

# Türk Psikiyatri Dergisi

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## Letter to the Editor

### PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE AND SUGGESTIONS ON THE PENAL EXECUTION SYSTEM IN THE PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF TURKEY

#### Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic, which rapidly surrounds our world and has important effects on all aspects of life (especially psychological, social and economic), also affects individuals living in closed prisons (imprisoned, convicted individuals and institution employees), which are physically and socially isolated in different ways. So much so that the World Health Organization (WHO) states that prisons are among the risky groups due to their limited opportunities (difficulty of accessing the diagnostic tests, physical distance as an inherent requirement of the very nature of the service itself, inability to comply with the call to stay at home, etc.) (WHO 2021). With the onset of COVID-19 cases in Turkey, as in many countries, the General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses (GDPDH) under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Turkey also applied various restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus in prisons. Such liberties as the ability to act autonomously, demonstrating skills and competencies and establishing relationships with others, which Deci and Ryan (2000) define as motivating needs, were/are still significantly restricted by COVID measures. This letter aims to draw the attention of mental health professionals and relevant administrators to the penal system (from the perspective of both service recipients and employees as well as the community) by discussing the COVID-19 restrictions and possible effects, which are thought to have significant effects on the psychosocial status of individuals.

Open and closed visits by the families and relatives of detainees/convicts (D/Cs) were suspended during March-August 2020 and February-June 2021, except for these periods only closed visits with a maximum of 2 people were allowed twice a month (GDPDH 2021a). Like all individuals, being able to establish verbal and physical contact with their relatives is an important requirement for all D/Cs. In Fahmy's (2021) research, it was seen that the general social support from family and friends as perceived by convicts and the consistency in general and emotional social support (empathy, sharing of feelings of joy and sadness, discussing about other problems encountered in life) positively predicted mental health. From this point of view, since the quality and quantity of communication opportunities of individuals in prisons are significantly restricted, they may have negative effects. At this point, GDPDH's doubling the phone call rights and allowing D/C individuals to have 1 open and 2 closed visits a month with their 2 relatives and 1 child as of December 2021 are important initiatives to meet the need for social support (GDPDH 2021b). However, the impoverishment of individuals, especially those with poor socioeconomic status, due to the pandemic may prevent them from adequately benefiting from the right to make phone calls and visits. For this reason, supports (right to free or discounted telephone calls, right to free or discounted transportation for visitors, etc.) for D/C individuals with low income and their relatives are considered helpful.

Family visits, which are an important protective and therapeutic element for delinquent children, who are more sensitive than adults, were also suspended during the pandemic. Studies conducted with delinquent children in institutions have shown that family visits helped reduce repetitive delinquency (Young and Turanovic 2021) and depressive symptoms significantly (Monahan et al. 2011). Considering the longitudinal study findings, the development, implementation and

encouragement of different interview options (weekly video calls with families, open visits conditional with vaccination and negative test results) for children in institutions should be on the agenda to protect the mental health of children and adolescents in institutions.

Many practices, especially psychosocial intervention, which is an important part of contemporary penal execution processes, is another aspect of the pandemic requiring further attention. Various studies conducted before the pandemic point out that such activities are very important for protecting the mental health of individuals, ensuring their development, and preventing criminal behavior. The program for convicts in Australia (which includes making job application interviews, avoiding harmful substances, adaptation after release, etc.) was seen to have a significant impact on reducing the rate of recidivism and re-sentencing after 2 years as well as the severity of the crime (injury instead of manslaughter) (Graffam et al. 2014). Woods et al. (2017) draw attention to the positive effects of sports-based interventions in prisons on individuals' self-esteem, confidence, and prosocial behavior. Vocational training and public education courses, which also serve to reduce the possibility of recidivism and meet the need for socialization and adaptation of D/Cs, were suspended during the pandemic, and the study only of individuals staying in the same room by the psychosocial unit specialists (psychologists and social workers) and teachers in the institution were allowed (GDPDH 2020). Carrying out rehabilitation (rehabilitation) studies by taking necessary precautions while protecting the physical health of the individual in prisons would be beneficial in terms of protecting both the mental health of the individuals and the society after release.

The pandemic creates significant difficulties and limitations for children aged 0-6 years who live in the prison with their mothers. Children who go to kindergarten or use the playgrounds within the institution cannot access these facilities during the pandemic. Since this situation may lead to delays in the physical, mental and cognitive development of children, it is recommended that mothers with children are accommodated in the same ward as much as possible, children in the same ward should be taken to playgrounds together, etc. With such interventions, children's need for socialization and exposure to different stimuli can be partially met.

In order to reduce the possibility of virus transmission to the prisons, the employees of the institution (especially the correction officers who are in contact with D/Cs most frequently and closely) started to work with a negative PCR test after 14 days of quarantine before they started to work, and without leaving the prison for 7 days, ensuring uninterrupted service provision (GDPDH 2021a). The practice to prevent prisons from the pandemic causes various stress factors (such as very limited communication with the families, no personal

telephone, being in a closed working environment for a long time, and being in contact with COVID-positive individuals who are being treated in the institution) for the employees. For this reason, practices that will reduce the stress level of prison employees (video calls with their families, providing shelter outside the building during rest times, creating indoor recreational/resting opportunities/areas) and activities that will strengthen their stress management skills (distance education/seminars, booklets, counseling services etc.) can be executed. End of 2020, GDPDH's psychological support services to its employees and their first-degree relatives is worthy (T.R. Ministry of Justice 2020).

Another new application that COVID-19 measures entailed in prisons is that individuals who go to the court or hospital could return to their wards with a negative PCR test result after being kept in quarantine wards for 14 days. This practice, which is carried out to prevent transmission inside institution, can create further coping difficulties, especially for individuals with mental/psychiatric problems. In this way, giving the quarantined individuals the right to make phone calls instead of open/closed visits they were not allowed, will both reduce inequality and meet the social support needs of individuals to a certain extent. In addition, telemedicine etc. for individuals who need psychiatric follow-up would be beneficial to provide access to treatment.

Offenders under probation are also considered on leave during the pandemic with Law No. 7242 in Turkey. In studies conducted in different countries (USA and Japan), it has been observed that structured and qualified probation services (close monitoring of the offenders by the officers, consultancy, training, etc.) postponed recidivism for about 1-4 years (Yokotani and Tamura 2017, Zortman et al. 2016). Based on these findings, another issue that should be carefully considered is that the convicts in open prison or on probation were released on leave or exempted from rehabilitation programs, with the legal regulations made to relieve overpopulation in institutions during the pandemic (Republic of Turkey Official Gazette 2020, Issue: 31100). Undoubtedly, physical health is a prerequisite for survival; it is a necessity for D/Cs to continue their improvement and monitoring processes of convicts especially those with a high risk of recidivism.

Many points mentioned above indicate that the pandemic caught the penitentiary system unprepared, which was natural. With a biopsychosocial approach, we believe that the effectiveness and quality of the service provided to D/Cs can be increased by scientific studies and perspectives before, during and after the pandemic. Thus, it can be ensured that both individuals (service recipients and employees) in the penitentiary system and the society experience the pandemic with lesser damage. However, unfortunately, as in many institutions, scientific studies have been suspended in order

to prevent contamination. Examining the psychosocial status of individuals with scientific methods and tools during the pandemic process will guide the employees of the institution in order to prevent negative reactions such as self-harm and suicide and to carry out studies that protect the mental health of individuals. For this reason, it will be beneficial for all parties that GDPDH allows scientific studies and increases cooperation with scientists by applying necessary physical precautions and regulations against contamination.

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