

## HEALTH CONDITIONS OF THE PRISON SECURITY AGENT RELATED TO WORK ACTIVITIES

Condições de saúde do agente de segurança penitenciária relacionadas às atividades laborais

Condiciones de salud del agente de seguridad penitenciaria relacionadas a las actividades laborales

Andréia Maciel Rodrigues Campelo<sup>1\*</sup>; Marleth Alves Ferreira Pereira<sup>2</sup>; Valéria Cristina Menezes de Berrêdo<sup>3</sup>; Deborah Aparecida da Silva Santos<sup>4</sup>; Michele Salles da Silva<sup>5</sup>; Vinicius de Mello Bergamo<sup>6</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze the physical and mental health conditions of the security agents of a penitentiary in the Municipality of Rondonópolis-MT related to labor activities. **Methods:** this is a descriptive study of a quantitative nature carried out in a penitentiary in the State of Mato Grosso. The data were collected in the months of May and June of the year 2017, through a questionnaire with closed questions. The analysis of the data used the statistics organized in tables. **Results:** in this study, 43 respondents were interviewed, aged between 35 and 40 years. Data analysis demonstrated that these professionals consider that unhealthy working conditions encourage physical, psychological and behavioral changes, as well as provide stress for this category. **Conclusion:** the results show that the working conditions imposed on the workers studied influence the health-disease process, which can result in physical, mental and social problems.

**Descriptors:** Occupational health, Prisons; Safety, Family, Burnout professional.

<sup>1</sup> Nurse graduated from the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis. Resident of the Multiprofessional Family Health Program at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis

<sup>2</sup> Nurse graduated from the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis.

<sup>3</sup> Nurse graduated from the Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA), PhD in Natural Resources, in the concentration area: Health and Environment, Federal University of Campina Grande-Paraíba (2016) Professor of the Nursing Undergraduate Course at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis.

<sup>4</sup> Nurse graduated from the Fernandópolis Educational Foundation, PhD in Natural Resources from the Federal University and Campina Grande (UFCG) Professor of the Nursing Undergraduate Course and the Multiprofessional Family Health Residency Program (PREMSAF) at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis.

<sup>5</sup> Nurse graduated from the University of Cuiabá, PhD in Natural Resources from the Federal University of Campina Grande - UFCG (2016). Professor of the Nursing Undergraduate Course at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), Campus Rondonópolis.

<sup>6</sup> Nurse graduated from the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), specialist in Prison Health Management at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul / Fiocruz (UFMS-Fiocruz) Professor of the undergraduate nursing course at the University of Cuiabá (UNIC), Campus Rondonópolis.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Analisar as condições de saúde física e mental dos agentes de segurança de uma penitenciária no Município de Rondonópolis-MT relacionadas as atividades laborais. **Métodos:** trata-se de um estudo descritivo de natureza quantitativa realizado em uma penitenciária do Estado do Mato Grosso. Os dados foram coletados nos meses de maio e junho do ano de 2017, por meio de um questionário com perguntas fechadas. A análise dos dados utilizou a estatística com o uso de tabelas. **Resultados:** neste estudo, obteve-se a participação de 43 informantes, com idade entre 35 a 40 anos. A análise dos dados demonstrou que esses profissionais consideram que as condições insalubres do trabalho cooperam para mudanças físicas, psicológicas e comportamentais, além de proporcionar estresse para esta categoria. **Conclusão:** os resultados evidenciam que as condições laborais impostas aos trabalhadores pesquisados influenciam no processo saúde-doença, podendo resultar em doenças físicas, mentais e problemas sociais.

**Descritores:** Saúde do trabalhador, Prisões, Segurança, Família, Esgotamento profissional.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Analizar las condiciones de salud física y mental de los agentes de seguridad de una penitenciaría en el Municipio de Rondonópolis-MT relacionadas con las actividades laborales. **Métodos:** se trata de un estudio descriptivo de naturaleza cuantitativa realizado en una penitenciaría del Estado de Mato Grosso. Los datos fueron recolectados en los meses de mayo y junio del año 2017, por medio de un cuestionario con preguntas cerradas. El análisis de los datos utilizó la estadística con el uso de tablas. **Resultados:** en este estudio, se obtuvo la participación de 43 informantes, con edad entre 35 a 40 años. El análisis de los datos demostró que estos profesionales consideran que las condiciones insalubres del trabajo cooperan para cambios físicos, psicológicos y conductuales, además de proporcionar estrés para esta categoría. **Conclusión:** los resultados evidencian que las condiciones laborales impuestas a los trabajadores encuestados influyen en el proceso salud-enfermedad, pudiendo resultar en enfermedades físicas, mentales y problemas sociales.

**Descriptorios:** Salud laboral, Prisiones, Seguridad, Familia, Agotamiento profesional.

## INTRODUCTION

In Brazil today, public security is a constant and growing concern for the public managers and society and has been gaining a lot of visibility from television news reports on daily violence. In order to solve the impasse, our public administration is organized into agencies and secretariats to better meet the existing demands in the states.<sup>1</sup>

In the state of Mato Grosso, the Secretariat of State for Justice and Human Rights (SEJUDH) is responsible for supervising, controlling and coordinating the penitentiary system and the socio-educational system according to decree No. 882, of December 7, 201.<sup>2</sup>

Prison security officers (ASP), one of several professions in public security, are responsible for the security of prisoners, i.e., they oversee the prison population performing high-risk activity, exposed daily to physical and emotional risks. They need self-control, attention and

group work, as their activities are highly complex.<sup>1,3-4</sup>

They are workers sworn in their position under statutory regime after appointment through a public competition, which gives them the status of permanent civil servants. In addition to the written test, they undergo rounds of physical, psychological and social evaluation.<sup>5</sup>

During their work, the ASPs are distanced from their social and family life and the imposed rules and the high workload must be followed carefully throughout the day. Contact with prisoners is constant, both sharing the same space, subject to the same problems inherent to overcrowding, such as the risks of contamination by infectious diseases and death, as well as damage to physical and mental health.<sup>5</sup>

This study provides reflections on the vulnerabilities and health conditions of these professionals, since coronary diseases, systemic arterial hypertension (SAH), fatigue, sleep disorders, depression and the burnout syndrome are some of the possible pathologies and disorders found in these professionals due to the heavy workload and the precarious working conditions that these workers face daily.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the physical and mental health conditions of prison security workers in the city of Rondonópolis-MT related to labor activities.

## METHODS

This is a descriptive, non-experimental, quantitative study. The study was conducted at the Major Eldo Sá Correa Regional Penitentiary, located at MT 130, km 6, Rondonópolis, Mato Grosso.

As for the sample of this research, we chose the male ASPs, who in the exercise of their duties deal directly with the detainees, excluding the inspectors, whose function is to organize the work of other agents; those who work in the administrative area and in the concierge; workers on vacation; those on sick leave and those who did not agree to participate in the survey.

Through Sample Calculation we obtained a sample with a 90% confidence level and 10% sampling error, which led us to a sample of 43 ASP, according to equation 1, presented below, where  $n$  - the calculated sample,  $N$  - the population,  $Z$  - the standardized normal variable associated with the confidence level,  $p$  - true probability of the event and,  $e$  - sampling error.<sup>6</sup>

$$n = \frac{N \cdot Z^2 \cdot p(1 - p)}{Z \cdot p \cdot (1 - p) + e^2 \cdot (N - 1)} \quad (1)$$

Thus, of 161 professionals who were active during the data collection period in May and June 2017, 43 agreed to participate in the survey.

For data collection, authorization was requested from

the management of that institution.

Data collection was based on a questionnaire adapted from other authors<sup>7</sup>, consisting of closed questions, which were tabulated according to frequency, with the variables of the respondents, and questions related to working conditions, health conditions and emotional aspects related to the work, wear and tear at work. For data analysis we used statistics, using tables for better exposure and interpretation of results.

This research is part of the matrix project “Implications of occupational factors in the mental health of prison security officers in the city of Rondonópolis-MT”, which was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee on Human Beings (CEP), CAAE No. 57901816.6.0000.5541 on November 23, 2016 under No. 1,842,921, and compliance with National Health Resolution no. 466/2012 and the guidelines and regulatory standards for research involving human subjects, including the delivery of an informed consent form (ICF) to respondents.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents of this survey, according to table 1, is verified by the sample of 43 male professionals, with a predominance of ages between 35 and 40 years 13 (30.23%), married 16 (37.21%), two children 14 (32.56%), Catholic 18 (41.86%) and complete higher education level 35 (81.40%).

We observed working time greater than 9 years 12 (44.18%) with a workload of 40 hours per week 42 (97.67%) on a 24-hour shift 37 (86.05%) and without engagement in other remunerated activities 37 (86.05%).

**Table 1-** Sociodemographic distribution of the ASP of the Major Eldo de Sá Correia Penitentiary. Rondonópolis, MT, Brazil, 2017

Variables	n= 43	%
Age		
29 - 34	11	25,58
35 - 40	13	30,23
41 - 46	11	25,58
47 - 52	03	6,98
Did not respond	05	11,62
Education		
Highschool	04	9,30
Complete higher education	35	81,40
Incomplete higher education	04	9,30
Marital status		
Married	16	37,21
Stable union	10	23,26
Widow	0	0
Divorced	04	9,30
Single	12	27,91
Other	01	2,31
Religion		
Catholic	18	41,86
Evangelical	10	23,26
Spiritual	04	9,30
Other	11	22,58
# of children		
One child	09	20,93
Two children	14	32,56

Three children	10	23,26
More than three children	03	6,98
No children	07	16,27
Time in service		
2 -5 yrs	12	27,21
6 - 9 yrs	12	27,21
> 9 yrs	19	44,18
Workload		
20 hrs	0	
30 hrs	0	
40 hrs	42	97,67
Did not respond	01	2,33
Overtime		
Yes	04	9,30
No	38	88,37
Did not respond	01	2,33
Overtimes		
1h - 5 hours	01	25,00
6h - 10 hours	01	25,00
> 10 hours	02	50,00

**Source:** Prepared by the researchers based on research data (2017).

Similar results were found in other research where 55.6% of respondents were between 30 and 39 years old; 68.9% of the agents were married; 56.8% with up to 2 children; mostly Catholics; (34%) with higher complete education; 89% worked on duty with 72 hours of rest and 78.2% had no other occupation on their days off.<sup>8-9</sup>

It appears that high level of education of these professionals stems from the fact that a higher level was a requirement under the most recent public competition rounds as well as for career progression.

Regarding the emotional aspects of the respondents, it was evident that 37 (86.05%) of the ASPs feel concerned about the safety of their relatives, 29 (67.44%) affirm that their work interferes with their friendships.

According to a study conducted in Recife, the precariousness of work generated by the pressure and lack of structure cause problems outside of their workplace affecting the lives of these professionals and the people who are a part of their social and family life.<sup>10</sup>

When asked about their behavior, 23 (53.49%) reported that family members noticed behavioral changes; however, they denied lack of balance in their professional and family life, not needing professional help 28 (65.11%).

This result reveals that respondents are unlikely to be able to make a connection between their behavioral change pointed out by their families, the stress they report feeling (which is shown in the result below) and the need for professional help to avoid significant changes in their health; which on the other hand may represent a risk factor in itself.

**Table 2** - Emotional characteristics of the ASP at the Major Eldo de Sá Correia Penitentiary. Rondonópolis, MT, Brazil, 2017

Variables	n=43	%
Worried about personal security and that of the family due to job as ASP		
Yes	37	86,05
No	06	13,95
Profession impacts on friendships		
Yes	29	67,44
No	13	30,23
Behavioural changes since taking up a job as ASP		
Yes	23	53,49
No	20	46,51
Lack of balance		
Yes	19	44,18
No	23	53,49
Did not respond	01	2,33
Need professional help		
Yes	14	32,56
No	28	65,11
Did not respond	01	2,33

**Source:** Prepared by the researchers based on research data (2017).

When asked about stress, 26 (60.47%) reported feeling stressed, while of these, 17 (39.53%) professionals said they felt even worse when they were going to work and on their way home.

Regarding health conditions, among the professionals who participated in the survey, most 26 (60.47%) reported engaging in some activity to reduce stress. Among the factors that most cause stress among the ASP were poor working conditions, such as the lack of adequate equipment and facilities (n = 30), low recognition and poor social prestige of the profession (n = 27), low recognition and poor prestige of the institution of work (n = 25), conflicts between colleagues and supervisors (n = 24) and fear of being held hostage by detainees (n = 22).

**Table 3** - Information related to occupational stress of the ASP of the Major Eldo de Sá Correia Penitentiary. Rondonópolis, MT, Brazil, 2017

Variables	n=43	%
Feels stressed		
Yes	26	60,47
No	17	39,53
Feels stressed most		
On the way to work	13	30,23
Returning from work	06	13,95
Both	17	39,54
Did not respond	07	16,28
Does something to reduce stress		
Yes	26	60,47
No	17	39,53

**Source:** Prepared by the researchers based on research data (2017).

This is possibly related to the unsafe work environment as they live with dangerous detainees and due to the risk of becoming hostages. On the other hand, when they say they feel insecure on the way home, it is probably because they imagine being followed and thus endangering their

own family.

In this sense, other research also found that this category experiences stress constantly, as they feel threatened by the reality lived within prisons where they are susceptible to aggression by criminal factions.<sup>11</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that the position of prison security officer is one of the most risky and stressful occupations, as these workers remain vulnerable and in constant unpredictable risks while working in prisons, which may lead to “disturbances of various types, both physical and psychological.”<sup>12-13</sup>

Adding to this are the complaints of low recognition and low social and institutional prestige that to 52 citations, configuring the most cited complaint by the respondents, i.e., the lack of recognition for work is what stresses these professionals. Therefore, the devaluation of work is a risk factor for their health. The lack of professional recognition translates to the invisibility of work affecting the intimate space of the worker, their thoughts and opinions.

In another study, the working conditions, the insufficient quantity of agents that demonstrate fragility in face of risk situations; absence from work; insufficient material and structural resources for work; excessive workload; dissatisfaction with remuneration; fear of the threat to their lives as well as their families due to the threats they face and the stress of dangerous service are important reasons behind the emotional imbalance of these professionals who often do not receive psychological assistance necessary for the proper performance of their duties.<sup>4</sup>

When asked about their health conditions, 37 (83.72%) of the respondents in this research reported changes during the period they worked in this profession, such as: physical (n = 25), psychological (n = 19) and behavioral (n = 18). Among the 43 professionals studied, most 26 (60.47%) reported that they had not taken sick leave in the last five years, 29 (67.45%) said they had felt or feel headache, abdominal pain, legs, stomach, among others. 23 (53.49%) stated that they felt or feel constant tiredness, fatigue, discouragement, disinterest and apathy.

Regarding nicotine use, most 31 (74.42%) denied smoking. Regarding alcohol use, 21 (48.83%) reported using alcohol; Of these, 11 (52.38%) used twice or more per week.

**Table 4** - Information regarding the health conditions of the ASP. Major Eldo de Sá Correia Penitentiary. Rondonópolis, MT, Brazil, 2017

Variables	n=43	%
Percebeu mudanças em você após se tornar AS/Noticed changes after becoming ASPP	37	83,72
Yes	07	16,28
No		
Sick leave during last 5 years		
Yes	11	25,58
No	26	60,47
Did not respond	06	13,95
Continuous use of medication		
Yes	10	23,26

No	33	76,74
<b>Symptoms observed</b>		
<b>Pain due to undefined causes:</b>		
Yes	29	67,45
No	13	30,23
Did not respond	01	2,32
<b>Feeling sick:</b>		
Yes	19	44,19
No	23	53,49
Did not respond	01	2,32
<b>Physical conditions affected:</b>		
Yes	23	53,49
No	19	44,19
Did not respond	01	2,32
<b>Sleep patterns</b>		
Difficulty to sleep	08	18,60
Wakes up repeatedly	07	16,28
Wakes up very early	01	2,32
No alterations in sleep cycle	20	46,51
All of the above	03	6,98
<b>Smoking</b>		
Yes	09	20,93
No		
Did not respond	31	74,42
	02	4,65
<b>How many per day</b>		
1 - 3 cigarettes	01	11,11
4 - 6 cigarettes	0	0
6 or more cigarettes	08	88,89
<b>Alcohol</b>		
Yes	21	48,83
No	19	44,19
Did not respond	03	6,98

Source: Prepared by the researchers based on research data (2017).

*Caption table 4: Pain without a defined cause: Head, chest, abdominal, legs, stomach and others; Feeling sick: Chest tightness, sore throat, dizziness, ringing, palpitations and shortness of breath; Affected Physical Conditions: Constant tiredness, easy fatigue, discouragement, quitting and apathy; Humor: Poor tolerance, irritability, explosiveness, sadness and desire to cry; Emotions: Anxiety (Continuous apprehension, restlessness and others; Attention - Concentration: Difficulty concentrating, distractibility and memory problems and Sexual changes: Impotence, low libido.*

Therefore, we found that most of the changes mentioned by the ASPs are psychological and behavioral (n = 37), which are correlated, since the psychological change directly affects the behavior.

Authors comment several behavioral changes presented by the ASPs, including aggressiveness, insomnia, tension, fear, insecurity, low performance in activities, loss of self-esteem, dissatisfaction, absenteeism, psychoactive substance abuse and consequently functional illness followed by sick leave, early withdrawal from activities, among other changes.<sup>9,14</sup>

Thus, tensions from the workplace cause physiological reactions triggering daily stress, interfering with the homeostasis of the worker's organism, becoming more frequent when the worker has many responsibilities and

difficulty in making decisions, which leads to a fragility of workplace health conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Although most of the respondents stated that they had never been away for health treatment, these professionals are susceptible to psychobiological diseases, since when asked about their health conditions most confirmed that they noticed changes in their behavior after entering the profession, with emphasis on psychological and behavioral changes.

In a study conducted in 2014, 40.91% reported feeling fatigued several times a week, 27.27% reported feeling headache and migraine many times a week, 45.45% reported feeling gastric pain several times a week.<sup>16</sup>

In the Northeast, 65.28% of the agents never used cigarettes and the majority (70.62%) confirmed alcohol consumption. Furthermore, professionals who reported using alcohol and other drugs revealed that this is a form of momentary relief to experience and manage the conflicts present at work. Meanwhile, those who reported nicotine use reported that it is a pleasure stimulant, because deep inhalations bring about tranquility and stress relief.<sup>9,14</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The research carried out allowed to analyze the reality of the ASPs interviewed in this study. Weaknesses were identified in some areas, such as: health, safety, work, dissatisfaction with the profession (lack of social recognition, risks relevant to the profession), psychological and behavioral factors that gradually contribute to physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral changes.

In the perception of these professionals, the feeling of insecurity follows them from the moment they leave home for work until they return. The feeling of personal insecurity with family comprehension was confirmed through the manifestations related to the psychological and behavioral aspects, with the concern with the safety of their relatives and the social isolation evident in the statements.

The unsafe work environment was revealed by the stress experienced by most of these professionals. Although most did not take time off work, it was noticeable that their health needs special attention, as many reported symptoms such as headaches, chest pains, abdominal pains, cramps in legs and stomach and others. Among physical conditions, most of these workers reported feelings of constant tiredness, easy fatigue, discouragement, disinterest and apathy.

During the formulation of our general objective, we believed that because these professionals were in a work environment conducive to constant stress, they might mention the development of psychological disorders as well as physical illnesses, however they were not mentioned by most respondents. We conclude, that the professionals surveyed are at serious risk of becoming ill considering that most families reported changes in their behavior, most of them also mentioned other symptoms. Moreover,

these symptoms could have been more frequent if a larger number of respondents would have been included in the sample, ideally approaching their total number (161 ASP), however only 43 respondents agreed to participate.

Regarding the limitations of this study, we highlight the fact that only quantitative approach was adopted, as well as the deficiency of studies related to the conditions observed. Therefore, further studies in this context are relevant, including aspects of organizational commitment.

Therefore, it is expected that the results of this study will provide theoretical support for the improvement of the work process and that the employer institution will promote and implement improvements for the safety of these professionals during their working period, as well as favoring physical and mental health care of these professionals, aiming at health promotion and disease prevention.

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### \*Corresponding Author:

Andréia Maciel Rodrigues Campelo  
Rua Antonio Alves da Silva, nº 541  
Distrito de Sunflower, Mato Grosso, Brasil  
E-mail: andreiamrc@yahoo.com.br  
Telephone: +55 (66) 9 9642-8945  
CEP: 78.731-648

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