

Suicide in Italian prisons: critical issues and opportunities for pedagogical reflection

Il suicidio nelle carceri italiane: criticità e occasioni di riflessione pedagogica

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Abstract

The difficulties objectively present in the Italian prison system (overcrowding, lack of resources, inadequate facilities) make it even more difficult to achieve its main objective, namely re-education, as clearly expressed in national legislation. In this contribution I try to reconstruct the context that led to the numerous suicidal events that occurred in 2024; thus, the priority, increasingly urgent at a national level, of putting the process of change that the prisoner faces during his journey back at the center of the penitentiary system is outlined, supported by various figures, all protagonists of his re-education.

Keywords: inclusion; prison; re-education; suicide; prevention.

Sintesi

Le difficoltà oggettivamente presenti nel sistema carcerario italiano (sovraffollamento, mancanza di risorse, strutture inadeguate) rendono ancor più complicato il raggiungimento del suo principale obiettivo, ovvero la rieducazione, come espresso chiaramente nella normativa nazionale. In questo contributo cerco di ricostruire il contesto che ha portato ai numerosi eventi suicidari avvenuti nel 2024; si delinea così la priorità, sempre più urgente a livello nazionale, di rimettere al centro del sistema penitenziario il processo di cambiamento che il detenuto affronta durante il suo percorso, sostenuto da varie figure, tutte protagoniste della sua rieducazione.

Parole chiave: inclusione; carcere; rieducazione; suicidio; prevenzione.

1. Introduction

Today, there are approximately 11 million people in prisons worldwide, a number that is constantly growing. With prisons often overcrowded, prison systems around the world are at a crisis point, unable to provide services such as education at the level required by international standards. In Italy, prison overcrowding increased slightly in 2022, reaching 110 prisoners per 100 available places (Istat, 2023). The aim of this reflection is to provide the reader with a picture, although not exhaustive, of the difficult situation that the prison institution in general is experiencing in Italy today, touching on the strengths and weaknesses of the system, in particular focusing on an individual phenomenon such as suicide but which has strong implications in the social sphere. Specifically, the events that occurred in 2024 in prisons throughout Italy will be analyzed. They make explicit the conflict between the shared values expressed in the relevant national legislation on the one hand and the numerous difficulties that the figures involved in treatment activities and volunteers report in everyday life on the other. Analyzing this context, the increasingly pressing need to rethink the prison institution emerges, also in light of how it is perceived by those involved in the re-education process.

2. From stigma to suicide in prison

When in common sense we speak, even improperly, of prisoners, convicts, we refer to stereotypes linked to people we most likely do not know (Turati, 2021) and we imagine, based on news stories and TV series such as “Vis a vis”, “Orange is the new black” or “Mare fuori” creating a sort of stigma. In fact, Goffman (1963/2018) claims: “the Greeks, who apparently were very expert in the use of visual aids, invented the term stigma to indicate a mark on the body that served to show something unusual and negative in the moral condition of the bearer. These marks were engraved or branded on the body and informed that the bearer was a slave, a criminal or a traitor – a degraded, ritually contaminated person, to be avoided, especially in public places” (p. 1). Often only the relatives of the prisoner or his closest loved ones remain in contact with those deprived of liberty through conversations or correspondence; for any request a specific application is submitted. If on the one hand what we can observe daily inside Italian prisons is the tendency of the inmate to self-isolate, who spends most of his days in his cell, on the other hand the national legislation actually requires that the prisoner undertake a re-education treatment path, in collaboration with the figures present inside the prison and outside with the education system, with various training bodies, associations, social cooperatives, host communities, research bodies, universities. In fact, the Constitution of the Italian Republic (published in 1948) recommends the following: “punishments cannot consist of treatments contrary to the sense of humanity and must aim at the re-education of the convicted. The death penalty is not permitted” (Constitutional Court, 2023, art. 27, par. 3). In this regard, the Rules on the Penitentiary System confirm that re-educational treatment also occurs through contact with the external environment: “re-educational treatment must be implemented for convicts and internees which aims, also through contact with the external environment, at their social reintegration” (Italian Law n. 354/1975, art. 1, par. 6). The reception of the accused or the prisoner in prison is an extremely delicate moment (Cerbini, 2016), since it is essential at this juncture to understand whether he is facing a difficulty linked to a mental distress that can cause harm to himself or others, or in extreme cases suicide. If this does not happen, even his re-educational path could be compromised since the mental distress for the prisoner creates difficulties in integrating into the prison

community and it is essential to realize this in order to identify an effective administrative action (Palmisano, 2015). Another condition may be that of substance abuse, in fact Laforgia claims that it may happen that the alleged offender at the time of arrest is under the influence of substances and commits suicide in the early stages of incarceration, “[...] often in the very first hours (due to the sudden isolation, the shock of incarceration, the lack of information and worries for the future)” (Laforgia, 2011).

Not only is there a higher rate of suicidal behaviors within prisons, but individuals who are subjected to the detention regime exhibit frequent suicidal thoughts and behaviors throughout their lives. Pretrial prisoners and convicted prisoners have a suicide attempt rate that is 7.5 and 6 times higher, respectively, than men in the general population. These data also bring us back to a basic problem regarding the causes of suicide in prison. On the one hand, people who break the law bring with them several risk factors for suicide (they “import” the risk), and among them the suicide rate continues to be higher even after release. This does not mean that the prison environment does not have an impact on the development of suicidal acts, and on the other hand it is precisely when these vulnerable individuals are within the prison institution, and therefore reachable, that they should be treated. Furthermore, detention in itself is a stressful event even for “healthy” prisoners, as it deprives the person of basic resources. Some individual and environmental risk factors that could contribute to increasing the risk of suicide among prisoners are: the failure to recognize any mental distress and drug addiction at the reception, the awareness of a long sentence, or even simply the daily life of prison in a situation of overcrowding and poor hygiene and sanitation (ibidem).

Certainly, the condition of detention is such as to constitute a significant stressful situation that can be included in the category of conditions facilitating the essential anguish from which one seeks to escape by putting an end to one’s suffering existence. The state of knowledge on the phenomenon in general agrees on this assumption to the point of including all prisoners among those at risk of suicide, a statement also sanctioned by the World Health Organization (Buffa, 2012, p. 8). Prison, on the other hand, should be seen as the psychosocial and moral scenario within which certain radical decisions have a greater possibility of being taken, considering the fact that inside it individuals kill themselves, as we have seen, much more than outside. Moreover, as Durkheim (1897) noted in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, suicide rates are nothing but the expression of the moral state of a social group. Durkheim (ibidem) in fact reads the phenomenon of voluntary deaths as an eminently social fact. Common sense is in fact inclined to think that people end their lives as a result of personal situations and motives, when in reality these circumstances become “suicidogenic causes” only in the presence of social conditions that make them intolerable for the individual. It also follows that any discussion on the prison-suicide relationship should observe the structural context within which a series of social processes take place that have incarceration and suicide among the possible individual outcomes (Saitta, 2014, p. 7). In contemporary prisons, at least in Italian prisons, there is a progressive decrease, and even a suspension, of the amount of training courses offered, of work available to inmates and, in general, of services available to inmates (ivi, p. 81). With regard to the causes of episodes of violence and suicides, the secretary of Sappe (the union representing the prison police) Capece declared that there are two factors of great importance: “the progressive increase in the presence of inmates, 61,547 present as of May 31, 2024 compared to a regulatory capacity of approximately 51 thousand beds, and the internal organization of penitentiaries based on dynamic surveillance and the open regime. A condition accentuated by a significant presence of foreign inmates (almost 20 thousand). This already highlights a possible intervention action that should be taken. Sappe has long

denounced the cyclical repetition of critical events in prison involving foreign inmates” (De Blasis, 2024). Italy has also often been called to account by the European Court of Human Rights for the serious overcrowding situation that exists in the prisons present in our territory. Structures that need to be expanded due to the greater number of inmates, sometimes dilapidated, have experienced a succession of governments that have attempted to solve this problem (Saudino, 2023). Bertusi (2016) in fact asks himself: “[...] why spend money to let inmates play with music and theater, in a place where it rains in the cells, there is no hot water in the bathrooms, there is not enough food for everyone and rats bite you while you sleep?” (p. 149).

3. The escalation of suicides in 2024¹

The National Guarantor of the rights of persons deprived of personal liberty has updated the focus on suicides in prison in the year 2024 with data from the Department of Penitentiary Administration (DAP) up to August 6. The number of detainees who committed suicide in prison from the beginning of the year to August 6, 2024 is 62. The cause of another 15 deaths is yet to be ascertained. This is a high figure compared to the same month of August 2023 in which 41 suicides were recorded (with an increase of 20 deaths) and to the month of August 2022. Compared to what has been the worst year for suicides in prison to date, namely 2022, the increase was 15 deaths. Analyzing the personal data reported in the document of the National Guarantor, it is noted that of the 62 people who died by suicide, 60 were men and two women. Regarding nationality, 33 were Italian and 29 foreign, coming from 15 different countries. The most common age groups are those between 26 and 39 (29 people) and between 40 and 55 (16 people); the remaining groups are between 18 and 25 (seven people), between 56 and 69 (nine people) and over 70 (one person). It is noted that the average age of people who committed suicide is around 40. 14 people (or around 22% of cases) had been subjected to the measure of “major surveillance” and five of these were also under surveillance at the time of the suicide. Of the 62 people who committed suicide, 17 (about 27%) were homeless, 30 were unemployed (about 48%). This data leads us to careful consideration and reflection: work, alongside training, as a means of emancipation and as a stimulus to survival in the prison context plays a fundamental role. From the 2024 suicide focus of the National Guarantor, it is clear that the people awaiting first trial who have committed suicide are, in proportion, two and a half times more than what occurs in the entire prison population (38% vs. 14%). Among the prisoners who have committed suicide, just under half are foreigners, while in the entire prison population foreigners do not reach a third. The suicide risk among the prison population is higher among the youngest: almost half of the people who have taken their own lives this year were under 35, in the entire prison population people under 35 are 30% (Guarantor of prisoners Lazio region, 2024).

Looking at the data from the National Guarantor (ibidem), the correlation between the number of suicides and prison overcrowding is clear: it is in the institutions with the highest number of available places that more than two suicides have occurred in the space of just

¹ This paragraph is a reconstruction of the events that occurred mainly during the month of July in Italian prisons, thanks to the constant reading of Italian national newspapers indicated in the bibliography.

over a year and a half, with the dramatic records of Rome Regina Coeli with seven suicides, Turin with six, and Verona with five, in the period between January 1, 2023 and August 6, 2024. The latest case at the time this essay was written refers to a 25-year-old boy. The young man hanged himself on July 30 in a cell in the isolation ward of Rieti where he had been locked up following the protests that had broken out in the previous days, when around 400 inmates had refused to return to their cells for two days and two nights, launching a sort of prison self-management. The wave of suicides this year has also fueled the protests and riots that have been following one another in recent weeks. Overcrowding, the reported lack of services and reintegration projects, are some of the factors that started the revolt. The first protest in the series broke out on July 4, in Florence, after a 20-year-old inmate committed suicide in Sollicciano prison: bars were beaten, furniture was burned in various cells, and a banner was displayed that read “Suicide/Prison/Help”. Sollicciano prison has long been known for its terrible hygienic and sanitary conditions and serious overcrowding: on June 30, there were 565 inmates, compared to a regulatory capacity of 497 places. Some parts of the facility also lack running water. From Florence, the protest moved to Viterbo, also here after the death of an inmate due to illness. About 50 inmates gathered in one section, damaged the ward, threw objects and homemade Molotov cocktails at the officers. On July 11, it was Trieste’s turn: over 100 inmates set fires and caused damage to denounce the sanitary conditions deemed unsustainable. This time, the riot police had to break in to quell the revolt, resulting in at least eight people being hospitalized, including those injured and those suffocated by tear gas. On the same day, protests also broke out in the Cuneo prison, while on July 12, it was the turn of the inmates of Brissogne, in the Aosta Valley, and Vercelli to revolt. In both cases, the inmates refused to return to their cells at the end of the hour of exercise and the police had to intervene once again from outside. The revolt also broke out in the Vallette in Turin, where the inmates burned blankets and sheets and broke the toilets, asking for attention and “immediate pardon or amnesty” through videos published on TikTok. The protests continued in the Turin prison between July 17 and 20, when about 250 inmates refused to return to their cells after the hour of exercise. During the night between July 26 and 27, a strong protest broke out in the Prato prison. The inmates removed the cameras and lights from the ward, then set fire to some clothes and barricaded themselves in the cells, blocking the entrance with iron beds. The situation returns under control after hours of mediation between the prison police officers and the inmates. On July 27, in the largest penitentiary in Rome, Regina Coeli, about 80 inmates set fire to and destroyed numerous cells. In the two following days, the protests, in a similar manner, also spread to Terni, Biella, Pescara and then again to Cuneo, where some inmates occupied an entire section, breaking surveillance cameras and shattering the windows of the prison officers’ cubicles. A pavilion was damaged to such an extent that it was declared unfit for use. The last case was on July 30. In Velletri, the revolt – fueled by the overcrowding of a prison that houses 594 inmates compared to the 412 for which it is approved – was so strong that the police, carabinieri and the mobile unit of the penitentiary (the GOM) had to intervene to quell it. Gennarino De Fazio, general secretary of Uilpa Penitenziari (an Italian trade union group of workers involved in penitentiaries), a true Calabrese, speaks of a “de facto death penalty” or, also, of “death by punishment” (Truzzolillo, 2024).

4. Conclusion. Is it possible to prevent suicides in prison?

Suicide prevention plans have been launched in some prisons, and in some countries national regulations and guidelines for suicide prevention in prisons have been established, in line with the recommendations of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2007). The

implementation of these programmes has been followed by significant reductions in the number of suicides and suicide attempts (ibidem). Although the details of these measures vary according to local resources and the needs of prisoners, certain elements and activities are common to all these plans and form the basis for knowledge of the most effective strategies in the field. A first step towards reducing the number of suicides among prisoners is to create a “profile” capable of identifying high-risk situations and/or groups. For example, the literature shows that prisoners awaiting trial differ from those already convicted by some important risk factors. Unfortunately, in many institutions these different “profiles” are confused, and the different types of prisoners housed in the same institution. The creation of tools for the promotion of legality within schools, community centers, meeting places for young people and adults and a commission for the prevention of suicides is a priority that can no longer be postponed. Many voluntary associations and Non-Governmental Organizations are moving in this direction and it is important that institutions and the academic world support this change. I conclude with the words of Michelucci (1993) who comments on the completion of the construction of one of the Tuscan prisons he designed by saying that he would like to “place deviance itself at the center of a series of problems that involve the city as a whole” (p. 46) and I would like to add that they involve citizens, aware of the fact that as Voltaire said, the civilization of a country is measured by its prisons, and that only by humanizing punishments and making them respectful of human dignity can the offender be truly re-educated (Gallino, 2020) and society as a whole be improved.

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