person grows and develops influences the shaping of their personality (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013/2016). In the case of the studied sample, living conditions in rural areas of Romania do not seem to allow the cultivation of emotional stability to the same extent as it is achieved in urban areas. This result is supported by that obtained by Pushpalatha (2021), which revealed that 30 students aged 19 to 22 at an urban college in India had a higher level of emotional stability compared to another 30 students of the same age at a rural college.

Different results were obtained by Kumar (2018), who found no significant difference in emotional stability between rural and urban middle school students in the Moga district of India (*N* = 100). Another research conducted in India also indicated that there were no significant differences in emotional stability between two groups of boys (*N* = 50) between the ages of 13 and 18 studying in different schools, one from an urban environment and the other from a rural environment (Singh, Singh, & Singh, 2018). However, a study involving 113 male offenders, with an average age of 15.2 years, showed that rural youth presented a greater tendency toward internalizing symptoms such as somatic complaints, anxiety, and depression (Nelson, Coleman, & Corcoran, 2010).

The difference depending on the area of origin can be explained by the differential access to resources of people from the rural environment and those from the urban environment. A list of resources to which teenagers from rural areas have limited access was presented by Șoitu (2013): "financial (budget and donations), human (specialized staff with higher and secondary education), educational (a smaller number of schools and accessible specializations)" (p. 122). Although he referred to teenagers in foster care centers in rural areas, the explanation can be extrapolated to the level of living conditions in villages and communes in Romania.

Beyond the administrative-territorial organization of the areas where young people live, the importance of the neighborhood climate is noted. The influence of a poor neighborhood, drug sales, or violent incidents in the neighborhood can be seen in relation to higher levels of functional negative emotions in the "sadness/depression" and "worry/anxiety" categories. Studying a sample of 270 former and current adult drug users in Baltimore, Curry, Latkin, and Davey-Rothwell (2008) observed an indirect association between neighborhood violent crime and depressive symptoms, with the relationship between the two variables being mediated by the perception of disorder in the neighborhood and by violent experiences in the neighborhood. The results were similar for teenagers. Analyzing data from 4,464 adolescents in California, Goldman-Mellor, Margerison-Zilko, Allen, and Cerda (2016) found that adolescents who perceived their neighborhood to be unsafe were twice as likely to report severe psychological distress, unlike those who perceived the neighborhood as safe. In contrast, they found no significant differences between levels of distress comparing the group of adolescents who lived in an area characterized by a higher level of objective violence and the group of participants who lived in safer areas. However, Alloush and Bloem (2022), investigating the situation in South Africa, found that both higher levels of perceived and objective violence were closely related to higher levels of depressive symptoms and a higher likelihood of people being exposed to the risk of depression. Regarding young people deprived of their liberty, some authors found in a longitudinal study involving 1216 male adolescents arrested for moderate crimes (eg theft, vandalism – graffiti) that a neighborhood of lower quality was associated with a higher level of anxiety and depression symptoms at the initial time of assessment (Baker et al., 2022).

The emotional state of young people deprived of liberty must also be taken into account even after release, as this may have implications on the criminal trajectory. Forry, Kirabira, and Rukundo (2019) showed in 414 adult prisoners in Uganda that there is an association between depression and criminal recidivism. They also observed an association between anxiety and the category of crime committed.

The role of social support received during detention

There is scientific evidence to support that the stability of emotional and instrumental social support received from family and friends has implications for the positive self-evaluation of the mental health of recently incarcerated men (Fahmy, 2021), an aspect also supported by the results of the present study, according to which recently visited participants have reported less emotional distress.

However, the fact that incarcerated youth in an intimate partnership relationship reported higher levels of emotional distress might suggest the existence of relational problems between the partners. Usually, relational problems between intimate partners can be associated with poor functioning in the behavioral, cognitive, or affective sphere. Among the affective problems that can be encountered in such situations are chronic sadness and apathy (APA, 2013/2016, p. 716).

In the context of deprivation of liberty, the higher level of distress faced by young people in a relationship can also be explained by the awareness of the distance between themselves and their partner. The geographical positioning of the penitentiary units, the cost of travel, the limited number of visits available to convicted persons over the age of 18 and the legislative difficulties encountered in obtaining intimate visits are just some of the factors that can contribute to the amplification of negative emotionality during the execution of the sentence. At the same time, the young age of the participants suggests that their intimate relationships are not yet stable and consolidated over time.

Although this investigation revealed that youth who received visits in the past month showed lower levels of affective distress compared to those who did not, they also reported lower levels of positive emotions. This result is in contrast to the observations made by Duncan and Balbar (2008), based on a qualitative study of a program of voluntary visits in a prison in Canada, which showed that the positive emotions experienced by inmates during the visits persisted after they had ended. The result revealed by this research can be explained by the fact that meetings with close people in the penitentiary environment, although they reduce sadness, depression, anxiety, and worries, do not always bring positive experiences. The restrictions imposed by the legislation in force regarding the framework for conducting visits in the penitentiary units in Romania, the awareness of the condition of being a prisoner, which prevents participation in usual events held in the family or the groups of friends, represent some elements that can influence the reduction of positive emotions such as joy, delight, or excitement.

However, the positive influence of reference persons in the process of social reintegration is acknowledged. The guide for penitentiary psychologists (Pripp, Decsei-Radu, David, & Gheorghe, n.d.) reminds us about the importance of maintaining and strengthening the connection of the convicted person with the family, and in the case of minors, the legislation supports maintaining relationships with support persons, with whom they have family relationships or strong affective ties, by supplementing the right to physical, online visits and telephone conversations (Parliament of Romania, 2013).

Regarding the young convict's relationship with other inmates and staff, although this study did not reveal significant differences regarding the emotional distress faced by those who receive moral support from people in the penitentiary and the level of distress of those who stated that they did not receive such support, Biggam and Power (1997) found such a difference in a sample of 125 incarcerated boys with a mean age of 18.8 years. They showed that anxious prisoners received less practical support than that considered optimal from fellow inmates and less practical and emotional support from staff responsible for their reintegration. At the same time, depressed inmates reported less practical and emotional support than that considered optimal, both from colleagues and staff.

Conclusions

Hypothesis H1 was partially confirmed, the investigation indicated that participants from the rural environment presented a lower level of emotional stability than those from the urban environment, and those who lived in a disadvantaged area obtained higher scores on two of the PDA subscales. Hypothesis H3 was also partially confirmed, with the study showing that participants who received a visit in the past month scored lower levels of affective distress but not emotional stability. Instead, the second hypothesis (H2) was disproved, the research not showing significant differences between the participants according to recidivism, the length of the sentence, or the fraction of the sentence served.

Although the therapeutic, psychoeducational, and counseling activities in the Romanian penitentiary units are clearly delimited by age categories 18-21 years (youths) and over 21 years (adults), this research shows that the persons deprived of liberty from the two groups (18 -21 and 22-25 years old), convicted of crimes committed without violence, do not differ significantly in terms of the psychological variables emotional stability and affective distress. Then, these activities are particularly aimed at reducing aggression, suicide risk, and alcohol and drug use. However, the present work shows the need to complete this spectrum of activities with workshops aimed at reducing sadness, depression, worry and anxiety, the target group being convicts between 18 and 25 years of age who are rarely visited and not visited.

The reintegration efforts started in the penitentiary must be continued even after the release of the convicted person. In the case of young parolees, the role of probation services becomes essential for monitoring and supporting them in the process of adapting to social life.

Since the specialized literature indicated associations between emotional distress and recidivism, respectively the criminal category, the development of policies that meet the psychological needs of ex-prisoners could prove useful. The construction of affordable housing for young people in Romania who are released from prisons and who reside in disadvantaged areas, as well as supporting them to enter the labor market, can represent effective solutions to reduce the risk of recidivism. Campaigns are also needed to counter prejudices about people who have been deprived of their liberty and to raise awareness of the role that society has in their recovery.

This work also highlighted the fact that young people deprived of liberty obtained lower emotional distress scores if they were visited in the last month, but not if they benefited from moral support from the people in the penitentiary institutions in whose custody they were (colleagues or cadres). This result draws attention to the importance of the social network outside the penitentiary units, consisting of family, friends, and/or intimate partners, which should become a link between prison and social life. Thus, taking into account the importance of the role that the personal social network has in the recuperative approach of persons deprived of liberty, the necessity of its active involvement in the process of social reintegration can be seen. In this sense, the diversification of the psychoeducational activities carried out in the penitentiary units, to which people between the ages of 18 and 25 with whom prisoners have strong emotional ties are invited, can represent a first step towards improving the mental health of young people deprived of their liberty. At the same time, the co-opting of important people from the lives of young criminals in their re-education process can be a motivating factor that ensures the active involvement of prisoners in psychoeducational programs, as well as the continuity of rehabilitation efforts after release. It is desired that the penitentiary units be no longer seen only as a perimeter that isolates the delinquent person from the rest of society but as an institution in which they are oriented towards identifying the resources necessary to reduce the risk of recidivism.

Limits

Given the low level of schooling of participants, interpreting the data reported in this paper requires a dose of caution. Potential errors in the interpretation of the framing of the criminal act must also be taken into account. As some participants gave vague answers as to the offense they were convicted of – e.g. "driving a car (theft)", which could not always be verified through the IT application for records of persons deprived of liberty in custody, some of the reported facts may have been coded as "theft" instead of "aggravated theft".

Acknowledgements

This study is part of the doctoral research project entitled "Adolescents and Youth in Educational, Detention Centers, and Penitentiaries: Personality Dimensions and Psychological Factors", Ph.D. Student Flavia-Elena Ciurbea, coordinated by Ph.D. Cornelia Rada, at the School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy, "Constantin Rădulescu-Motru" Institute of Philosophy and Psychology, Department of Psychology, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania.

A summary of this paper was presented at the online international conference: *Individual, family, society: contemporary challenges*, fifth edition, October 4–5, 2023, Bucharest, Romania, and published in the journal *Studii și Cercetări de Antropologie*, No. 8/2023.

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