



Psychological and social aspects of affectivity in the penal system

Introduction

Affectivity encompasses the ability to feel and regulate emotions and to integrate them into relationships. In the prison system, it is highly relevant both individually and socially: for the mental health of prisoners, their resocialization and ultimately for social cohesion. But how does affectivity work psychologically - and what conditions influence it in the justice system? Affectivity as a protective factor against isolation and mental health crises

Numerous studies show that emotional neglect during imprisonment increases the risk of mental illness, particularly depression and suicidal thoughts. In Italy, for example, the number of suicides among prisoners in 2022 was higher than in the entire previous year - partly due to a lack of emotional support.

Affective relationships with partners, children or close friends, on the other hand, have a stabilizing effect: they offer support, meaning and a bridge to the world outside the prison walls. The loss or restriction of such relationships can be perceived as „secondary punishment“ - with negative effects on self-esteem, motivation and social development.

Psychological programs to promote affectivity

Many prisons offer individual and group psychological sessions aimed at self-reflection, emotional regulation and relationship skills. In Romania, programs such as „Me and my child“ or „Self-knowledge and personality development“ are used specifically to promote affective skills. Methods used include role-playing, cognitive restructuring, biographical work and emotion regulation training. The aim is to recognize and change stressful relationship patterns and to strengthen empathy and communication skills.

Social dimension: Affectivity as a bridge to society

Affectivity is not only an individual state, but also a social process. Prisons that specifically promote contact with the „outside world“ - e.g. through family celebrations, parent-child activities or couples counseling - open up spaces for social reintegration. In Romania, children's days with painting activities and sports competitions between parents and children are even part of the resocialization programme.

In Italy and Germany, comparable projects exist on a selective basis, e.g. family seminars, father-child weekends or joint group lessons. These not only promote affectivity, but also a sense of responsibility and long-term relationships.

Institutional framework conditions and challenges

Psychological work with affective disorders is under structural pressure: overcrowding, a shortage of specialists and safety regulations make long-term, individual care difficult. Cultural taboos (especially in the area of sexuality) and a lack of political prioritization also slow down the development of affective reintegration programmes.

Another problem is the lack of systematization: affective support programmes are not mandatory in most European countries, but depend on the commitment of individual professionals or projects such as PSSARP.

Conclusion

Affectivity is a key factor for the mental health and social reintegration of prisoners. Its promotion should therefore be an integral part of resocialization - through targeted psychological programmes, social rituals and institutional openness. If prisoners learn to deal with themselves and others in an emotionally constructive way, this not only increases their chances of a life free of punishment, but also the social security of society as a whole.

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result**

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'The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein'



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