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## Press release

### **Most prison staff in Switzerland are satisfied with their jobs**

*Job satisfaction among people working in prisons and similar institutions is on average high - it's actually even higher than in other professions. Nevertheless, about ten per cent of prison staff risk suffering a burnout, particularly in western Switzerland and Ticino. These findings are the fruit of the first representative study of Swiss prison workers, which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.*

People employed in Swiss penal institutions have a special job. They work in prisons, remand centres or other institutions where inmates serve their sentences, undergo corrective and educational measures or are otherwise deprived of their freedom. Their jobs are under a great deal of pressure due to cost-cutting measures and public and media scrutiny. Appreciation is something they rarely experience. What is more, attending to and overseeing convicted offenders can quickly become a burden. How do employees in penal institutions feel about their work?

A research team led by the social anthropologist Ueli Hostettler from the University of Bern set about finding an answer to this question by launching the first Swiss-wide, representative survey of penitentiary staff. Between 2010 and 2012, the researchers supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation sent out questionnaires to around 1880 employees in 84 institutions where people are locked away. A quarter of the interviewees - who were almost all men - stated they had previously been craftsmen, while one-tenth said they had been working in the security sector (police, military, private services).

#### **High job satisfaction**

Surprisingly, 82 per cent of the interviewees claim they are satisfied with their jobs. This constitutes a very high rate of job satisfaction: in the HR-Barometer, the regularly conducted representative survey of employees in all Swiss industry sectors, approximately 77 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their jobs in 2012. Only 3 per cent of the interviewed prison

staff are unhappy in their work. What is more, around 50 per cent identify very strongly with their institution, thus matching the average rate for all branches (HR-Barometer). At just under 10 per cent, the share of interviewees who relate only faintly to their institution is only half as high as in other professions.

The majority of those interviewed feel their working environment has a positive influence on them. Two-thirds claim they have enough autonomy - the power to make their own decisions - and are adequately challenged. Approximately one-third feel overstretched or underchallenged, either due to the large number of tasks they have to fulfil or the undemanding nature of their work.

### **High burnout risk**

Another positive aspect is the staff's health. Ninety per cent of the respondents - more than the national average of 85 per cent gauged by the HR-Barometer - said they were in good health. Only 2 per cent of penal facility staff consider their health to be poor. Ten per cent, however, are at high risk of suffering a burnout. These staff members were already feeling emotionally drained at the time of the interview. Longer absences due to ill health are fairly frequent occurrences: 39 per cent of the respondents stated they had recently missed more than three days of work (only 33 per cent in the HR-Barometer).

### **Different attitudes towards prisoners**

Of those interviewed, 75 per cent have daily dealings with inmates. The attitude towards inmates is positive in 37 per cent of the interviewees, but negative in 18 per cent. There is a tendency to view inmates as little more than perpetrators of specific offences. Judgements about the purpose of incarceration are similarly ambiguous: approximately 80 per cent hold the view that punishment should be a step towards reintegration; at the same time, 75 per cent approve of punishment as retribution. Around 45 per cent are of the opinion that punishment serves the purpose of taking the criminals "out of circulation".

### **Negative coverage**

According to international studies, prison staff often feel their work is misunderstood. This is also the case in Switzerland. Sixty-one per cent of those who took part in the survey said they did not feel appreciated for the work they did. They put the blame on media coverage, which they regarded as an even more negative factor than the lack of support from politicians. However, 90 per cent said that people to whom they talk about their profession for the first time generally take an interest.

## **Noticeable regional differences**

So how does the study leader explain the positive results of the survey? The prison staff consisted largely of older people who had become professionally very stable and steady after having changed to prison work from another sector. Their prison job also limited the range of alternatives open to them, creating a higher sense of loyalty towards their employer. Hostettler stresses, however, that the positive results are marked by substantial regional differences. In western Switzerland and the Ticino, for instance, the burnout risk was significantly higher than in the German-speaking part of the country. This is where he sees a need for action.

## **Publication**

Anna Isenhardt, Ueli Hostettler, Christopher Young: Arbeiten im schweizerischen Justizvollzug – Ergebnisse einer Befragung zur Situation des Personals (KJS-CJS, Vol. 15). Stämpfli, Berne 2014, 290 pages.

(Journalists can obtain a PDF file from the SNSF by writing to: [com@snf.ch](mailto:com@snf.ch))

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