

Ljeposava Ilijić, Olivera Pavićević and Milena Milićević: Well-being in Prison: The Case of Serbia

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In “Well-being in Prison: The Case of Serbia”, authors Ljeposava Ilijić, Olivera Pavićević, and Milena Milićević present a comprehensive and empirically grounded exploration of how prisoners perceive their well-being within the Serbian prison system. In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in prison climate and the experiences of prisoners worldwide, although the majority of studies have been conducted in the Western context. In the literature, we come across research conducted in England and Wales (e.g., Auty & Liebling, 2024), Spain (Barquín et al., 2019), Belgium (Favril et al., 2017), Malaysia (Hassan, 2020), and Norway and the Netherlands (Johnsen et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2021), among others. Therefore, the book offers a timely and important contribution to the sociology of imprisonment and comparative penology. It also provides rare insights from the Southeastern European region, which is underrepresented in mainstream prison research.

Specifically, this book presents an empirical study conducted as a part of the broader PrisonLIFE project, a three-year national initiative aimed at understanding and improving the quality of prison life in Serbia. The authors employed the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) framework (Liebling et al., 2012) to capture prisoners’ perceptions across multiple dimensions of institutional life. In this research, the Serbian version of the MQPL questionnaire was administered across five prisons between May 2022 and January 2023.

The book opens with an exploration of the conceptual evolution of well-being in prison, tracing its philosophical, historical, and contemporary origins. In the subsequent chapters, the focus is on the prison context in Serbia, and the authors provide a detailed overview of the Serbian prison system, including its legal foundations, institutional typology, and demographic statistics. The reader is also introduced to key elements that shape the institutional culture and everyday prison life in Serbia, such as centralized governance, the legacy of socialist penal policies, an emphasis on order and security, and the limited availability of rehabilitative programs. Recent statistics and past research trends further contextualize the study, particularly for international readers seeking to understand the structural

and cultural background better. Altogether, this theoretical and contextual groundwork frames a central and timely question: What does it mean to live well in prison in Serbia?

The findings are organized thematically, as the study considers both personal and systemic aspects of prison life. Among the many findings presented, a few of the most noteworthy should be highlighted. Firstly, prisoners in Serbia rated physical conditions and family contact most positively, while staff professionalism received the lowest scores. Many reported sleep problems, emotional strain, and a strong sense of punishment, alongside limited trust in institutional support despite optimism about personal change. As highlighted, both personal (e.g., gender, age, sentence length) and institutional factors (e.g., regime type, social ties, staff relations) were important for subjective well-being. Secondly, several patterns emerged: women were more affected by social isolation, men prioritized health, whereas older prisoners, especially men, generally reported better outcomes. Demographic effects were modest but notable: single women had lower distress, partnered men reported greater personal development, and rural male prisoners had slightly better well-being. Next, well-being was higher in semi-open regimes and among those with longer sentences, family visits, proximity to prisons, employment, and no disciplinary sanctions. Poorer outcomes were linked to recidivism, high-risk profiles, disciplinary history, and extended cell confinement. Mental health and addiction issues, particularly among men, are strongly correlated with distress. A high-risk group was identified: young women with poor mental health, long sentences, and limited family contact, underscoring the need for targeted, gender-sensitive support. Finally, the quality of staff-prisoner interaction was the strongest predictor of well-being and development, exceeding the effects of regime type and gender. Positive peer relationships also contributed to better outcomes, but could not fully compensate for poor staff–prisoner dynamics.

In the final chapters, the authors offer a comprehensive synthesis of the findings and their recommendations for prison policy and practice: strengthening staff professionalism and respectful treatment of prisoners, especially women; expanding gender-specific programs; improving access to health care and leisure; and enhancing support for individuals with histories of trauma or limited

social support. The presented practical implications align with international findings on the importance of prison climate and subjective well-being in recidivism (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Beijersbergen et al., 2016; Hall & Chong, 2018). Therefore, the findings in this book are crucial for creating specific reform plans for this region.

From a methodological standpoint, the book is rigorous and transparent. The use of the MQPL framework adds credibility and enables international comparability, while the adaptation to the Serbian context demonstrates methodological sensitivity. The authors acknowledge the limitations of the study, such as the non-random sample, and avoid overgeneralization, thereby enhancing the integrity of their conclusions.

The book's strengths lie in its interdisciplinary approach and in combining empirical data with theoretical insights and practical implications. While grounded in the Serbian context, it contributes to broader international discussions on prison conditions and rehabilitation, especially in under-researched regions. First, it expands the empirical base of prison studies by offering evidence from Southeastern Europe, a region that is rarely studied in this context. Secondly, it reinforces the importance of subjective well-being as a legitimate and actionable concern in penal reform.

The study's findings are interpreted in light of the unique context of the Serbian prison system, including its post-socialist legacy, limited resources, and evolving penal policies. Therefore, the book not only contributes empirical data but also critiques and informs ongoing discussions about penal legitimacy, human rights, and rehabilitation in Serbia. Within Serbian scholarship, it represents one of the most systematic and theory-informed studies on subjective well-being in prison. Earlier studies conducted in Serbia primarily focused on objective conditions of imprisonment, work engagement, treatment quality, surveillance, and privacy in prisons without systematically addressing subjective well-being (e.g., Batrićević & Stepanović, 2020; Bjeloš, 2011; Bobić et al., 2022; Petrović & Jovanić, 2018; Savić & Knežić, 2019). Moreover, the authors' earlier works have focused on prisoner adaptation, emotional distress, and the experiences of female prisoners (e.g., Batrićević et al., 2023; Ilijić, 2012), but this book represents the first large-scale attempt to quantify and analyze subjective well-being using internationally validated instruments.

Overall, "Well-being in Prison: The Case of Serbia" is a valuable and timely resource. It offers a rare empirical insight into prison life from the perspective of incarcerated individuals in Southeastern Europe. Scholars of penology,

prison administrators, legal reform advocates, and international researchers interested in prison quality and inmate experiences will find this book compelling and instructive.

Aleksandra Marković

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