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COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION OF ROMANIAN EX-OFFENDERS: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract: *The study approaches the issue of community reintegration of former inmates, having as starting point the observation that in Romania, the authorities' interest on this topic is almost nonexistent. No law makes references to the social reentry of ex-prisoners although the custodial penalties in our country are on long-term. The study tries to reveal the barriers the inmates who leave prison faced with in their attempts to successfully reintegrate into the community, and also, the role that prison and other community institutions plays in this process. Methodologically, the study consists of a qualitative analysis carried out in 2010 in Giurgiu. Data were collected through interviews with three categories of subjects: prison staff, representatives of community institutions and recidivists held in penitentiary. The study ends with some concluding remarks and reflections about the ex-convicts reintegration into the community.*

Keywords: *social reintegration, ex-inmates, prison, education, psychosocial assistance, community*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the official data of National Administration of Prisons, almost 12.000 inmates are released from the Romanian detention facilities each year. Some of them are returning to the community after their first experience with prison, others – after multiple incarcerations. Among these ex-detainees are persons with violent behavior, who have committed murders, rapes or robberies. All of them are coming back to the community with different social and psychological needs or problems, which if remain unsolved, could push these individuals back on the route of crime.

Community reintegration of released offenders should be a subject of undeniable significance both for policy makers and general public: through social reentry of these persons, the recidivism rate is diminished and the public safety is increased [1].

2. METHODOLOGY

The study' theoretical hypothesis is that social reintegration of former prisoners represents a process influenced by the personal history of the offenders (relationships with parents, brothers and sisters; relationships with wives and children; educational and employment history; drug and alcohol addiction history; peer group etc.), by their experiences in prison (participation in programs; victimization; misbehaviors etc.), and also by the obstacles or on the contrary, by the social and legal opportunities that the community provides them, after they have left detention [2]. The main objectives of the study were: a) to identify the obstacles and barriers the ex-inmates faced with in the social reintegration process; b) to describe the way in which the prison prepares the inmates for the release into the community; c) to identify the role and responsibilities of various institutions of the community in the process of social

reintegration of those who leave prison. Data were collected in 2010 in Giurgiu, through interviews with three categories of subjects: a) practitioners at Giurgiu prison (director of the institution, social worker, psychologist, priest, chief doctor, educator, worker at prison regime department); b) representatives of different public institutions from Giurgiu county (Probation Service, A.J.O.F.M., Child Protection Department, Local Council, Giurgiu Court); c) 10 recidivists held in custody at Giurgiu prison. They were convicted for theft, robbery, drug offences, rape and murder. The average age of the inmates was 38; most of them had long criminal histories and also, extensive periods of time spent in prisons.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. What are the main obstacles the ex-inmates faced with after their release from prison? Based on their past experiences with community reintegration, the interviewed recidivists have admitted that one of the most important barriers they faced with after leaving prison is the impossibility to find and keep a steady job, which to generate them the necessary incomes for everyday life. In their opinion, this fact is due to the companies' reluctance to hire people whose criminal record is stained.

Interviews suggest however that neither the individuals have the desire to change their lifestyle. Many have the wrong idea that nobody will hire them and therefore they don't try or not persevere enough in seeking a job. If they were rejected once or twice by the employers, they give up, preferring to return to criminal activities.

Even if they succeed to get employed, they abandon quickly their jobs because, they have argued, the employers – knowing about their criminal past – discriminate them, blaming for anything goes wrong at work.

The low wages with which they are paid is another reason for them to quit jobs, given that they are used with large amounts of money gained from criminal activities. In addition, the fact that they have to wait a month in order to receive the payment for their work, while in the case of theft, for example, the earnings are

immediate, but also the fact that they consider certain jobs as being humiliating represent further motives for which they don't stay employed long periods of time.

Another obstacle faced by the ex-inmates who are returning to the community is the drug addiction. Most of the interviewed recidivists with a history of drug use admit with sorrow that their chances of recovery are much reduced because drug dependence is a chronic illness. For this reason, the probability of relapse even after a period of 2 or 3 years is very high.

Regarding the family, except two interviewed inmates who were abandoned by their parents and brothers due to their repeated incarcerations, for all others, the family was close to them and supported them, sometimes with huge sacrifices. Interestingly, some respondents admit that one of the reasons for not given up criminal activities is, perhaps paradoxically, the support offered by the family both during the incarceration periods and after the releases from prison. As they said, they *didn't feel the burden*.

A difficult obstacle for most of the interviewed detainees is the reunion with their friends involved in criminal activities. Although some of them have stated that they want to give up of these entourages, they believe that because they have been to prison, it will be very difficult for them to enter into a new group of non-offenders friends.

Another barrier to successful reintegration into community of former prisoners is, in the opinion of the interviewed recidivists, the way in which prison prepares them for the release time. Thus, they have argued that the prison system is not focused on the idea of rehabilitation, but rather is one that *gets people away from the human things*.

3.2. How prison prepares the inmates for the release time? The answer to this question has been obtained through the interviews carried out with practitioners from Giurgiu prison. As they have highlighted, the detainees have the opportunity to participate in prison in a wide range of psychosocial interventions and educational activities. This includes, inter alia, the following programs:



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- **Adaptation to institutionalized life**, focused on activities of information and support for those inmates who are at the beginning of detention period, in order to take note and comply with the institutional norms of everyday program;

- **Educational programs**, such as: education for a good citizen; legal education; education for human rights; education for family life; education for a healthy life;

- **Primary, secondary and high school education** according to the rules of the public education law and the conditions established in the collaboration protocol signed by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Justice [3]. For illiterate prisoners are organized courses in order to promote the first four classes, through the „Second Chance” program;

- **Training and qualification courses** consistent with the interests and individual skills of the offenders, but also with the labor market demand [3]. These courses are organized in collaboration with A.J.O.F.M., and are offered to the inmates who have to serve up to 9 months of the sentence;

- Depending on the detention regime, the detainees can **work** according to their qualifications and skills, age, health, work capacity etc. There are two types of activities in which the prisoners can participate: the paid work, for which they can earn both money and days and the unpaid work for which they obtain only the so-called earning-days. The latter ones are those provided in the interest of the detention units;

- **Recreational activities**, which consist in practicing sports and games in accordance with the prisoners' health, their skills, age and preferences.

- **Pre-release programs** whose objectives are to preserve and strength the relationships of the inmates with their families and

communities (friends, neighbors). Some of the persons interviewed have pointed out that the training for release is more an informational program than a practical one, especially for the inmates who are detained at maximum security or closed regime, who don't have the legal possibility to go out in the community to seek employment or even to work. For these prisoners, the programs of this type teach them how to write a postcard, how to write a resume or how to apply for a job.

- **The social assistance programs** are primarily intended to mediate the relationships between incarcerated persons and their families. It must be said that being workers within the penal system, the social workers are not allowed to visit the prisoners home to see the familial environment in which they lived before imprisonment and to which they will return after release. Thus, the only way in which they can mediate the relationships between prisoners and their families is in the visit sector, or, if the inmates are not visited through official requirements submitted to local authorities to provide the necessary information about the prisoner family situation;

- **Therapeutically interventions** aimed to prevent violent behaviors, reduce aggressive conducts, reduce depression, increase self esteem and self image, develop positive thinking, reduce the anxiety level etc.

Although as previously noted, there is a wide range of educational and psychosocial programs designed to reform the criminal behavior, their effectiveness is limited by: a) the small number of the staff of the education an psychosocial assistance service; b) the high level of bureaucracy; c) the lack of material and financial resources; d) the so-called phenomenon of *prison tourism*; e) the lack of viable work opportunities offered to prisoners held at maximum security and closed regime;

f) the lack of appropriate treatment programs for drug users (the Giurgiu unit does not have a therapeutic community, although according to those mentioned by the prison director, almost half of all prisoners is related with trafficking or drug use; g) the lack of post detention assistance.

3.3. What is the role of other institutions from community in the social reintegration process of former inmates?

The main findings of the interviews conducted with the representatives of the public institutions have revealed that at present, there is no coherent legal and institutional framework regarding the community reintegration of persons who are released from prison. Only in the new Penal Code is stipulated the responsibility of the Probation Service to supervise the way in which some prisoners who have been conditionally released comply with the measures imposed by the court. Although such regulation is very useful, to be applied it is necessary to allocate to the Probation Service proper human, material and financial resources. In this context, it should be mentioned that at the time of the study, in Giurgiu, the institution had only three probation officers.

None of the public bodies whose representatives were interviewed have a record of people who are released from prison. In particular, the local authorities where the detention units are, should establish a special office or department whose main responsibility should be the maintenance of the relationships with the prison and which, inter alia, to keep records of those who are released from detention. Neither the A.J.O.F.M. keeps records of the inmates who have participated in training and vocational courses to see whether after being released from prison, they have employed in the jobs that they were trained. Such statistics will allow the objective assessment of the efficiency of these courses carried out in prison.

The persons who leave prison do not receive any social benefits or subventions other than those of which can benefit all other people from the community. There is no special financial support for this category of individuals. For this reason, some of the

interviewed subjects have recommended the providing of an allowance to former inmates on a period of maximum three months until they succeed to get employ or under the obligation to hold a job. Such benefit would help those who have no financial possibility to pay the transport or the medical investigations required by any employer.

The inmates demand for information and professional counseling programs and also, for vocational courses is high during the detention period. After release, the number of those who contact the A.J.O.F.M. is very much reduced. The interviewed ones consider therefore that the development of certain individual plans for finding jobs for the prisoners who have to serve up to 2-3 months of detention can compensate, to some extent, the lack of support they would benefit if they would be addressing the Agency. Such an initiative would be particularly welcome given that many of those who return to the community after release from prison come from other counties and although the Agency specialists refer them to the territorial structure of the institution, most of them are not going.

Another measure that would help all those who are released from prison to reintegrate of the labor market would be the provision of the prison director of a certificate of good behavior, which to attest the inmates' participation at programs and activities carried out in prison, work performed, the rewards received etc. Also, to increase the chances for employment of the ex-inmates, some respondents believe that it should be introduced the mandatory participation of the prisoners at vocational and training courses. After completing the courses, the organization of caravans in the community from which the offenders come could further contribute to the social reintegration process of ex-detainees.

In Giurgiu, there are no NGOs focused on social reintegration of former convicts or on helping families of those incarcerated. There is only one NGO in whose status is mentioned the providing of professional counseling and guidance, but not for ex-inmates. Also, there are no prevention and treatment services for alcohol and drug addicts, from which come a high percentage of former detainees.



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4. CONCLUSIONS

Society must understand that the community reintegration of the ex-convicts is not only the problem of Ministry of Justice, but of the entire government and that by giving the opportunity for social reentry of those persons released from prison, the communities become safer.

We consider that in the first place, it should be allocated sufficient financial resources to stimulate the employment of prison staff specialized in psychology, sociology, social work and pedagogy. The personnel deficit impedes the conducting of the most basic educational and psychosocial programs and interventions and compromises the chance of inmates to reform their conduct and turn to a pro-social lifestyle.

Reintegration of ex-prisoners does not have to stop at the prison gate. An essential role in this context should be played by the local authorities, which should manage the flow of

releases from detention. It should be realized that without a network of social and institutional support, these individuals cannot overcome the barriers they confront with, being therefore prevented to follow the conventional routes in life.

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