Need to Address the Psychological Stressors Faced by Officials Managing Prisons in Punjab, Pakistan

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Opinion

Mental health issues prevailing in the prisons have always been a great concern for researchers in Pakistan as it is often stated as a domain which need attention on priority basis. Whenever we talk about the mental health of the prisoners it is also important to notice that the functioning of a prisoner is dependent upon the context prevailing around him. The human context of the prisoner involves fellow prisoners, staff and officials. Rehabilitation of prisoners is assigned to the staff and officials that are managing these prisons in terms of their daily functioning and coordinate with law reinforcement bodies on a daily basis to ensure the availability of justice to the society. There are often complaints about the attitude and behaviors of the personnel managing prisons, including both staff and officials. In order to explore this domain informal interviews with either Superintendent or Deputy Superintendent and field observation was carried out in 9 Central Jails of Punjab, Pakistan. Common stresses faced by officials include time management, work-family balance, nature of the job and demanding level of commitment. Managing prison is a hectic job which include continuous level of commitment and security concerns due to which there is no holiday in that setup. Officials have to be vigilant from 5am to 4pm and then again in evening shift from 5pm till lock up of the prisons. Arrival and departure of under trial prisoners on a daily basis, assigning barracks for their stay and occurrence of any misconduct in prison between new and old prisoners are consistent prevailing issues that need to be addressed on a daily basis. Availability on call, no holiday and excessive workload often lead to work-family imbalance among personnel. A majority reported complaints by family members on different occasions especially out station visitation of relatives, involvement in children oriented leisure or academic activities. They reported their concerns about the educational progress of their children, but also report more involvement from the mother than father. Other than family members, death of colleague through suicide or other mental health issues often create psychological insecurities among official currently serving at an important post in prison.

Staff reported financial constraints as well as being assigned to specific tasks staff has a stronger bond with the prisoners as they are more in touch with the prisoners and act as a mid-man between the management and the prisoners. Besides the corruption, being judgmental is also an important factor in explaining the behavior of staff members with the prisoners. Subjective judgement based on the prison’s conduct, family background, caste, criminal act, and hierarchical status, staff personnel often show partial behavior towards criminals. Though it is unfair to attribute this judgement to corruption only rather in psychology it is clear that every individual have tendency to follow the schema oriented information processing that an individual often use to categorize people efficiently and effectively based on available information and existing schemas but result of this partial behavior has strong and long term implications on prisoner’s behavior during and even after imprisonment.