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Article Commentary

“Comment on: Psychopathology and female detention at the “Pagliarelli” jail of Palermo: preliminary results.”

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We read with great interest the article by Ferraro et al. about the presence of current and lifetime psychiatric disorders among a sample of Italian female inmates. However, despite the strengths of the article, we have certain reservations on the methodology followed and conclusions drawn in the study that need to be elaborated for a better understanding of this very important research. Our correspondence thus, emphasizes the need for further explorations on this important area of research on mental health in inmates, in order to identify appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic strategies to be applied in this population.

To the editor:

We read with great interest the article by Ferraro et al. (2018) about the presence of current and lifetime psychiatric disorders among a sample of Italian female inmates.

Mental disorders represent a serious health concern in prisoners populations, with prevalence rate up to 85% in Italian sample (Zoccali et al., 2008; Piselli, Elisei, Murgia, Quartesan, & Abram, 2009; Macciò et al., 2015). As a consequence, inmates must be considered a vulnerable group at elevated risk for anti-conservative acts, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death in jails (Winters et al, 2017). Thus, adequate psychopathological and neuropsychological evaluations (Martin, Hynes, Hatcher & Colman, 2016; Muscatello et al., 2014) and the ascertainment of further and specific suicidal risk factors represent a fundamental clinical moment in this special population. In their study, Authors reported a psychiatric disorders prevalence rate of 44%; furthermore, no personality disorders were diagnosed. These findings did not confirm the higher percentages obtained in previous Italian studies conducted on large male samples (Zoccali et al., 2008; Piselli, Elisei, Murgia, Quartesan, & Abram, 2009; Macciò et al., 2015); moreover, regarding personality disorders, other studies that have specifically investigated this aspect by different diagnostic tools (e.g. SCID II) showed the high prevalence of antisocial (60.3%) and borderline (19.5%) disorders, confirming that these disorders are markedly associated with criminal/deviant behaviours, impulsivity, and aggression (Zoccali et al., 2008).

Despite the strengths of the article (the sample, although small, represents an entire inmate female population with a final judgment), we have certain reservations on the methodology followed and conclusions drawn in the study that need to be elaborated for a better understanding of this very important research.

First, the discrepancy of the results can certainly be explained by the small sample size, as correctly stated by the Authors; further studies with adequate sample size are needed. Moreover, the use of a diagnostic tool like the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) which evaluates only the Antisocial personality disorder can lead to an understatement (and, therefore, undertreatment) of the other personality disorders that represent a major

mismatch factor to prison life; the use of diagnostic tools, including projective ones, specific for personality disorders would be desirable to better investigate this important clinical aspect.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that some inmate (malingering of symptoms or unwillingness/inability to disclose symptoms), staff (heuristics related cognitive errors, assessment and/or the methods used), and environmental (situational stressors, screening and assessment time) characteristics may contribute to the risk of diagnostic errors and that at least 10% to 15% of all inmates may be incorrectly classified in terms of the presence or absence of a mental illness (Martin, Hynes, Hatcher & Colman, 2016).

Our correspondence thus, emphasizes the need for further explorations on this important area of research on mental health in inmates, in order to identify appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic strategies to be applied in this population.

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