

Previous Prison Experience and Evaluation of the Quality of Prison Life

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Abstract: In the paper, the authors analyse the relationship between the prison social climate and recidivism, that is, they connect the data obtained by measuring the quality of prison life (MQPL) with the dimension of previous prison experience. The paper examines the hypothesis that on some/certain aspects there will be differences in the perception of the prison social climate depending on whether the respondents are in prison for the first time, or they have already had prison experience. The main goal of the paper is to examine whether there are differences between persons who have previously served a prison sentence and those who have not, with regards to the perception of the quality of prison life. The research was carried out in the course of 2022, on a sample of 578 convicted adults, who are serving a prison sentence in Sremska Mitrovica Prison, Požarevac - Zabela Prison, Niš Prison, Belgrade Prison and Požarevac Prison for Women. Descriptive statistics and t-test were used in the paper. The most important results show that there are significant differences regarding the assessment of the quality of prison life in the following categories: Harmony Dimensions, Professionalism Dimensions and Wellbeing and Development Dimensions, and that each of those three categories is statistically significantly better rated by those who are not penological returnees. When it comes to the general assessment of the quality of prison life, the results showed that there are no significant differences between persons who have previously served a prison sentence and those who have not.

Keywords: prison, convicts, prison social climate, quality of prison life, recidivism.

[Graphical abstract](#)



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INTRODUCTION

Dealing with persons sentenced to imprisonment is a topic that has always been given special importance. If we start from the position that imprisonment is necessary in the system of criminal sanctions because society has not found an adequate substitute for imprisonment (Ignjatović, 2013), the question can be raised as to how convicted persons should be treated. The affirmation of that question stems from a number of negative circumstances or consequences that arise for a person staying in a prison environment. Thus, the coercive nature of the prison environment means that punishment affects many aspects of daily life in prison. Convicts are restricted in their movement, they must follow strict rules of behaviour, work and activities during the day which are imposed on them, and their personal property is restricted as well. Also, they are limited in the sense of work and education, and their relationships with families are fundamentally changed and restricted (Coyle, 2008). In the literature, prison deprivations, which include *deprivation of freedom, deprivation of safety or security, deprivation of material goods and services, deprivation of independence, deprivation of heterosexual relationships* (Sykes, 1958), are marked as an inevitable product of the prison sentence and the overall conditions of its execution (Ilijić, 2012), and their intensity affects the (un)success of the implemented treatment (Ilijić, 2014). This issue is further complicated for persons who have been sentenced to life imprisonment (Banović, 2022) but also for convicted persons who are recidivists (Đorđević & Bodrožić, 2020).

Without going into a deeper analysis, we can agree that modern systems of execution of prison sentences are based on the principle of humane treatment, which implies that persons sentenced to prison are treated in a way that should contribute to reducing the negative consequences of imprisonment to the greatest extent, and thus better preparation for life in freedom. Contemporary theoretical discourse follows that direction, and different treatment interventions, that is, different models of behaviour that respect the needs of convicted persons can greatly contribute to improving the quality of prison life, that is, the prison social climate.

Although empirical research of the social climate of prisons in Europe is progressing, it is still in its early stage in our region. The domestic literature lacks empirical research results that focus exclusively on the prison social climate. Namely, previous research of the prison system has most often focused on the analysis of: the negative consequences of serving a prison sentence and the impact of deprivation on the success of treatment (Jovanić, 2007; Ilijić, 2014), prison treatment and the integration of prisoners into the prison social system (Radovanović, 1992), the impact of the education process on reducing the risk of recidivism (Ilijić, 2016), the importance of specialized training of convicted persons for deficient occupations on the labour market (Stevanović et al., 2018), the importance of the application of parole on reduction of recidivism (Vujičić, 2023) or the importance of previous convictions on the development of a criminal career (Vručinić, 2019). Although all the mentioned research included the key components of prison life and treatment, none of them focused solely on the analysis of the quality of prison life.

Bearing in mind the previous remarks, the main goal of the paper is to examine whether there are differences between persons who have previously served a prison sentence and those who have not, in the perception of the quality of prison life. In other words, in this



paper we are focusing on recidivism and the quality of life in prison, but we are determining whether there are differences in the perception of the quality of life in prison in relation to whether the respondent had previous prison experience or not. Since the execution of a prison sentence leaves consequences not only for the perpetrator himself, but also for his family and the environment in which he lives, the focus of our interest was the question of whether and to what extent the previous experience of imprisonment affects the assessment of the quality of prison life.

THE CONCEPT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRISON SOCIAL CLIMATE

For the last three decades, empirical research on the prison social climate has been in progress (van Ginneken & Nieuwebeerta, 2020), representing a dominant topic in the criminological literature. Directing scientific attention to the study of the mentioned concept is of extreme importance because empirical findings confirm that the characteristics of the prison social climate mediate between convicts and applied rehabilitation or therapeutic measures. In other words, the prison social climate can potentially facilitate the successful rehabilitation of convicts or hinder its progress (Day et al., 2011, as cited in Ilijić, 2021). The prison climate is an important characteristic of every prison (van Ginneken & Nieuwebeerta, 2020) and to the greatest extent determines (or affects) the overall quality of prison life.

The term prison social climate is a popular concept used to describe the contextual characteristics of prisons that can have a significant impact on the behaviour of individuals and describes what it is like to actually live and work in a prison environment (Wright, 1985; Ilijić et al., 2022). As a complex and multidimensional construct (Auty & Liebling, 2019; Ilijić et al., 2020), it includes the idea that the perception of the environment is important and can be defined as the perceived quality of conditions in prison that includes interpersonal relations, material, and organizational dimensions of life in prison (Bosma et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2008; Moos, 1997). It consists of different components that describe how (in what way) staff or prisoners experience a certain (prison) unit. These components contain a number of features, which include (but are not limited to) e.g. how safe inmates and staff are from threats of aggression and violence (by other inmates), how much a supportive therapeutic orientation is present, to what extent the physical and psychological needs of inmates are met, and to what extent it is seen that the environment (prison) provides an opportunity for learning new skills and adoption of prosocial behaviour (Tonkin, 2015; Schalast et al., 2008; Ilijić, 2021).

Through the theoretical and empirical study of the prison social climate, progress has been made in the discovery of factors that influence the success of prison sentences. Namely, most of the evaluative research on prison treatments took for granted the assumption that "treatment" is a key variable in achieving and maintaining changes in the behaviour of convicts (Lösel, 1995), while neglecting the influence of factors from the prison environment and prison social climate on convicts and treatment success. Scientific progress in the understanding of the complex social relations that apply in the prison community has also led to the appreciation of broader aspects of the social and moral climate in prisons and the study of their influence on the outcomes of applied treatments (Lösel, 1992, as



cited in Auty & Liebling, 2019). Prison climate appears to be a key factor that has often been neglected in research that evaluated factors influencing the effectiveness of prison sentences. In accordance with the above, the prison social climate is one of several environmental factors that could explain significant differences in the outcomes of applied treatment programs (Attar-Schwartz, 2017, as cited in Ilijić et al., 2022) or differences in prison efficiency.

Differences in the prison social climate between prisons or individual prison units of the same prison are considered very relevant, because it has been confirmed that a better prison climate has a positive effect on: *the behaviour and well-being of convicts* (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020; Liebling, 2011), *relationship and satisfaction with staff-prisoner relationships* (which includes satisfaction with the quality of interaction between staff and prisoners, satisfaction with the quality of rehabilitation activities and treatment offered, and satisfaction with the prison being a safe place to live and work in) (Bressington et al., 2011; Rossberg & Friis, 2004), *adaptation of individuals to imprisonment* (focusing on the frequency of physical and verbal violence) (Long et al., 2011), and *mental health problems* (Gover et al., 2000; Beijersbergen et al., 2014).

PRISON SOCIAL CLIMATE AND RECIDIVISM

Boone and colleagues (2016) identify six primary domains of the prison social climate, consisting of: prison relations, safety and order, contact with the outside world, prison facilities, existence of meaningful/ purposeful activities and autonomy. Some of these domains of prison social climate are related, not only to the nature of human relationships in prison, both with staff and other inmates, but also with the ability to maintain relationships/ contacts with individuals and family outside of prison. Other domains of the prison social climate are related to the specific physical conditions of life in prison (which primarily refers to the quality and size of the prison facilities, conditions of accommodation in cells, quality of food, etc.) and activities available in the prison (such as sports and recreational activities, availability of the library, etc.), the rules that regulate behaviour and the extent to which convicts have a certain freedom to make decisions independently and move around the prison (autonomy). In addition, building architectural features, professional staff, and the composition of the inmate population are considered important factors that create the conditions that are necessary for a positive living environment (Boone et al., 2016).

Although there is no consensus in the literature regarding the definition and terminological determination of the concept of prison social climate (often called prison climate, social climate, social milieu, institutional climate, moral climate, etc.) (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020), there is general recognition that prisons have a certain “character” (Moos, 1975), which affects the well-being and behaviour of convicts during and after serving a prison sentence, and that one of the most important aspects of the humane execution of that type of sentence is precisely the establishment of a safe and stimulating prison climate (Bosma et al., 2020).



PRISON SOCIAL CLIMATE: A MEASURING INSTRUMENT

Conditions in prison differ based on less tangible characteristics that include atmosphere, treatment by staff, subjective perception of deprivation, quality of relationships with other prisoners, etc. Scientists suggest that these experiences are subjective, and may vary among individuals in the same environment, but that this variation is more likely to be greater for individuals in different prison units than for individuals within the same unit, meaning that there is a perceptual agreement (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020).

In the research of the prison social climate in the Republic of Serbia, which was realized as part of the PrisonLIFE project, the authors were interested precisely in the assessment and measurement of the common subjective experience of prison conditions, which we call the prison social climate. The main hypothesis is aimed at examining whether there are differences in the perception of the prison social climate depending on whether the respondents (persons serving a prison sentence) are in prison for the first time or already have previous prison experience. In the aforementioned sense, one of the goals is to determine in which dimensions there are differences in the understanding of the prison social climate, between the two observed groups of respondents.

To collect the data that will be presented in this paper, a questionnaire called *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life Survey - MQPL* (Liebling et al., 2012) was used. *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life Survey* represents one of the most comprehensive models of prison social climate (Mededović et al., 2023a; Liebling et al., 2012; Harding, 2014). Using these instruments, Liebling (2004) has been able to measure the “moral performance” of prisons. She defines this as “those aspects of a prisoner’s mainly interpersonal and material treatment that render [...] imprisonment more or less dehumanising and/or painful [...]. The term moral performance takes us beyond legitimacy [...] in a way that indicates that prisons are about more than power relations. They are, or can be, despite the stark imbalance of power, almost civic communities” (Liebling, 2004, as cited in Harding, 2014). The MQPL survey was not developed with the intention of predicting outcomes. Its aim was to conceptualize and measure the moral, social and relational qualities of prison life as experienced by prisoners (Auty & Liebling, 2019).

The Serbian MQPL Survey (Milićević et al., 2023b; Mededović et al., 2023a; Milićević et al., 2023a) consists of 126 statements (items) regarding the prisoners’ experience of their life in prison, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly disagree) and one global question assessing the prisoners overall rating of QPL (1 = lowest, 10 = highest). To minimize acquiescence bias, 72 items are worded ‘positively’ (where agreement with the statement constituted a positive response) and 55 ‘negatively’ (where agreement with the statement indicated a negative perception). The items are organized into 21 dimensions clustered thematically into five overarching categories representing treatment and physical conditions: *Harmony; Professionalism; Security; Conditions and Family Contact; and Wellbeing and Development*. For each dimension, a composite mean score is calculated. The original English version and Serbian adopted version evidence good psychometric properties with reliability scores ranging from 0.56 to 0.97 (Mededović et al., 2023a; Liebling et al., 2012). For the purposes of this research, an assessment of the overall quality of prison life on a scale of 1 to 10 (with a higher number indicating a better quality of prison life) is included.



- 1) **The dimensions of harmony examined the following aspects of prison life:** *Arriving in prison* - feelings and experience of treatment upon arrival in prison (“I felt extremely lonely during the first three days in this prison”); *Respect/courtesy* - positive, polite and decent attitude of employees towards convicted persons (“Most employees address me and talk to me with respect”); *Relationship between staff and convicts* - mutual relationships between staff and convicts that are characterized by trust, fairness and support (“When I need to do something in this prison, I can usually get it done by talking directly to the staff”); *Humanity* - an environment characterized by respect and concern for other people, where the values and humanity of the individual are recognized (“Employees in this prison show concern and understanding”); *Decency* - the extent to which the staff and prison regime are reasonable and appropriate (“In this prison, convicts spend too much time confined to their cells”); *Caring for vulnerable groups* - care and support provided to prisoners at risk of self-harm, suicide or abuse (“Preventing self-harm and suicide is a top priority in this prison”); *Help and Support* - support and encouragement directed at convicted inmates who have health problems, addiction problems, and progress in treatment (“I am clear about what I need to do in this prison to progress in treatment and prepare for court (parole)”).
- 2) **The dimensions of professionalism examined the following aspects of prison life:** *Professionalism of employees* - self-confidence and expertise of employees in exercising authority (“The rules and regulations of this prison were clearly presented to me”); *The justification of the bureaucracy* - the transparency of the work of the prison/ prison system and its willingness to react and morally respect the individual (“In this prison, they only care about my ‘risk factors’ and not about what kind of person I am”); *Fairness* - perceived impartiality, proportionality and legality of disciplinary punishments and procedures (“In this prison, decisions are poorly explained to convicts (about the treatment program, disciplinary punishments, granting of extended rights and benefits, etc.)”); *Organization and consistency* - clarity, predictability and reliability of the prison (“In this prison you never know where you stand”);
- 3) **The dimensions of security examined the following aspects of prison life:** *Preservation of order and security* - professional supervision and control of the prison environment (“This prison has too few employees”); *Safety of convicted persons* - feeling safe and protected from harm, threats or danger (“Generally speaking, I fear for my physical safety”); *Adaptation of convicted persons* - the need or pressure to join informal prison groups (“In this prison you have to be part of a group to get along”); *Drugs and abuse* - drug use, abuse and victimization in the prison environment (“Drugs cause numerous problems between inmates here”).
- 4) **The dimensions of living conditions in prison and contacts with family examined the following aspects of prison life:** *Conditions* - to what extent the living conditions in prison are decent (“This prison provides me with adequate conditions to maintain my physical appearance”); *Contact with the family* - possibilities for maintaining family relations (“In this prison I was able to maintain a quality relationship with my family members”).
- 5) **The dimensions of well-being and development examined the following aspects of prison life:** *Personal development* - an environment that helps convicts develop their potential, deal with criminal behaviour and adequately prepare for release (“I see the time spent in this prison as a chance to change”); *Personal autonomy* -



convicted persons' feelings regarding personal autonomy and self-determination ("You can preserve your personality in this prison"); *Well-being* - the suffering of imprisonment and the feelings of pain, punishment and tension experienced by convicted persons ("The time spent in this prison acts to a large extent as a punishment"); *Anxiety* - feelings of serious inner turmoil ("I thought about suicide in this prison").

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

This descriptive and exploratory study is part of a larger national three-year research project entitled PrisonLIFE, which aims to improve our understanding of the quality of prison life of prisoners in Serbia. The data were collected in five penitentiary facilities in Serbia: four penitentiaries for men - Sremska Mitrovica, Niš, Zabela, Padinska Skela and one penitentiary facility for women, Požarevac. The sample was based on a voluntary basis and the only inclusion criterion was functional literacy. All participants were informed about the study goal, they filled in informed consent, and they could leave the data collection process at any moment. All prisoners provided written informed consent before participating in the study. They were assured that the collected information would be used solely for the research project and that no personally identifiable information would be disclosed. Researchers were present during the whole process of data gathering. The research was approved by the institutional ethical committee, and it was part of the larger project (blinded for the review). Descriptive statistics and t-test were used in the paper.

TYPES OF COLLECTED DATA

As part of the MQPL questionnaire, sociodemographic, penological, criminological and other data were collected from the respondents themselves, such as gender, age, marital status, parentage, education, previous convictions, committed criminal offense and type of criminal offense (with or without elements of violence), complicity, a measure of security of a medical nature, the time spent in prison, which are shown in the basic data on the sample of the investigated population.

Data on recidivism - the existence and number of previous imprisonments were collected from legally binding court decisions that are the basis for the execution of prison sentences, as well as files of the convicted persons. In addition, data on the estimated risk degree, department, treatment group, disciplinary punishment and special measures were also collected.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS - BASIC DATA ABOUT THE SAMPLE

The research included a total of 578 convicts, with the largest number of those serving their prison sentences in Penitentiary Institution Niš 182 (31.5%), then in Sremska Mitrovica 177 (30.6%), Zabela 106 (18.3%), Penitentiary Institution for women in Požarevac



89 (15.4%), and finally in Belgrade (4.2%). The sample consisted of 489 (84.6%) male and 89 (15.4%) female persons. The average age of the respondents was about 40 years (SD = 10 years), with an age range from 20 to 74 years. Persons who have not previously served a prison sentence are, on average, about two years younger than penological returnees.

In terms of marital status, the results show that 263 (45.5%) respondents had a partner (marital or common-law union), 223 (38.6%) indicated that they were single (no partner). There were 78 (13.5%) divorced respondents, while the number of respondents who were widowed was 11 (1.9%). The data was not available for 3 persons. Slightly more than half (55.2%) of convicted persons have children, where 42% have one, and 58% have two or more children.

The largest number of convicted persons has high school education - 352 (60.9%), while 142 (24.6%) respondents have primary school education. In the sample there were also persons with a university degree, as well as persons without a primary school degree, in both cases 41 (7.1%). One person had the status of a student, while information on education was not available for one person.

The largest numbers of respondents are serving prison sentences for the following crimes: unauthorized production and distribution of narcotic drugs from Art. 246. of Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia - 169 (29.2%), robberies from Art. 206. of CC - 79 (13.7%), aggravated theft from Art. 204. of CC - 68 (11.8%), aggravated murder from Art. 114. of CC - 63 (10.9%) and murders from Art. 113. of CC - 41 (7.1%). The enumerated crimes make up more than 70% of all crimes for which respondents are serving prison sentences in the institutions included in the research. More than a third of respondents - 208 (36%) are serving a prison sentence due to two or more committed criminal acts.

According to groups of criminal offenses, namely according to the first criminal offense for which a person was sentenced to prison, the data show that at the time of the research, the largest number of persons were serving a prison sentence for committing a criminal offense against property 191 (33%), against health of people 181 (31.3%), crimes against life and limb 122 (21.1%) and against public order and peace 18 (3.1%), while other groups of crimes are represented by less than 3%.

According to the type of crime committed, the largest number of respondents, 310 (53.6%) committed a non-violent crime, while 266 (46%) committed a crime with elements of violence. The data was not available for three respondents.

The average length of the prison sentence is 93.12 months (SD = 97.55). Differences exist in relation to whether the convicted person has previously served a prison sentence or not. Namely, penological returnees serve an average prison sentence of 85.08 months (SD = 83.75), compared to persons who are in the system for the first time and who serve an average prison sentence of 101.76 months (SD = 109.98).

Security measures of a medical nature (mandatory psychiatric treatment and custody in a health facility, mandatory psychiatric treatment at liberty, mandatory drug addict treatment and mandatory alcoholic treatment) were applied to 102 (17.7%) respondents.

Of the total number of respondents for whom information on previous convictions was obtained, close to 70% had a history of previous convictions (returnees in the criminal sense). On the other hand, when it comes to return in the penological sense, more than half of the respondents 299 (51.7%) had previously served a prison sentence, with a range



from one to 36 previous convictions. If only the penological returnees are observed, 84 (28.1%) had only served a prison sentence once, 45 (15.1%) of them twice, while 170 (56.9%) respondents had been in prison more than twice.

When it comes to complicity, the data were available for 286 (49.5%) respondents. Regarding those convicts, the results show that there is a relative uniformity between the number of persons who committed the crime alone and those who committed the crime in a group. At the time of conducting the research, the largest number of convicted persons, 304 (52.6%) were in the institution for more than two years, followed by those who were imprisoned one to two years 114 (19.7%), then seven months to one year 87 (15%), while 72 (12.5%) have been in the institution for less than six months.

According to the last assessment of the risk degree, the largest number of respondents was assessed with a high (or very high) degree of risk - 291 (50.4%), followed by a medium degree - 259 (44.8%), while the fewest were assessed with a low degree of risk - 24 (4.2%). Data is missing for four persons.

Observed by departments, the most persons were in the closed department - 424 (73.4%), 143 was in the semi-open department (24.7%), while only four were classified in the open department of the institution. Data was not available for seven persons. When it comes to treatment groups within each type of department (open, semi-open and closed), convicts are in most cases assigned to a treatment group that provides a lower level of extended rights and benefits (A2, B2 and V2).

The largest number of respondents, 349 (60.4 %) were not disciplined, while some kind of disciplinary measure was imposed to 222 (38.4%) persons. Among the persons who had disciplinary measures imposed to them, the largest number had only one disciplinary measure - 157 (70.7%). Similar to disciplinary measure, no special measures were imposed to the largest number of convicts - 387 (67%).

RESULTS

The results of the t-test (total score) regarding the dimension of harmony (Table 1) indicate that there are statistically significant differences between the groups of respondents - those who were previously in prison and those who were not, with a higher score from respondents without previous prison experience. Statistically significant differences were also obtained for individual dimensions within the dimension of harmony, namely: Respect/ Courtesy; Staff-Prisoner relations; Humanity and Decency. Similar results were attained for Professionalism dimension and Well-being and Development dimension.

On the other hand, statistically significant differences were not found on the total score of the Security and Family Contact dimensions between the observed groups. However, statistically significant differences were found on individual dimensions between these two groups. For example, within the Security dimensions, there are significant differences in the individual dimensions of Policing and Security and Prisoner safety, where persons who have not previously served a prison sentence have higher scores - they rate the mentioned dimensions better compared to persons who already had prison experience. When it comes to Overall Quality of Prison Life, no significant differences were found.



Table 1. Quality of Prison Life and Recidivism: Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparisons

Dimension	Penal Recidivism	N	M (SD)	t (df)
Harmony Dimensions	No	279	3.17 (0.76)	2.30 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.02 (0.82)	
Entry into custody	No	279	2.91 (0.79)	-0.86 (576.00)
	Yes	299	2.97 (0.79)	
Respect / Courtesy	No	279	3.37 (0.84)	2.69 (575.47) *
	Yes	299	3.17 (0.93)	
Staff–Prisoner Relationships	No	279	3.30 (0.97)	2.92 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	3.06 (1.05)	
Humanity	No	279	3.29 (0.88)	2.75 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.08 (0.95)	
Decency	No	279	2.94 (0.81)	3.34 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.71 (0.87)	
Care for the Vulnerable	No	279	3.09 (0.82)	1.30 (575.82)
	Yes	299	3.00 (0.89)	
Help and Assistance	No	279	3.06 (0.85)	0.91 (575.18)
	Yes	299	2.99 (0.94)	
Professionalism Dimensions	No	279	3.00 (0.80)	3.46 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.77 (0.85)	
Staff Professionalism	No	279	3.30 (0.94)	2.56 (575.83) *
	Yes	299	3.09 (1.02)	
Bureaucratic Legitimacy	No	279	2.73 (0.85)	3.80 (576.00)
	Yes	299	2.46 (0.84)	
Fairness	No	279	2.96 (0.91)	3.31 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.70 (0.96)	
Organization and Consistency	No	279	2.93 (0.84)	3.27 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.70 (0.88)	
Security Dimensions	No	279	3.41 (0.67)	3.75 (576.00)
	Yes	299	3.19 (0.70)	
Policing and Security	No	279	3.33 (0.66)	2.55 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.19 (0.71)	
Prisoner Safety	No	279	3.52 (0.82)	2.10 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.38 (0.86)	
Prisoner Adaptation	No	279	3.96 (0.86)	4.90 (574.89)
	Yes	299	3.59 (0.96)	
Drugs and Exploitation	No	279	3.09 (0.96)	4.00 (576.0)
	Yes	299	2.77 (0.98)	
Conditions and Family Contact Dimensions	No	279	3.50 (0.87)	1.94 (576.00)
	Yes	299	3.35 (0.90)	
Conditions	No	279	3.48 (0.98)	2.24 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.30 (0.99)	
Family Contact	No	279	3.51 (1.04)	1.02 (575.00)
	Yes	298	3.42 (1.08)	



Wellbeing and Development Dimensions	No	279	3.18 (0.73)	3.01 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.99 (0.77)	
Personal Development	No	279	3.15 (0.91)	3.04 (576.00) **
	Yes	299	2.92 (0.98)	
Personal Autonomy	No	279	3.10 (0.81)	1.46 (576.00)
	Yes	299	3.01 (0.80)	
Well-Being	No	279	2.69 (0.95)	2.09 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	2.52 (0.98)	
Distress	No	279	3.97 (0.87)	2.61 (576.00) *
	Yes	299	3.78 (0.92)	
Overall Quality of Prison Life_a	No	279	4.43 (2.63)	1.33 (543)
	Yes	299	4.13 (2.53)	

Notes: MQPL - Measuring the Quality of Prison Life

^a Rated on a 10-point ordinal scale, ranging from 1 = lowest to 10 = highest

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The results of the t-test (total score) regarding the dimension of harmony (Table 1) indicate that there are statistically significant differences between the groups of respondents - those who were previously in prison and those who were not, with a higher score from respondents without previous prison experience. Statistically significant differences were also obtained for individual dimensions within the dimension of harmony, namely: Respect/ Courtesy; Staff-Prisoner relations; Humanity and Decency. Similar results were attained for Professionalism dimension and Well-being and Development dimension.

On the other hand, statistically significant differences were not found on the total score of the Security and Family Contact dimensions between the observed groups. However, statistically significant differences were found on individual dimensions between these two groups. For example, within the Security dimensions, there are significant differences in the individual dimensions of Policing and Security and Prisoner safety, where persons who have not previously served a prison sentence have higher scores - they rate the mentioned dimensions better compared to persons who already had prison experience. When it comes to Overall Quality of Prison Life, no significant differences were found.

DISCUSSION

This research was conducted with the aim of examining the differences in the perception of the prison social climate depending on whether the convicted persons had previous prison experience or not. Additionally, we wanted to see in which dimensions there are significant differences in this regard.

Finding that the respondents without previous prison experience gave higher score to Professionalism dimension of the staff than respondents who had previously been in prison was expected. The aforementioned finding indicates that convicts, who encounter the prison regime for the first time, appreciate the clear and professional relations of the staff. Similar findings were made by Liebling and Arnold (2004) who found that inmates valued "staff professionalism", which included relationships with staff that were neither overly



polite nor restrictive. In other words, they recognized the importance of clarity and order and the role of staff in protecting them from other prisoners and from themselves (Crewe et al., 2011). In addition, the literature points out that respect for the organization is a key determinant of the quality of life of convicts, that is, there is a difference between good and bad prison performance (Liebling et al., 2012).

What is somewhat surprising is that in the Prisoner Adaptation dimension, no significant differences were observed in terms of adaptation in relation to whether the respondent had previous prison experience or not. Namely, it was reasonable to expect that respondents who had no previous prison experience would find it more difficult to fit into the prison environment, since they entered the prison system for the first time, and therefore encounter the prison regime, rules, and norms of behaviour for the first time, as well as the restrictions and deprivations that come with the captivity. Both groups of respondents equally assessed the quality of prison life in the domain of adaptation upon arrival at the institution, which means that the professional staff treats them in the same way.

Finding that there are no significant differences in the individual dimension of Family Contact, regardless of whether the respondents had previous prison experience or not, speaks in favour of the importance of maintaining family relationships. Strengthening the family, intensifying contacts with the family, as well as providing assistance to the convict's family, represent those areas to which the great attention of professional workers must continue to be directed. This can be achieved in various ways (telephone and video calls, receiving deliveries, visits inside and outside the institution, etc.). The family factor, viewed through relations with the family, but also the quality and intensity of the relationships, represents a field that can be positively influenced and will be reflected not only in terms of the behaviour of convicts in prison, but also in terms of more successful social reintegration (Ilijić, 2014).

Maintaining contact with the family would also contribute to reducing the degree of deprivation that every convicted person lives while serving a prison sentence. Social contacts and maintenance of family ties represent only one of the factors that can improve the quality of prison life, which can motivate the convict to achieve positive changes in behaviour. The finding that there are no statistically significant differences between both groups of respondents regarding the assessment of individual dimensions Entry into custody and Bureaucratic Legitimacy, indicate that coming to prison itself, as well as bureaucratic procedures, is equally stressful for all convicts, regardless of whether the experience is new or not, which is not surprising.

Research suggests that coming to prison is an extremely depriving and painful experience (Auty & Liebling, 2019; Sykes, 1958; Clemmer, 1958; Radovanović, 1992; Ilijić, 2014). It includes frustrations due to the loss of freedom and social and emotional ties, which arise upon arrival in prison, as well as due to the admission procedures themselves, which are often depersonalizing (confiscation of personal items, uniforms, etc.) (Radovanović, 1992). Furthermore, the entire life, work and free time of convicts is fully normatively regulated, not only through general legal regulations, but also at the level of internal acts of the prison. The complete regulation of all segments of life is aimed at controlling behaviour (Ilijić, 2014), which additionally reinforces the already present feeling of helplessness in convicts.



These data point to the need for additional efforts by professional workers and the penitentiary institution itself to be done in order to improve the mentioned segments of prison life.

Reducing the degree of normative regulation of every detail of prison life, to the extent that it does not pose a threat to maintaining security, is one of the possible directions for improvement. Further directions of improvement can also go towards enabling convicts to participate in the creation of certain contents or activities, at least to the extent that this does not pose a danger to security. It should be emphasized that the manner in which norms are presented to convicts by professionals and officials, their interpersonal relationships, fairness in terms of respect for discipline and order can lead to a better understanding of certain norms and alleviate the dissatisfaction and/or resistance that exists among convicts in terms of bureaucratic procedure and rules.

The mentioned dimensions as well as the overall social and moral atmosphere in the prison environment influence the determination of the direction in which the effectiveness of the treatment is directed.

Another finding is that there is a statistically significant difference in rating of the Well-being and Development Dimensions between the observed groups of respondents, which indicates that respondents without previous prison experience rate their perception of their own well-being, i.e., the ability to act independently with certain levels of support towards achieving personal development and progress, with a better rating. Contrary to them, those who are penological recidivists do not rate the prison environment highly, i.e., they do not see the prison environment as stimulating for their own growth and behavioural changes. The stated results are not surprising, if we bear in mind the fact that the second group of respondents had already been in prison, as well as the fact that there were no positive changes in their behaviour during the previous stay.

By reviewing the literature, we find that the Wellbeing and Development Dimensions essentially embody prospects for the future based on personal development and behavioural improvement, which is achieved in an environment that helps and encourages convicts to adequately deal with their criminal behaviour, develop their positive potentials and parole preparations (Auty & Liebling, 2019). It is a desirable change of identity that moves from the identity of survival to the identity of growth (Liebling & Arnold, 2004; Liebling et al., 2012). The basic and comprehensive thesis of research of the possibility of identity transformation in prisons rests on the assumption that the disabling environment in prison communities promotes the identity of survival, while the stimulating environment promotes the identity of growth (Liebling et al., 2012). In this way, the strategy of “whatever works” and “risk reduction strategy” is replaced by a strategy of responsible criminal behaviour. It is accomplished through appropriate treatment programs that challenge and confront attitudes and behaviours that are usual for criminal choices and behaviours (Auty & Liebling, 2019). The availability of implementing such programs and cooperation with relevant services in prison and outside it – in the social community, differs between institutions, based on the possibility of providing a sufficient number of professional staff, psychologists, pedagogues, sociologists, etc., but also the number of available and accredited courses, as well as opportunities for education, professional development and employment of convicts.



STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The strength of this research is reflected in the use of the MQPL questionnaire, which is primarily aimed at obtaining answers about the quality of prison life from the actual persons who are serving a prison sentence. As the focus is on the experiences and perspectives of convicted persons, it is therefore more authentic to learn about the investigated phenomenon, that is, to get a better understanding of the quality of prison life. In this sense, the relevance of the obtained results also increases. In addition, it can be said that the examination of the quality of prison life is in its early stage in our environment, and that this is the first study in Serbia that comprehensively examines the quality of prison life, based on the MQPL questionnaire adapted to the prison system in Serbia (Milićević et al., 2023b). The fact that the study was conducted in the largest institutions in the country, that is, in closed penitentiaries, including closed penitentiaries with special security is of particular importance. These are the institutions where the largest number of convicted persons are serving prison sentence, so it was important to analyse the prison social climate in them. As previous convictions and especially previous prison experience are of importance, starting from the conduct of criminal proceedings and the passing of a final verdict until the execution of the prison sentence and the application of treatment, that characteristic of the convicted person should be taken into account during his stay in prison. The results showed that both categories of respondents (penological returnees and those who were not) evaluated the adaptation to prison conditions, as well as the importance of the relationship with the family, approximately the same. Therefore, in practice, the idea of maintaining contact with the family should be strengthened, through numerous available models. Strengthening the idea of maintaining contact with family would certainly contribute to improving the quality of prison life, and reducing the degree of deprivation that inevitably comes with serving a prison sentence.

On the other hand, there are several limitations of this study. In the first place, it is not possible to draw general conclusions regarding the quality of prison life in Serbia, bearing in mind the size of the sample, i.e., its representativeness. Namely, the sample includes a little more than 14% of the total number of all convicted persons who are serving a prison sentence in some of the institutions included in the research. In addition, participation in the research was voluntary, which resulted in the participation of a relatively small number of respondents, which limits the potential for a deeper statistical analysis. The research did not include persons who were in isolation, receiving treatment, nor persons who were engaged in work during data collection. Consequently, in the sample itself there were very little of those who were in the open department of the institution, which makes it impossible to compare the quality of prison life between them and e.g., persons who are in a closed department. The research did not include treatment service employees, so the quality of prison life was not considered from their point of view. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that the research did not cover all institutions in the country, including those of the open type, which differ in many respects from the closed type institutions. As the study is based on a retrospective view of prison life, the data may be somewhat limited, bearing in mind the bias of the respondents, their emotional state, but also other characteristics that may be important in giving answers. This is compounded by the fact that this is not a longitudinal study, and therefore the influence of penological recidivism on the perception of the quality of prison life was not investigated, but rather its impor-



tance. Finally, this is not a cross-national study, and it exclusively deals with examining the quality of prison life in Serbia.

FUTURE RESEARCH STRATEGIES

In order to improve the generalization of the obtained findings and gain insight into different subgroups of convicts, it is necessary to conduct large studies with a diverse and representative sample. In addition, attention should be paid to prisons with different levels of security, since the regimes differ from institution to institution, bearing in mind the fact that in some institutions there are only people who have been sentenced to short-term prison sentences, which significantly differentiates them in relation to the group of convicts included in this study. Special attention must also be paid to certain categories of convicted persons who have different needs compared to the general prison population, such as persons who have certain health disorders, who are undergoing treatment, or who are in isolation. It is necessary to look at and analyse the quality of prison life of convicted persons who are in the open department of the institution, because by the nature of things they have the widest degree of extended rights and benefits, which probably affects a different view of the quality of prison life, compared to the respondents who are in closed or semi-open departments of the institution. Since respondents are by nature biased and their emotional state often influences their answers, repeated examinations could provide new knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation. Researching longitudinal changes in the quality of prison life through follow-up studies would broaden perspectives on the dynamics and variations (changes) in prison experiences, taking into account factors that contribute to change, such as certain treatment interventions. Since Serbia is a signatory to numerous international documents on the basis of which various standards are established, the authors believe that it would be good to conduct research about the quality of prison life in which several countries would be involved, in order to observe examples of good practices, to observe key problems and thus make suggestions for further improvements in practice.

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