

Life of Convicted Men in a Late-modern Prison

Život odsouzených mužů v pozdně-moderním vězení

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Abstract:

This paper is a review study of research on the lives of male prisoners in a post-2010 prison environment in the developed Western world. The study first briefly introduces classical backgrounds and theories and then focuses on the most important contemporary research themes in sociology, anthropology, and psychology that relate to the lives of male prisoners. Emphasis is also placed on research in the Czech Republic. The study summarizes this knowledge, draws the most important conclusions, and suggests possibilities for further research in this area, especially concerning the needs of penitentiary practice.

Keywords:

Overview study; convicted men; prison

Abstrakt:


Příspěvek je přehledovou studií výzkumu života odsouzených mužů ve vězeňském prostředí po roce 2010 ve vyspělém západním světě. V této stati jsou nejprve stručně představeny klasická východiska a teorie. Dále se studie zaměřuje na nejdůležitější současná témata výzkumů z oblasti sociologie, antropologie a psychologie, které se týkají života odsouzených mužů. Důraz je kladen i na výzkumy v České republice. Práce toto poznání shrnuje, vyvozuje nejdůležitější závěry a navrhuje možnosti dalšího výzkumu v této oblasti, zejména s ohledem na potřeby penitenciární praxe.

Klíčová slova:

Přehledová studie; odsouzení muži; vězení

Introduction

Life behind prison walls has always attracted the attention of novelists and poets and has been shrouded in many romantic images. It became a regular subject of scientific investigation in the 1930s in the USA when graduates of the famous Chicago School entered prisons and described the way of life of the convicts. In the 1950s and 1970s, sociologists produced many studies on incarcerated men and formulated two influential theories of prison subcultures. Current research on the lives of convicts in prison settings

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is now relatively broad and includes studies within sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The results of these recent studies bring new topics far beyond the study of prison subcultures.

According to some authors, the late-modern prison system is at a crossroads because it is not fulfilling the hopes placed in the institution (Milhaud, 2015). Currently, not only in the Czech Republic, there is a professional debate, especially regarding the change of approach to convicts and the introduction of new methods of treatment (Novopacká et al., 2023). At the same time, it should be noted that in the current prison system, many remnants of traditional settings persist, which makes this action minimally difficult (Koncepte vězeňství do roku 2025, 2016). On the one hand, there is the influence of a large formal organization (the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, hence the organizational units), their components and institutions. On the other hand, it is the action of informal social groups of convicts, of which the convict is also a member. To have a better impact on the prisoner, it is good to understand all these influences, preferably in interdependence.

This study presents research papers that deal with different aspects of a convicted person's life during his sentence. It then summarizes this knowledge and suggests a possible future direction for research that would not only help to expand theoretical knowledge but could also have implications for penological practice.

What are we building on?

The study of the lives of male convicts was a classic topic for sociologists in the 1950s-1980s in the United States and was framed by the theme of prison subcultures. Researchers of the time, beginning with Donald Clemmer (1958)², went into prisons and sought to describe various aspects of this subculture and, in turn, to explain its origins. In the 1960s, two influential theories competed. The first (deprivation) explained the specific subculture of convicts as a natural reaction to the organizational environment of the prison, the essence of which is general deprivation. The foremost representative is Gresham Sykes (1958). The second theory (importation) builds on the socialization of the individual in the environment of criminal street gangs, whose subculture is then transferred inside the prison. A representative of this theory is, for example, James Jacobs (1974). During the 1970s, a series of research studies were carried out that confirmed that institutional influences are better predictors of prisoners' subcultural manifestations than importational influences. The exception to this is the age factor, especially as it relates to near-adolescents (Akers et al., 1974; Thomas, 1977; Ellis et al., 1974). This conclusion was later confirmed by Paweł Moczydłowski (1992) in Polish prisons. Classical studies have also focused on socialization in the prison environment from a time perspective, which is different for long sentences (Toch, 1992; Flanagan, 1995) compared to shorter sentences (Schmid & Jones, 1991). A significant factor influencing the life of a convict is the phase of his conviction and the anticipation of possible future events (Wheeler, 1961).

² Prison Community was first published in 1940 and summarizes the author's field research during the 1930s.

Contemporary research

There is already an extensive literary production touching on convicts' lives. In addition to the traditional approach from the position of penitentiary sociology, there are many contributions from anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, etc., not only traditionally from the USA and Canada but also from several European countries, including Eastern Europe. The focus is partly related to classical research. Still, new themes abound, primarily oriented toward the psychological concept of prison well-being, convicts' relations with staff, and the prison climate.

The current form of prison society

New research has reopened the old question of the shape of the prison community. Most American authors lean towards the importation model. They believe that a violent predatory code based on gang affiliation has become prevalent in American prisons due to the multiplication of the prison population. David Skarbek (2014) is the leading proponent of this approach. Other authors also subscribe to this notion (Trammell, 2012; Fredman, 2013, etc.). Gangs primarily serve the function of keeping white prisoners safe from assault by black and Hispanic inmates (who are the majority in American prisons), as well as making the environment more predictable and giving the individual some symbolic prestige (Trammell, 2012). However, these gangs are more a matter of maximum-security prisons; in medium-security prisons, there is no firm evidence of their existence (Wills, 2014).

In contrast, Derek A. Kreager and his team (2017) argue against the importation model in favor of a much more cohesive system, finding that despite the high numbers of inmates in US prisons, a kind of informal system has developed, with "old heads" at the center, i.e., inmates who are familiar with the conditions in jail and prisons in general. They are generally respected and become mentors, especially to new prisoners, and surprisingly have good relationships with the wardens (Kreager et al., 2017).

In the countries of the former Soviet Union, the rigid prison subculture of the socialist era, which was based on the rejection of the formal system and the division of convicts into several classes, probably persists in some form (Przybyliński, 2016). However, it no longer seems to retain its rigidity based on loyalty to fellow inmates and resistance to the official institution. Also, the enforceability of compliance with unwritten rules is much more limited (Symkovych, 2018). The reasons are the same as in the Western world: 1) many prisoners have a real chance to get home early on parole, and it is a priority for them; 2) regional, ethnic, and especially economic conditions among prisoners come into play, which makes the traditional stratification of prisoners more complex (Vaičiūnienė & Tereškinas, 2017). This is also confirmed by Polish researcher Andrzej Uhl (2022). He states that prison counterculture is instead something that prisoners would like to exist, but in reality, it is a "theatre," obscuring the fact that the individual is incarcerated. Economic capital is more critical than subcultural norms and practices (Uhl, 2022).

The process of adaptation to imprisonment

Several studies have examined how convicts adapt to the specific conditions of imprisonment. According to Yvonne Jewkes (2011), it is primarily about constructing a proxy identity that enables prisoners to act in prison. For men, work is one of the most critical status conveyors, and thus, men in jail lose the markers through which they can

position themselves in the social world. Since there is no backstage in prison, the prisoner is constantly forced to play a role, so he cannot be himself. These proxy identities can sign good adaptation to the prison environment. However, the repertoire of these identities is limited and largely depends on the specific prison (Jewkes, 2011). However, identity can also be defined by what an individual is not, which explains the prisoners' hatred towards certain groups, especially towards specific crimes (Wills, 2014). Michael Gibson-Light (2020) has shown that identity in prison is primarily derived from an inmate's job position. There is a specific hierarchy in this regard, with the most valued work on the outside being amongst "normal people". Prison work is, therefore, a significant factor in socialization and self-concept (Gibson-Light, 2020).

Adapting to imprisonment is undoubtedly different for shorter and longer sentences. This has been shown in some earlier research. Yvonne Jewkes (2011) found that prisoners with longer sentences tend to form not groups but relatively stable pairs (rarely trios) with closer bonds. She found that the media also plays a significant role in their socialization process (Jewkes, 2011). Interestingly, extended prison stays may not only have adverse effects; according to Polish researchers (2020), these convicts paradoxically showed more excellent psychological stability and appeared even younger than age-appropriate. As a rule, long-term prisoners did not care much about contact with peers, distanced themselves from the prison subculture, and focused on independent activities in the cell. Thus, long-term incarceration may benefit some prisoners (Miszewski & Miałkowska-Kozaryna, 2020).

Adaptation to prison is also related to the relative length of time in prison. This has already been demonstrated by Stanton Wheeler (1961) and actively confirmed by Daniel H. Butler (2019). Results have shown that prisoners orient to different problems at different stages of their sentences. Fear of assault dominates early on, which is reflected in more frequent stays in correction. In the middle phase, the prisoner focuses on relationships with fellow prisoners and people outside the prison. In the last phase, he is already preparing to leave the prison and is most open to contact with staff. These conclusions align with Wheeler but with a refinement in the middle phase, when the prisoner may not only orient himself to the prison subculture but also to people outside the prison world. According to the author's findings, the magic line between short and long sentences is five years (Butler, 2019).

Manifestations of the hidden life of prisoners

One of the manifestations of the life of convicts in the depriving conditions of a prison, where there is a large number of people in a small space, is, of course, violence. However, according to British researcher Joseph H. Michalski (2015), convicts perceive violence with ambivalence. On the one hand, they admire such people; on the other, they fear them or regard them as troublemakers who threaten the established order. For violence to be justified, it must meet one of the following requirements: 1) punishment of disrespect, 2) self-defense against victimization, and 3) a means of conflict resolution (Michalski, 2015). German Anke Neuber (2011) reports in a similar vein. According to her research, violence is predominantly a means of struggle for recognition, reputation, honor, and respect. According to Francesco Wills (2014), "redemptive" violence is directed against specific crimes. Such actions allow one to put personal guilt aside and focus on another problem,

thus feeling like a better person.³ According to Polish researcher Dariusz Sarzała (2015), violence is more associated with closed prisons, without a view of the green, where time is not structured, for example, by work (Sarzała, 2015).

Drugs play an inherent role in today's late-modern prison system. These can serve multiple functions, most notably as an escape from a generally inhospitable environment and a way to structure time (Jewkes, 2011). Drugs are often associated with gang activity (Skarbek, 2014; Fredman, 2013; Tetrault et al., 2020). Surprisingly, in Norwegian prisons, a completely different distribution model based on a sharing culture has been found (Mjåland, 2014).

One of the manifestations of the hidden life of prisoners is gambling. Gambling then represents 1) a means of structuring time (it passes better), 2) an exciting activity to distract boredom, and 3) a means of socialization, especially for prisoners who want to integrate quickly and seek protection. However, gambling is not an essential feature of the prison subculture, as smoking is far more prevalent than gambling (Beauregard & Brochu, 2013).

The impact of the organization on the life of convicts

Much of the current research is concerned with prison staff (particularly warders) and their relationship with prisoners or the role of the organization in the lives of prisoners. In Rebecca Trammell's (2018) study, the wardens reported mutual respect as essential to their relationship with inmates. According to them, prisoners are sensitive to acts of arrogance. It is estimated that the warden's arrogant attitude causes about a quarter of conflicts. On the other hand, guards are often faced with the dilemma of whether they would withdraw and lose authority or behave authoritarian and risk escalating conflict (Trammell et al., 2018). Sarah Shannon and Joshua Page (2014) conducted extensive research among guards and concluded that negative attitudes toward prisoners are not entirely commonplace. These attitudes depended on how wardens rated the prison regarding the sufficiency of staff and the quality of rehabilitation programs for prisoners. Where they believe this works, they report less stress and display less punitive attitudes towards prisoners (Shannon & Page, 2014).

Similar research has been conducted in the Netherlands (2020). This study compared the work climate of guards to prisoner satisfaction. These two variables correlate with each other. Higher perceived staff workload is significantly associated with a low sense of security and poorer peer relationships among prisoners. However, a higher number of guards led to a lower sense of autonomy and generally lower satisfaction among prisoners, undoubtedly due to a higher risk of disciplinary action. To the extent that staff perceived peer cooperation as good, this was reflected in prisoners' overall good assessment of the organization. The length of work experience of guards or the percentage of female representation played no role (Ginneken et al., 2020). Looking from the other side - from inmates - Rebecca Trammell's (2012) study showed that prisoners universally viewed warders (and other prison staff) through a system of widespread prejudice. They see guards as lazy, stupid, and sometimes even sadistic. These findings are not dissimilar to earlier findings (Trammell, 2012).

³ This aspect is also well known to the staff of our prisons; convictions for certain crimes are a source of general contempt among fellow prisoners, and this view is also shared by the guards (Imříšková, 2013).

The prison climate, as seen through the lens of the inmates, has been of long-standing interest to British criminologists led by Ben Crewe. Their MQPL scale (Liebling et al., 2011) is based on the psychological concept of Quality of Life. It captures five dimensions: 1) harmony (humanity, respect, helpfulness from staff), 2) professionalism of the staff (fairness, consistency, bureaucratism), 3) safety (drugs, ease of adaptation, protection from staff), 4) contact with the outside (visiting conditions, etc.), and 5) personal well-being and self-development (autonomy, well-being, opportunity for development). As we can see, this scale is primarily set to the effect of the organization (especially the guards) towards the convicts.

There is considerable variation between prisons in this regard, most markedly in the ratings of warders (Liebling et al., 2019; Johnsen et al., 2017; Bullock & Bunce, 2020, etc.). It is worth noting that, particularly in private prisons, inmates value the helpfulness and humanity of warders (e.g., addressing them by their first name). Simultaneously, there is a low rating for warden professionalism and prison safety. This indicates a failure on the part of the wardens, who do not feel supported by prison management when they should intervene (Crewe, 2015).

While prison climate captures the overall atmosphere between prisoners and staff, prison culture can be considered a broader concept, including sentencing philosophy and general attitude towards prisoners. A study by Ben Crewe (2007) suggests that the culture of late modern prisons in the UK has shifted significantly. According to the convicts, the current prison system is soft, devious, and inhumane. This inhumanity, even monstrosity, of the modern bureaucratic system means that prisoners not only have to do the things they are expected to do but also demonstrate that they are doing them and proclaiming a change of attitude during formal interviews with specialists. These specialists are seen as part of a vast network of disciplinary knowledge.

In contrast, prisoners perceive wardens as relatively powerless and have an utterly peripheral role in decision-making about the inmate. The system is set up so that a convict's life revolves around the possibility of getting out of prison on parole. Even those not in a hurry to get out discuss this topic extensively. Thus, prisoners have to participate in activities and proclaim attitudes that are not their own (Crewe, 2007).

A similar phenomenon also appeared in the British research of Deborah Drake (2012). Prisoners are very skeptical about rehabilitation programs. According to them, they are not there for the prisoner but for the organization; they force prisoners to be what they are not and to behave according to a standard. Some inmates stated that the psychologist is the most dangerous person in prison, as he induces feelings of guilt and self-questioning in prisoners, which can lead to a mental breakdown (Drake, 2012). It is clear that even in the US, a traditional bastion of repressive treatment of prisoners, this narrative has changed, and the role of the warden has shifted towards that of a "low-level street bureaucrat" who enables or prevents prisoners from accessing social services (Shanon & Page, 2014).

Based on a phenomenological exploration of the experience of imprisonment, Ben Crewe (2015) constructed a model of the four basic dimensions in which imprisonment is experienced:

- *depth* – impenetrability of walls, physical and psychological distance from the outside world;

- *weight* – the strictness of the regime, the unforgivingness of the guards, the amount and rigidity of the rules (however, prisons with a soft regime may not be evaluated positively, as prisoners do not feel safe there);
- *tightness* – responsiveness of prisoners for the rehabilitation process or monitoring and documentation of prisoners in terms of participation in programs, their performance for parole purposes;
- *breadth* – the effect of incarceration on the individual after release (physical, financial, social, etc.) (Crewe, 2015).

According to him, the prison regime is mainly influenced by the dimensions of rigidity and responsiveness. Combining them gives us four regimes: supportive, tight, loose, and inconsistent. Especially vague evaluation criteria are perceived very negatively by prisoners (Crewe & Ievins, 2021).

Research on the life of convicts in the Czech Republic

Research directly from the male prison environment is not abundant in our country. The first such work was a study on prison speech by Hála and Soudková (2002), followed by Lucie Radková (2012) with an updated report on the state of prison speech.

Sociologist Lukáš Dirga has the highest publication activity in his efforts to capture the contemporary social world behind prison walls. In his 2015 ethnographic research, he examined the structure of the prison population. He came to a similar conclusion to some of his predecessors of the past generation (Netík et al., 1997), namely that the prison population is vertically structured into classes, with "physical capital" being the primary key to division (Dirga et al., 2015).⁴ Masculinity also plays a crucial role in another of his contributions. The building of muscularity is emphasized primarily to intimidate potential aggressors (Dirga, 2017b). In another study, he discusses prison language, finding that it has a cryptic function in addition to its communicative and socializing function (Dirga, 2016a). Another project focuses on the religiosity of inmates during incarceration, particularly the use of the institution of the prison chapel. There are skeptical findings regarding the convicts' beliefs, as the chapel is often used to meet with other convicts and exchange goods with them (Váně & Dirga, 2016). Lukáš Dirga concludes his research in his dissertation thesis, where he compares the perception of the prison system's humanization policy from the perspective of convicts and selected groups of employees of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic. He concludes that each group perceives the current prison politics differently; in particular, convicts are not at all satisfied with the current state of affairs (although changes are paradoxically happening in the interest of humanizing the conditions of prisoners) (Dirga, 2018).

Alena Lochmannová first focused on the informal market among prisoners, which takes the form of barter, i.e., exchanging scarce goods for other payment (most often tobacco) or services (Lochmannová, 2016). Later, in her monography, she focused on prison tattoos. This work also provides a wealth of information about the hidden life of convicts, including a discussion of norms of behavior among convicts (Lochmannová, 2020). The perspective of convicts on the resocialization institution was addressed by Jiří

⁴ The kings represent the ruling class, particularly distinguished for their muscularity. The workhorses represent servants who must serve others and have few rights. The fools are a class that neither dominates nor is dominated (Dirga et al., 2015).

Mertl (2020). The findings gathered from released prisoners sound critical of the current prison setup and the possibilities for the socialization of prisoners (Mertl, 2020).

Jan Drahoňovský is another author systematically dealing with the prison system. The core of his interest is the experience of prisoners with the execution of imprisonment (Drahoňovský, 2016). Among the most important research findings are the importance of self-esteem derived from success in the prison environment and ambivalent attitudes toward fellow inmates. Furthermore, he and his collaborator focused on the issue of prison tutors through the lens of the inmates entrusted to them (Drahoňovský & Bulavová, 2020). Here, the cardinal importance of these workers for the convict was confirmed. At the same time, it turned out that convicts perceive their tutors in a somewhat different light than intended. Finally, in his quantitative investigation, he addressed the issue of the attitudes of convicts. Here, it was found that the perception of one's sentence is inextricably linked to the prison in which the convict is currently held. There was a remarkable consensus across different groups of convicts in their attitudes towards serving their sentence and the prison (Drahoňovský, 2022).

A summary of the most important findings about the lives of male convicts

- The prison subculture retains a particular existence but is a more implicit, constantly changing, and difficult-to-capture phenomenon. Its characteristics can be seen, for example, in attitudes towards violence or drug use.
- Economic and social capital are critical sources of status in prison. Lack of social capital is an intense vulnerability factor.
- It is not only socialization factors from fellow prisoners that play a role in the life of a convicted person; the possibility of parole and the institutions associated with it can be of great importance. This factor can significantly influence his strategic orientation during his sentence.
- Work is one of the main socialization factors in prison. It allows for structuring time, gaining social status and roles, and significantly influencing well-being.
- Drugs are also a way to structure time in prison. Given the demand for this commodity, prisons are flooded with drugs, and this has significant implications for prison security levels.
- The role of officers has changed, even in the traditionally authoritarian US. The warden either approaches the role of a social worker or acts passively. It has to be said that the prisoners view this rather negatively, as it reduces their sense of security in the prison.
- Imprisonment need not only represent misery (although it is undoubtedly associated with a lower quality of life). Instead, long-term incarceration has a stabilizing effect on the prisoner's well-being.

Conclusion

In summary, the life of convicts in the late-modern era becomes very complex as many factors come into play, and prisons vary significantly. The spatial and organizational conditions determine these factors, the composition of the prison population, the prevalence of drugs, as well as the actual opportunities and facilities offered by the

institutions during the course of the sentence (of which parole plays the most critical role). The staff and their attitude towards the convicts also play a crucial role.

The few domestic studies published do not fundamentally contradict these research findings. They show a multi-layered and sometimes contradictory picture of late-modern prison life in the Czech Republic. On the one hand, we have reports of intense prison subculture manifested in language and customs (tattoos, weight training, slang, black market, and class divisions). On the other hand, there are reports of solid interconnection between convicts and official institutions within the prison, which probably stems not only from the orientation towards parole and obtaining other benefits but also from the need to spend time in a meaningful way and to establish relationships outside the circle of fellow convicts. One of the most critical people in prison for a convict is his tutor. This institution (which is not found in Western prisons) certainly deserves more attention, especially since these professionals are the primary agents of the prisoners' resocialisation during their sentence. The role of guards is perceived rather passively (as in the Western world).

We must state that these domestic studies often provide findings of a difficult-to-generalize nature, sometimes even contradicting each other, which is probably due to the differences between prisons of the same type and the narrow profile of some studies. In this respect, there still needs to be more research that attempts to grasp this complex experience of male prisoners in their sentencing in-depth and at the same time in all contexts. There is also a lack of comparative studies within a quantitative framework that compare aspects of the lives of convicts in different prison settings. In this regard, there are ample opportunities for aspiring researchers. The need for such research stems not only from gaps in theoretical knowledge about convicts' lives but also from everyday practice's needs. There is a growing call from experts for at least partial reforms in the Czech prison system. This debate, conducted mainly in the discourse of restorative justice, puts prisoners at the center of the discussion (Tomášek et al., 2022). In that case, it makes good sense to understand what influences affect and shape a convicted person during his stay in a prison facility.

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