

Some Features of the Educational Structure of Convicted Individuals in the PrisonLIFE Study*

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This paper analyzes the educational structure of the incarcerated population based on a sample surveyed as part of the PrisonLIFE research project. The results indicate that convicted individuals with high school are predominant within the sample, prompting various considerations not only regarding the incarcerated population and its socio-demographic characteristics but also about what these data suggest for the general population and social processes in Serbia. Several perspectives are proposed for analyzing these results, representing a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses sociological, criminological, and pedagogical contributions to the topic. The discussion aims to enhance understanding of the incarcerated population and its educational advancement, while also critically reflecting on negative trends in education, as well as moral, normative, and institutional development and compliance in Serbia, which could be significant for reducing crime rates.

KEYWORDS: education / prison / convicted individuals / anomie / crime

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Introduction

The educational structure of convicted individuals is a socio-demographic characteristic tied to various aspects of quality of life in prison (Ilijić et al., 2024a, b) and is also linked to different post-incarceration outcomes. Given the relationship between educational attainment and socio-economic status, the educational composition of convicted individuals provides indirect insights into which socio-economic segments are most prevalent within the prison population. Extensive literature highlights how the incarcerated population is often economically, socially, educationally, and otherwise marginalized and criminalized compared to the broader society (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011; Wacquant, 2009; Western & Pettit, 2002).

In developed Western societies, particularly the United States, where recent decades of economic and political reforms have exacerbated social inequalities, increased the unequal distribution of power, and disenfranchised segments of the population based on race and class, this marginalization is most apparent among those with the lowest levels of education—specifically, the unskilled labor force (Wilson, 2012).

The idea that mass incarceration stems from neoliberal economic, social, and disciplinary regulation connects various forms of deprivation and marginalization, such as educational inequality, with a heightened risk of individuals encountering the penal system. The social, economic, and political structures of capitalist neoliberal societies contribute to rising crime rates through the starkly unequal distribution of living conditions and opportunities, as well as through the creation of policies that criminalize social conflicts arising from this inequality (Pavićević & Ilijić, 2022). Unequal access to education is a critical deprivation, especially in a developmental context, and plays a significant role in the increased propensity for youth crime (Wikström & Treiber, 2016).

Educational opportunities are a defining factor in the lives of young people growing up in disadvantaged and criminogenic environments, and this is reflected in the educational attainment of the prison population. Numerous studies show that the educational level of incarcerated individuals is lower than that of the general population, often marked by underdeveloped basic skills, low self-esteem, previous educational failures, school dropouts, and ultimately, unsuccessful social reintegration (Curley, 2016; Harlow, 2003; Hawley et al., 2013; MacKenzie, 2012, as cited in Pavićević & Ilijić, 2022, p. 576).

Education of Convicted Individuals in Serbia

Serbia, still grappling with the legacy of the severe crisis of the 1990s, is also impacted by global socio-economic and cultural shifts, marked by a transition from crime prevention and suppression to a focus on crime control (Soković, 2011). The continuation of unfavorable economic, social, and developmental trends has coincided with the commodification of various social services, the tightening of penal policies, and the rise of penal populism (Kolarić, 2018; Soković, 2011). The number of convicted and detained individuals in the Republic of Serbia grew significantly from 3,600 in the early 1990s to 6,000 by the year 2000, then to 7,800 in 2004, and eventually reached 11,300 by October 2012. The maximum capacity of correctional facilities in Serbia is estimated to be around 9,000 ("Official Gazette of RS", no. 114/2013). According to the Council of Europe's 2020 data, Serbia, with 153 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, exceeds the European average of 102 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants (Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics, 2021, cited in Pavićević, et al., 2024, p. 210).

Data from 2010 indicates that 2.8% of convicted individuals are completely illiterate, while 15.2% have not completed primary school (raising concerns about potential illiteracy among this group), and 26.5% have only completed primary education, which classifies them as functionally illiterate in today's world. In terms of age, the majority of convicted individuals admitted in 2009 were between 27 and 40 years old (43.7%), followed by those aged 21 to 27 (24.8%) (Knežić, 2011). These figures on the educational structure underscore the significant challenges of illiteracy, limited basic education among adults, and a high percentage of unskilled individuals (Knežić & Savić, 2013, p. 106).

The research conducted as part of the PrisonLIFE project surveyed a sample of 634 convicted individuals, representing 12.4% of the total number of people serving prison sentences at the time of the study. This research provides a different perspective on the educational structure of the incarcerated population. The study was carried out from May 2022 to the end of January 2023.

The educational profile of the sample reveals that 385 respondents (62.3%) completed secondary school, while 148 (23.9%) completed primary school. Additionally, 41 respondents (6.7%) have no education or have not completed primary school. Furthermore, 42 respondents (6.8%) have completed a higher education institution or vocational school (Ilijić et al., 2024a).

The notable prevalence of convicted individuals with secondary school presents an intriguing finding that will be explored in the following discussion.

Social Implications of the High Percentage of Convicted Individuals with Secondary Education in Correctional Institutions in Serbia

In analyzing the disproportionately high representation of convicted individuals with secondary school in the sample surveyed for the quality of prison life research within the PrisonLIFE project², it is essential to first consider the limitations associated with respondent selection, the accuracy of their answers, and their categorization into specific educational classes.

The research was based solely on the voluntary consent of convicted individuals to complete the questionnaire, which suggests a degree of (self)selection in their participation. This self-selection likely reflects a higher motivation and interest in the survey among those who are proficient in reading and writing, potentially discouraging those with basic literacy challenges from participating. Additionally, it is possible that prison officials encouraged participation among those who could adequately respond in writing to the relatively large number of questions in the questionnaire. This encouragement may have been more pronounced among male respondents, as women represented only 40% of the total female incarcerated population in the study.

Moreover, there is a challenge in categorizing educational levels, as the current framework does not account for differences in the type, duration, and quality of secondary education (e.g., whether it pertains to a three-year vocational program, a gymnasium, or a technical school).

Despite these potential biases favoring respondents capable of completing a lengthy questionnaire, the high percentage of convicted individuals with secondary school necessitates further research and clarification. Understanding why this phenomenon occurs can shed light on the specific characteristics of the incarcerated population, revealing traits that are significant to the general population and may have broader social implications.

In seeking answers to the data indicating that more than half of the incarcerated individuals surveyed (from correctional institutions for men—KPZ Sremska Mitrovica, KPZ Niš, KPZ Zabela, KPZ Beograd—and one correctional institution for women in Požarevac) possess secondary school education, we begin with two hypotheses.

² The PrisonLIFE project aims to identify and understand the key factors, various forms, and aspects that shape the quality of life in Serbian prisons. It sought to establish methods for measuring, monitoring, and enhancing the quality of prison life to improve our understanding of contemporary imprisonment experiences and promote objective assessment and improvement. The project focused on the criminological, penological, psychological, sociological, legal, and security dimensions of prison life in Serbia (Ilijić et al., 2024b).

The first hypothesis examines positions within hierarchical and class-stratified structures, where educational attainment is a significant indicator of social position. The role of education changes both theoretically and operationally across different periods, particularly in Serbia, where this distinction primarily pertains to the pre-transitional and post-transitional eras. In the 1980s, social inequalities were defined as disparities in the distribution and use of material and other goods, held by social strata that were hierarchically arranged based on these factors. According to Bogdanović (1987, p. 26, as cited in Manić, 2013, p. 16), "the operationalization of the concept of social position as different magnitudes of material and moral compensation is found in the dimensions of education, material standard, and political power". For each dimension of social position, indices were calculated, including one for social position itself. These indices were derived from objective data and weighted according to their presumed significance for each dimension. The education index was based on responses regarding the highest level of education completed. In the 1986 study, weights were assigned as follows: 1 for incomplete primary education, 2 for completed primary education, 3 for secondary education, 4 for higher education, 5 for university education, and 6 for specialist, master's, or doctoral studies. Two years later, categories for higher education, specialist studies, master's degrees, and doctorates were combined into a single category (Manić, 2013).

After 2000, social strata were replaced by classes, which are viewed as complex groups composed of strata, hierarchically arranged according to differences in the possession of economic, political, and cultural capital (Lazić & Cvejić, 2004, as cited in Manić, 2013, p. 22). Members of these classes share similar living conditions and are organized into a seven-class schema, which includes: 1. politicians, large and medium entrepreneurs, and senior and middle directors; 2. small entrepreneurs, lower directors, and large farmers; 3. professionals, self-employed individuals, lower managers, and highly qualified freelancers; 4. self-employed and non-manual employees with secondary qualifications (including lower managers, freelancers, clerks, and technicians); 5. skilled and semi-skilled non-manual workers; 6. unskilled and semi-skilled non-manual workers; 7. small farmers. Operationalization was carried out based on two criteria: the occupation and education of the respondents (Manić, 2013). The educational criterion suggests that secondary school education is associated with lower middle-class positions. In this context, the convicted population from the research sample, based on their educational attainment (which is not a sole indicator), would hold an appropriate position within the class hierarchy. It is important to note that this sample is relatively small compared to the total convicted population in Serbia, and that secondary education alone does not equate to the social position of the middle or lower middle class; rather, it serves as one indicator.

This brief overview of Željka Manić's work indicates a shift in the significance of education, which is weighted differently across periods. Specifically, during the socialist era, education played a more substantial role in determining higher social positions. In contrast, post-transition class stratification has shifted the focus toward material position. Consequently, we conclude that social mobility prior to the transition depended heavily on higher levels of education, whereas in the post-transitional context, education has become increasingly influenced by material status.

Analyzing this data provides insight into the position and prospects of unstable class groups within the broader population, aiding the development of educational and vocational training programs within correctional facilities. Metrics of economic security encompass various factors important for the social status of the middle class, with education serving as one of the most significant determinants of economic mobility. Acquiring skills required by the evolving job market ensures competitiveness, even in contexts that do not allow for higher education. Equity and greater access to education represent central social issues that particularly concern the stability of the middle class and overall income distribution. The quality of education poses a significant challenge, especially regarding secondary school diplomas, which, according to the findings of this research, have largely degraded compared to earlier periods when they were considered a solid foundation for education and employment.

The second hypothesis draws on criminological insights into the institutional anomie of the middle class, which, according to some authors, significantly contributes to declining trust, legal cynicism, and everyday crime (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006). Violating rules to achieve business success and rationalizing economic crime—which is not regarded as “real crime” (Button et al., 2022) — leads to the moral legitimization of criminality. This phenomenon, along with other socio-cultural specificities (institutional anomie, the collapse of moral social control, moral cynicism, civic deficit), propels members of the middle class toward apathy, anger, and moral indifference, diminishing their aversion to engaging in criminal behavior.

The dominance of the market exerts a broader social influence on the contextualization of normative orientations and perceptions of (in)justice (Pavićević & Bulatović, 2015). It pertains to behaviors within the "cognitive landscape", representing a structural adaptation to the moral order of the market and economy (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006). Anomie of the law is conceptualized as the ecological structure of normative orientations that encompasses a fundamental understanding of justice. Individual morality is profoundly shaped by the structural and normative characteristics of the market (Pavićević & Bulatović, 2015). The dismantling of the welfare state, coupled with the widening divide between the rich and the poor, has fostered an increasing emphasis on conspicuous consumption and material success. This dynamic intensifies feelings of

deprivation among those who are less successful. Members of the middle class, especially those at the lower end, face unstable labor market conditions, declining incomes, rising living costs, and a growing sense of social injustice. Social mobility from parents to children is low across various dimensions—earnings, education, occupations, and health—and the same holds true for the mobility of personal income throughout individuals' lifetimes (OECD, 2018).

The recognition of harmful behavior among "working families" in the middle class (Karstedt & Farrall, 2007) and the decline in their social and economic status, which is constantly threatened by poverty and marginalization, do not diminish the significance of institutional anomie and moral cynicism that often align with the avoidance or violation of the law. Middle-class crime, referred to as "anomic crime" (Farrall & Karstedt, 2020), has transformed the "law-abiding majority" into a majority that evades legal constraints. For many, engaging in crime has become a "practical" solution driven by the desire to expedite the process of making money and getting things done (Gottschalk, 2020). The normalization of such behavior closely resembles techniques of neutralization, as outlined by Sykes and Matza (1957).

“It is the ambiguous relation between the normal and the normative that creates a moral maze for the respectable. Although the middle classes are engaging in this type of behaviour, they are also eager to blame when they find themselves victims of such behaviour. Consumers are sheep and wolves – easy prey and preying on others. Offending and victimisation are as closely and intricately linked at the core of society as at its margins.”(Karstedt & Farrall, 2007).

Conclusion

The analysis of data concerning the educational structure of the convicted individuals surveyed in this sample has yielded valuable insights for improving educational programs targeted at the incarcerated population. Education and skills should be aligned not only with labor market demands but also with the potential for personal growth and individual well-being. The design of educational programs should go beyond employment-focused criteria and encompass knowledge valuable for every individual in society. This includes, in particular, learning foreign languages, developing digital literacy, and pursuing a well-rounded education.

It also aids in understanding the educational, social, and cultural trends reflected in the educational profile of convicted individuals. These are complex, interwoven, and cumulative processes, and their characteristics reveal significant deficiencies in the developmental potential of society in Serbia. This is especially

true regarding educational, normative, and institutional regression, as suggested by the data.

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