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Insights from Inside

Addressing mental health,
well-being and healthcare needs of
young prisoners in Cambodia

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Insights from Inside – Addressing mental health, well-being and healthcare needs of young prisoners in Cambodia

Abstract

Background: Globally, studies have indicated a significantly higher prevalence of mental health disorders and suicidal behaviours among young prisoners compared to adult prisoners and the general population. In Cambodia, the experience of historical trauma and contemporary challenges exacerbate mental health concerns among young people, yet there is a lack of adequate mental health resources and research within the prison system. To address these issues, there is a critical necessity for comprehensive assessments of mental health needs, interventions tailored to local contexts, and reforms in the prison healthcare system, all of which are essential for improving the well-being and quality of life of young prisoners in Cambodia and beyond.

Aims: This thesis aimed to address the mental health, well-being, and healthcare needs of young Cambodian prisoners by exploring their mental health situation, efficacy of life skills interventions, coping mechanisms, and health system strengthening strategies, all informed by insider perspectives to enhance their well-being.

Methods: The thesis was conducted in four selected prisons. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to fulfil its aims. The quantitative component was used to assess the current mental health of young prisoners and to evaluate the impact of the Life Skills Education (LSE) intervention. The qualitative elements aimed to explore the perspectives of both young prisoners and prison staff regarding their current mental health status and coping mechanisms and the strategies applied to enhance the prison health system.

Results: The quantitative findings revealed high levels of mental health problems but low suicidal behaviours among the participants. Factors such as younger age, lower education, and a history of drug use were associated with higher level of mental health problems. While the LSE intervention led to an improvement in mental health, the differences with the control group were not statistically significant. Qualitative insights highlighted the challenges faced by young prisoners, including loneliness, lack of family support, and unmet basic needs, impacting their mental well-being. Some employed coping strategies, but overall there was a reliance on self-help and family support due to the limited availability of healthcare services acknowledged by prison staff. Staff emphasized the need for reforms, including mental health awareness activities, staff training, governance improvements, and external support to enhance prison healthcare services.

Conclusion: This thesis revealed a high level of mental health problems among young prisoners in Cambodia, underscoring the critical need for contextualized mental health interventions. While the impacts of the LSE programme were limited, it lays the groundwork for future improvements. Perspectives from both young prisoners and staff emphasized the importance of self-help strategies and staff training. Moving forward, policymakers should prioritize mental health services and reforms to better support young prisoners' well-being in Cambodian prisons.

Key words: Young prisoners, mental health, well-being, life skills education, prison healthcare, Cambodia

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