

## Female Prisoners' Views and Satisfaction on Incarceration Conditions: Findings of a Cross-Sectional Survey in Greece

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Detention conditions during incarceration have not been adequately explored in Greece. The aim of this study was to highlight incarcerated women's views and satisfaction on their detention conditions in the female prison of Attica.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey was carried out in 2014. A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to those who met the inclusion criteria and were enrolled in the study. Inmates who were in solitary confinement, suffered from serious psychiatric problems, or were unable to understand the Greek language were excluded from the study. Participation was voluntary after prisoners' verbal consent. Data were collected via personal interviews and information received was anonymized. Descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis, Spearman correlation coefficient and qualitative content analyses were used. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 20.

**Results:** Of a total of 135 incarcerated women, 101 were eligible and accepted to participate in the study. Current mental and health status were rated as poor/ very poor by 55% and 27.7% of the participants, respectively. The vast majority stated their dissatisfaction with the accommodation, the cleanliness, as well as the provided nutrition inside the prison. 65% participated in social reintegration programs and 66% in physical exercise. 73.3% declared that the main reason of their worries was the relationship with their family members and 37.6% stated that there was support in family problems during incarceration. The overall satisfaction on detention conditions regarding prisoner's daily life was also rated as low by 67.3%. In addition, the results confirmed a positive linear relationship between satisfaction on detention conditions and health/mental health status.

**Conclusion:** Incarcerated women in the female prison of Attica appear not to be satisfied with the experienced detentions conditions that are associated with their health status. Our findings should encourage further research in order to introduce more effective interventions aiming at improving prisoner's daily life and future after release.

**Keywords:** Female prisoners; Incarceration conditions; Health status; Mental health; Satisfaction; Daily life; Greece

### Introduction

The assessment of detention conditions is very important and gives the opportunity to explore inmate's experience of imprisonment [1]. The prison environment is characterized by isolation, communal life, violence, insecurity, and overcrowding [2-4]. Incarceration is generally associated with unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, inactive lifestyle and irregular diet that lead to the increasing rates of physical and mental diseases [2-4]. Health status is also deteriorated by unhealthy conditions of imprisonment such as lack of clean facilities or means for personal hygiene [5]. In addition, adequate and healthy nutrition during incarceration has also a major impact on prisoner's daily life and on maintaining or improving their overall health status [6].

Incarceration conditions are also associated with reduced physical activity. Recent study results suggest that physical activity seems to improve prisoners' fitness and health status by reducing their health care needs and associated public spending [7]. Moreover, physical activity and continuous vocational training during incarceration are considered very useful for leisure time activities and for social reintegration encouragement after release [7-9].

In Greece, limited work has been done in the field of assessing incarceration conditions with the few existing studies to be focused only on male detention facilities [10-12]. The need for such a study was considered imperative given that imprisonment seems to affect inmate's health status, everyday life, as well as their future after release. The aim of this study was to highlight women's views and satisfaction on their incarceration conditions in the female prison of Attica.

### Methodology

#### Study design and sample selection

Given that women in Greek penal institutions reach approximately 5% of the total prison population [13], there are only two female detention centers in the country, one in the prefecture of Attica and one in Central Greece. A cross-sectional survey was carried out in the female prison of Attica from January to December 2014 by the University of Peloponnese [14], which was granted an entry permit to the prison by the Ministry of Justice after School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee's approval. Out of 135 incarcerated women, those who were in solitary confinement, suffered from serious psychiatric problems and were unable to understand the Greek language were excluded from the survey. The recruitment process was undertaken by prison's social workers, specially trained for the purpose of the study by the university research team. The prisoners were informed on the

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study objectives and scope and were asked if they wanted to participate, providing an informed verbal consent those who agreed. The list of participants was subsequently given to the University research team and the interviews were scheduled.

### Study instrument

A questionnaire was developed based on a review of the international literature [1,15,16]. A pilot research was carried out in January 2014 on a convenience sample of 12 female prisoners from the target population, in order to evaluate questionnaire's clarity, comprehensiveness and validity [17] and feedback was incorporated into the final version. The questionnaire included several close-ended questions on prisoner's socio-demographic and detention characteristics and on their opinions and views regarding their current health/mental health status, the dimensions of the existing detention conditions such as accommodation, cleanliness in sanitary areas, communal areas and cells, nutrition and on their overall satisfaction with the prison environment. Questions relevant with prisoner's worries, leisure activities and future reintegration plans after release were also included.

Prisoner's opinions, satisfaction as wells as their general health and mental health status were explored with a 5-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from "very poor" to "very good". In addition, a few open-ended questions were included to investigate prisoners' daily leisure time activities and reasons of worries.

The questionnaires were completed during face to face interviews with the inmates. The interviews were conducted in Greek by an experienced researcher of the University of Peloponnese, with more than five years' experience in managing vulnerable population groups without prison's personnel presence. All questionnaires were anonymized to guarantee secrecy.

### Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed through descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis. The results are presented as absolute (n) and relative (%) frequencies for the nominal and ordinal variables and as mean values for the quantitative variables. For the statistical differences and relationships, non-parametric tests were performed. A two-tailed Spearman rank correlation test was used to determine the relationships between health status and socio-demographic characteristics (nominal or ordinal variables) and dimensions of detention conditions (ordinal variables). Also qualitative content analysis method was used based on open-ended questions. All analyses were performed with SPSS 19 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

### Results

Out of 135 female prisoners, 101 were eligible and accepted to participate in the survey, with a response rate of 74.8%. More specifically, female prisoners who were in solitary confinement (N=3), suffered from serious psychiatric problems (N=14) or were unable to understand the Greek language (N=17) were excluded from the study. The majority of the participants (76.2%) were Greek with a mean age of 37.5 years. 52.5% was unmarried and 61.4% reported having children. 58.4% was employed before incarceration and 67.5% had a compulsory or a secondary educational level (Table 1). In addition, current health status and mental health were rated as poor/very poor by 27.7% and 55% of participants, respectively.

The main reasons of incarceration were drug trafficking (28.7%), theft/robbery (26.7%) as well as debts (25.7%) related with banks,

taxes and social insurance funds, together with uncovered checks and defalcation. The penalties for injuries and murder were in lower rates, in particular 2% and 6.9%, respectively. The mean duration of imprisonment was 12 months (S.D. 10) and 58.4% were pre-trial prisoners. Furthermore, most of the respondents (83.2%) have been imprisoned for the first time.

Regarding the hours per day that prisoners spend inside their cells, 11-15 h and 5-10 h were reported by 36.2% and 22.3%, respectively. However, 97% stated that they had leisure time, where 61.4% usually watched television and 55.4% read. Other activities reported were music, knitting, cooking and baking. Also, 66% stated that they had the opportunity of physical exercise inside the prison.

The majority (65%) stated that the prison offered social reintegration programs such as vocational training and educational programs as well as various therapeutic programs. More analytically, vocational training includes craft, jewelry and painting. As far as educational programs, there is the so-called "School of Second chance" in which the inmates have the opportunity to study in both primary and secondary education in order to reduce the level of illiteracy. Furthermore, for drug and alcohol addicted therapeutic programs are provided. Adversely, a low percentage (37.6%) declared that there was a social worker who offered support to the prisoners' family problems. In addition, prisoners highlighted as the most important reasons of worries the relationship

	N	%
<b>Mean Age=37.5 (S.D. 11)</b>		
<b>Citizenship</b>		
Greek	77	76.2
Other	24	23.8
<b>Marital status</b>		
Unmarried	53	52.5
Married	19	18.8
Divorced	21	20.8
Widow	8	7.9
<b>Children</b>		
Yes	62	61.4
No	39	38.6
<b>Employment status before detention</b>		
Employed	59	58.4
Student	2	2.0
Unemployed	26	25.7
Pensioner	3	3.0
Housework	9	8.9
Other	2	2.0
<b>Education level</b>		
Compulsory	36	35.6
Secondary	32	31.7
Tertiary	24	23.8
Postgraduate	9	8.9

**Table 1:** Sample characteristics.

Reasons	Number	Percentage
Relationship with family members	74	73,3
Prisoner's uncertainty after release	52	51,5
Relationship with other prisoners	18	17,8
Relation with the other gender	12	11,9
Other reasons	6	6

**Table 2:** Prisoners' reasons for worries.

with their family members (73.3%) and uncertainty after release (51.5%) as shown in Table 2.

As far as the prison conditions (Figure 1), 70.3% and 80.2% declared that accommodation and nutrition in detention were bad/very bad respectively and only 7% and 5% reported as good/very good the above mentioned dimensions. Similar were the results about cleanliness in sanitary areas and cleanliness in communal areas and in cell, where 79.2% and 72% of the sample respectively was dissatisfied. The overall satisfaction on detention conditions was bad/very bad (67.3%), moderate (26.7%) and only 7% of prisoners rated it as good/very good.

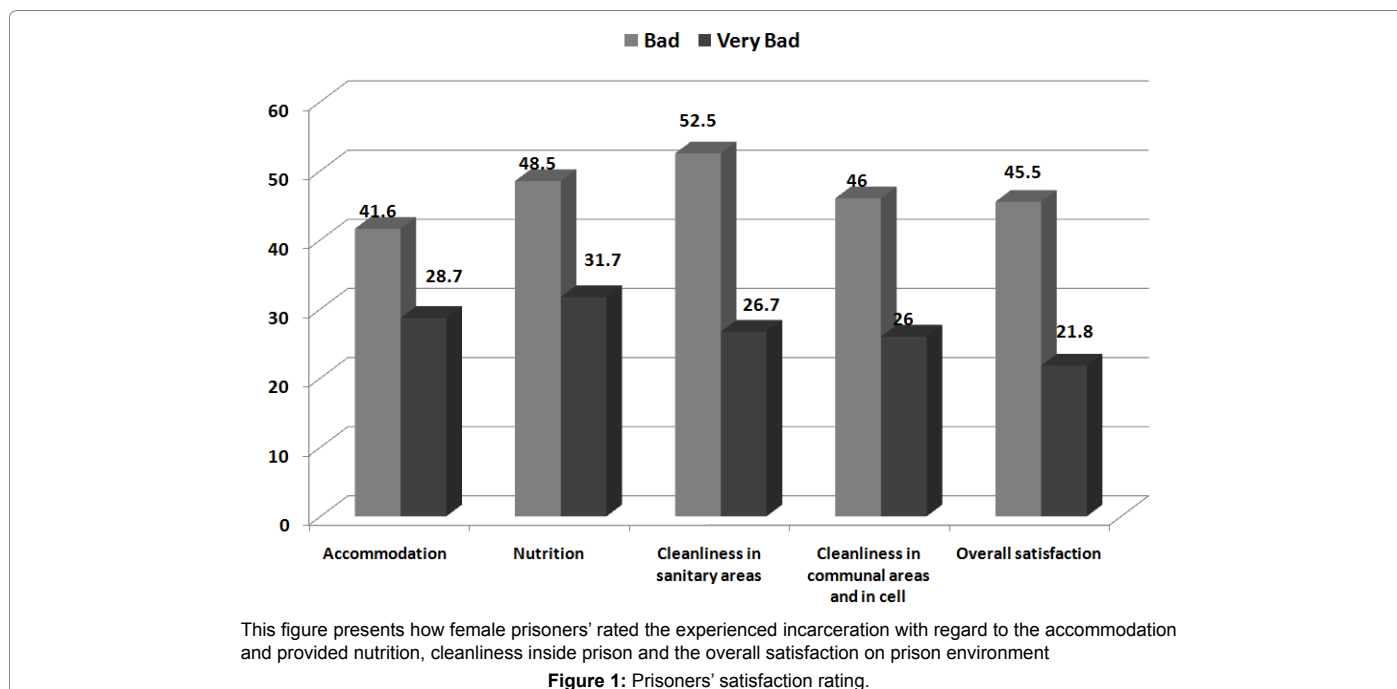
The results of the linear correlation examining the relationship between satisfaction on detention conditions and health/mental status are presented in Table 3. All dimensions were moderate and positively correlated with each other and with health status (except for cleanliness

in communal areas and in cell) as well as with mental health of the respondents. It is worth mentioning that the increase of satisfaction on detention conditions leads to the increase of general health and mental health status.

Moreover, no statistically significant differences were found between the dimensions of detention conditions and prisoners' socio-demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, educational level and duration of penalties.

### Discussion

To our knowledge, the present study is a first attempt to turn attention to incarcerated women's views and satisfaction with the experienced detention conditions in the female prison of Attica which constitutes one out of two female prisons in the country. According to the study results, approximately 6 out of 10 female prisoners were



		Accommodation	Nutrition	Cleanliness in sanitary areas	Cleanliness in communal areas and in cell	Overall satisfaction
Nutrition	Correlation Coefficient	0,777**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001				
Cleanliness in sanitary areas	Correlation Coefficient	0,636**	0,665**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,001			
Cleanliness in communal areas and in cell	Correlation Coefficient	0,574**	0,524**	0,720**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,001	0,001		
Overall satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	0,668**	0,612**	0,713**	0,599**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,001	
Health status	Correlation Coefficient	0,325**	0,289**	0,334**	0,183	0,458**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,003	0,001	0,069	0,001
Mental health	Correlation Coefficient	0,383**	0,339**	0,354**	0,300**	0,438**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,001	0,001	0,003	0,001

**Table 3:** Correlation analysis for detention conditions and health/mental status.

dissatisfied with the overall prison environment and almost 3 out of 10 and 6 out of 10 rated their current health and mental health status as poor, respectively [14]. With regards to detention conditions, the vast majority of the respondents were not satisfied with the accommodation, the provided nutrition and the cleanliness of the prisons' facilities. Our study showed that almost all prisoners had leisure time and more than half stayed inside their cells approximately 5 to 15 h per day. More specifically, the majority spent their leisure time by attending social reintegration programs, physical exercising and with other daily activities such as watching television and reading. The main reason of female prisoner's worries was relationship with their family and the uncertainty after release. Also, our results revealed that inmates' satisfaction on detention conditions seem to influence their health and mental status while the socio-demographic characteristics appear not to be determining factors.

Most of our findings are consistent with the international literature. With regard to the reasons of female incarceration, the rates of drug-related crimes of our survey were similar to other studies, while the violent crimes and murders observed in USA, seem not to be common reasons of women imprisonment in Greece and other European countries [2,18-20].

Prisoners' poor health status as well as the high prevalence of mental health deprivation and mental disorders has been also reported in various studies [21-28]. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the detention conditions was also reported in a Greek study focused on male prisoners as well as in the international literature [11,29,30]. Adversely, in a Scottish Prison survey the majority of prisoners expressed positive views about prison cleanliness and was generally satisfied with the provided nutrition [1]. In the same survey, prisoner's daily exercise was extremely high (94%), while in England it has been found that approximately 43% of inmates participated in some form of organized physical activities [31].

The satisfactory rates of physical exercising in our study appear not to be consistent with a Greek study conducted in three male detention centers, reporting the lack of physical activities and sports during imprisonment [10]. The reasoning behind our finding is that female prison of Attica is one out of five detention centers providing sport facilities, while there are other 29 prisons in Greece that do not provide relevant facilities [32].

As far as the future after release, the attendance of social reintegration programs such as vocational and job training was higher in our study than in the international literature [1,33,34]. Furthermore, a significant association between health/mental health status and physical exercise-sports activities during imprisonment is also found in numerous studies since being locked for many hours has a negative effect on inmates' mental health status and leads to limited work, access to education and physical exercise [35-37].

The lack of a standardized questionnaire should be noted as a potential limitation in this study. However, the development of the specific tool combines the international experience with the Greek prison's practice and has been elsewhere used [14]. It should be also noted that despite the fact that our findings come from one out of two female prisons in Greece, they cannot be generalizable to the country since the prison studied is less crowded than the other one but it is located in the capital of the country.

## Conclusion

Incarcerated women in the female prison of Attica appear not to

be satisfied with the experienced detention conditions. This study call attention with regards to the overall prison environment as it seems to be associated with prisoner's health status deterioration. This study should encourage further research in the field, given that prisoner's satisfaction on detention conditions might be used as a means of introducing more effective interventions aiming at improving inmates' daily life and future after release.

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