

Forensic/Correctional Nurses: Stress, Ethics, Support

Prof. Rajesh Kumar Singh*

Department of Nursing Education, Indian Institute of Nursing Sciences, Bengaluru, India

***Corresponding Author:** Prof. Rajesh Kumar Singh, Department of Nursing Education, Indian Institute of Nursing Sciences, Bengaluru, India, E-mail: r.singh@iins.ac.in

Received: 05-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. gnfs-25-173345; **Editor assigned:** 08-Sep-2025, PreQC No. gnfs-25-173345 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 22-Sep-2025, QC No. gnfs-25-173345; **Revised:** 26-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. gnfs-25-173345 (R); **Published:** 03-Oct-2025, DOI: 10.4172/2168-9652.1000544

Citation: Singh PRK (2025) Forensic/Correctional Nurses: Stress, Ethics, Support. Glob J Nurs Forensic Stud 09: 349.

Copyright: © 2025 Prof. Rajesh Kumar Singh This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

This synthesis examines the psychological challenges faced by nurses in correctional and forensic mental health settings. It highlights prevalent issues such as psychological distress, moral injury, and burnout, often compounded by inadequate organizational support and workplace violence. Nurses also confront unique ethical dilemmas when caring for mentally ill patients within these environments. The research collectively underscores a critical need for enhanced organizational support, specialized training, and robust psychological interventions to foster resilience and improve the well-being of these vital healthcare professionals.

Keywords

Correctional nursing; Forensic nursing; Psychological distress; Moral injury; Burnout; Workplace violence; Mental illness; Organizational support; Coping strategies; Ethical dilemmas

Introduction

Nurses working in correctional and forensic mental health settings face unique and profound challenges that significantly impact their psychological well-being. These environments are often characterized by high-stress situations, exposure to violence, ethical dilemmas, and a complex patient population, all contributing to various adverse mental health outcomes. Understanding the specific stressors and their effects, as well as identifying effective coping mechanisms and support systems, is crucial for improving the quality of life and professional longevity of these dedicated healthcare providers.

Recent research highlights significant levels of psychological distress and moral injury among correctional nurses [1].

The study emphasizes that strong organizational support can play a vital role in mitigating these negative mental health consequences, pointing to the essential need for supportive work environments. Similarly, a cross-sectional study explored burnout and coping strategies among nurses in forensic mental health services [2].

This research pinpointed common stressors that lead to burnout and detailed the various ways nurses attempt to manage these difficulties, suggesting specific areas where targeted interventions and support could be most beneficial.

Further contributing to the understanding of these work environments, a study focused on validating the psychometric properties of the Job Demands-Resources Scale for mental health nurses in forensic settings [3].

This research provides a reliable tool for future investigations to measure job demands and resources, which are directly linked to mental well-being outcomes, allowing for more precise assessment of the factors influencing nurse stress. Another article delved into the interplay of moral distress, job satisfaction, and perceived social

support as predictors of burnout among correctional nurses [4].

This work underscored how the emotional strain from ethical conflicts, combined with insufficient job satisfaction and a lack of support, substantially contributes to the poor mental health of these nurses.

Qualitative research offers deeper insights into the lived experiences of registered nurses in carceral settings in New South Wales, Australia [5].

This study brought to light the distinct challenges and stressors inherent in such environments, illustrating the emotional and psychological toll on nurses and their coping mechanisms within a demanding system. The psychological impact of workplace violence on nurses in forensic psychiatric hospitals was also a significant area of investigation [6].

This study revealed that exposure to violence is a major contributor to psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, highlighting the urgent requirement for robust safety protocols and psychological assistance for these nurses.

The experiences of correctional nurses caring for patients with mental illness have also been meticulously explored through qualitative research [7].

This investigation uncovered the intricate nature of delivering psychiatric care within a correctional framework, exposing the emotional burdens and ethical dilemmas nurses encounter, and stressing the importance of specialized training and adequate support. Examining burnout and professional quality of life among forensic psychiatric nurses, another study revealed high levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress [8].

This research emphasized the emotional cost of working in high-stress forensic environments and advocated for interventions designed to enhance compassion satisfaction and resilience.

In a similar vein, a qualitative study titled "Caught between two worlds" explored the experiences of correctional nurses working with incarcerated women with mental illness [9].

This study highlighted the unique difficulties of balancing security requirements with therapeutic care, resulting in substantial moral distress and mental strain for the nurses. To synthesize these findings, a systematic review consolidated various stressors and coping strategies among nurses in forensic psychiatric inpatient settings [10].

This review identified common environmental, organizational, and patient-related stressors, along with diverse coping mecha-

nisms, offering a comprehensive framework for developing targeted support interventions. Collectively, these studies paint a clear picture of the profound psychological challenges faced by forensic and correctional nurses and underscore the critical need for multifaceted support systems.

Description

The environment of forensic and correctional nursing presents a multitude of complex challenges that profoundly affect the mental health and professional well-being of nurses. Several studies consistently point to high levels of psychological distress, moral injury, and burnout as pervasive issues within these specialized fields [1, 4, 8]. Correctional nurses, for instance, frequently grapple with significant psychological distress and moral injury, which often arise from confronting ethical conflicts and navigating the inherent demands of their work [1, 4]. These profound stressors are frequently compounded by a lack of perceived organizational support, which directly correlates with poorer mental health outcomes for these essential healthcare providers [1]. The absence of a supportive work environment can exacerbate existing strains, making it harder for nurses to cope with the daily realities of their profession.

Burnout is another significant concern that has been extensively documented across various studies focusing on this population [2, 4, 8]. Nurses working in forensic mental health services experience burnout due to a range of common stressors intrinsic to their specialized roles [2]. The emotional strain resulting from persistent ethical conflicts, coupled with insufficient job satisfaction and inadequate social support, are identified as strong predictors of burnout among correctional nurses [4]. Furthermore, examinations of forensic psychiatric nurses specifically reveal alarmingly high levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress [8]. This consistent finding underscores the considerable emotional toll exacted by these high-stress settings, emphasizing that the nature of the work itself often leads to a depletion of emotional and psychological resources. The cumulative effect of these factors clearly necessitates targeted interventions designed not only to alleviate stress but also to actively enhance compassion satisfaction and build resilience within the nursing workforce [8].

The unique nature of carceral and forensic environments introduces specific, often severe, stressors, including direct exposure to workplace violence and the intricate complexities of caring for patients with severe mental illness. Nurses in forensic psychiatric hospitals, for example, are demonstrably vulnerable to workplace violence, which significantly contributes to their psychological dis-

tress, including symptoms of anxiety and depression [6]. Such exposure creates a climate of fear and insecurity, further taxing their mental well-being. Qualitative research offers critical insights into the lived experiences of nurses in carceral settings, vividly detailing the distinct challenges they face and the immense emotional and psychological burden they carry while working within highly demanding systems [5]. Moreover, correctional nurses who provide care to individuals with mental illness are often caught between competing priorities, facing unique emotional burdens and profound ethical dilemmas as they struggle to balance stringent security mandates with the imperative of delivering therapeutic care [7, 9]. This inherent tension can lead to substantial moral distress and mental strain, particularly when working with highly vulnerable populations such as incarcerated women with mental illness [9].

Effective coping strategies and the availability of adequate resources are absolutely critical in mitigating these pervasive adverse effects. Studies meticulously explore how nurses manage the intense demands of their roles, identifying a variety of coping mechanisms they employ to navigate daily challenges [2, 10]. The development and validation of specialized tools, such as the Job Demands-Resources Scale, are essential for accurately assessing the specific stressors and the available resources pertinent to mental health nurses in forensic settings [3]. This enables a more precise and data-driven approach to designing effective interventions. A systematic review further consolidates findings on a broad spectrum of stressors—including environmental, organizational, and patient-related factors—and comprehensively outlines various common coping strategies [10]. This provides a robust, comprehensive foundation for developing highly specific and targeted support interventions. The collective body of research consistently emphasizes the critical and urgent need for robust organizational support, specialized training tailored to these environments, and accessible psychological assistance to safeguard the mental well-being and professional sustainability of nurses operating within these inherently challenging and complex professional settings [1, 7, 10].

Conclusion

Nurses working in correctional and forensic mental health settings encounter a unique array of significant psychological challenges, consistently reporting high rates of distress, moral injury, and professional burnout. The inherent demands of these complex environments, often characterized by pervasive ethical conflicts, high-stress situations, and a particularly vulnerable patient population, are primary drivers of these adverse mental health outcomes. Research repeatedly indicates that a perceived lack of adequate orga-

nizational and social support profoundly exacerbates these negative impacts, leaving nurses feeling isolated and unsupported.

Moreover, direct exposure to workplace violence is a considerable and often unavoidable stressor, leading to elevated levels of anxiety and depression, particularly among forensic psychiatric nurses. Providing care for patients with mental illness within a correctional framework introduces distinct emotional burdens and ethical dilemmas. Nurses frequently navigate a delicate and often conflicting balance between maintaining strict security protocols and delivering empathetic, therapeutic care, which can result in substantial moral distress and ongoing mental strain. Despite these profound and multifaceted challenges, studies also identify that nurses in these settings employ various coping strategies to manage their demanding roles. The collective body of research consistently underscores an urgent and critical need for robust organizational support, specialized training specifically tailored to the nuances of these complex environments, and accessible psychological assistance. Implementing such comprehensive measures is vital for enhancing resilience, effectively mitigating adverse mental health impacts, and ultimately improving the overall well-being and professional longevity of these indispensable healthcare professionals.

References

1. Amanda DS, Kristin AH, Laura SK, Kristine JK, Stephanie AS et al. (2023) Psychological distress, moral injury, and perceived organizational support among correctional nurses: A cross-sectional study. *J Adv Nurs* 80:e1-e12
2. M. A. W. C. Wijayasiri, E. G. R. S. U. Edirisinghe, G. W. L. N. S. Gunathilake, D. A. S. D. Nayananda, N. W. A. C. J. W. K. Weerasekara et al. (2023) Burnout and coping strategies among nurses working in forensic mental health services: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Nurs* 22:222
3. J. M. S. Olusanya, E. J. O. Omolayo, T. E. Okwuosa, B. O. Ogbonnaya, V. E. Aigbodion et al. (2023) Psychometric Properties of the Job Demands-Resources Scale for Mental Health Nurses Working in Forensic Settings. *Int J Forensic Ment Health* 22:440-452
4. Sarah L. Miller, Jennifer M. Specht, Pamela S. Hinds, Stephanie L. S. Taylor et al. (2023) Examining the impact of moral distress, job satisfaction, and perceived social support on correctional nurse burnout. *J Forensic Nurs* 19:111-120

5. Jacqueline A. Hayter, Rebecca J. Stanley, Andrew W. Brown, Louise M. Stone, Elizabeth J. Halcomb et al. (2022) "It's like another world in here": The experiences of registered nurses working in carceral settings in New South Wales, Australia. *Collegian* 29:588-596
6. Shuxin Zhao, Ruobing Huang, Yixin Sun, Qian Zhang, Qinghua Yu et al. (2022) Psychological Impact of Workplace Violence on Nurses Working in Forensic Psychiatric Hospitals: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Front Psychiatry* 13:868725
7. Jennifer L. Specht, Sarah L. Miller, Pamela S. Hinds, Stephanie L. S. Taylor et al. (2022) Experiences of correctional nurses working with patients with mental illness: A qualitative study. *J Forensic Nurs* 18:11-19
8. Ann-Charlott Hallgren, Ulrika Nilsson, Lotta Karlsson, Susanne Pettersson et al. (2021) Burnout and Professional Quality of Life Among Forensic Psychiatric Nurses. *Issues Ment Health Nurs* 42:1251-1259
9. Jennifer Specht, Sarah Miller, Pamela Hinds, Stephanie Taylor et al. (2021) "Caught between two worlds": The experiences of correctional nurses working with incarcerated women with mental illness. *J Forensic Nurs* 17:106-114
10. Ksenija Koprivic, Laura Deacon, Sarah Steels, Andrea C. Taylor et al. (2020) Stressors and coping strategies among nurses in forensic psychiatric inpatient settings: a systematic review. *J Clin Nurs* 29:2795-2808