

Inmates with Dementia: Responding to an Ageing and Ailing Prison Population

Zofia Szweda-Lewandowska¹, Joanna Felczak²

¹SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2153-5031>

²SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2325-7805>

Keywords: cognitive impairments, correctional healthcare, dementia, older prisoners, penal policy, social policy

Penitentiary systems worldwide are confronting a profound demographic shift mirroring that of developed societies: a rapidly ageing prison population. This trend results in a growing number of inmates with complex, age-related health issues, most notably dementia and other severe cognitive impairments. The prison milieu – characterised by stress, sensory deprivation, and limited access to specialised care – can exacerbate the progression of these neurodegenerative diseases. This situation presents a fundamental challenge to the very purpose of incarceration, as individuals with dementia progressively lose the ability to comprehend their legal situation and the meaning of their punishment. On the other hand, this is also a challenge for prison guards and those working in prisons who face the problem of providing care for such prisoners.

This paper draws upon an interdisciplinary research project that analyses the systemic, legal, medical, and ethical challenges associated with managing prisoners with dementia.

Based on a mixed-methods approach, including a review of official reports and statistics, a comparative analysis of international policies (e.g., in Poland, Germany, Austria, Japan, and Sweden), and in-depth interviews with key penitentiary stakeholders, our research identifies critical systemic failures.

The presentation aims to disseminate pre-findings of an analysis of six areas of institutional inadequacy in selected countries: daily care, medical care, living conditions, legal procedure, inter-institutional coordination, and staff competencies.

Ultimately, this paper argues that current punitive models are unsustainable, inefficient, and ethically untenable for this vulnerable population. It aims to provide robust analytical material to stimulate debate towards creating humane, coherent, and evidence-based policies for prisoners with dementia.

Authors

Zofia Szweda-Lewandowska, PhD, SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Poland,
zszwed@sgh.waw.pl

Joanna Felczak, PhD, SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Poland, jfelcz@sgh.waw.pl