


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From training to the work of forensic nurses in the Brazilian prison system*


HIGHLIGHTS

1. Reveals the lack of preparation in the training of forensic nurses.
2. Highlights adverse working conditions in the prison environment.
3. Highlights the need for urgent review of training policies.
4. Points out improvements needed for forensic nursing practice.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the perception of forensic nurses about their work in the Brazilian prison system and the impact of nursing education on the development of forensic science skills in this context. **Method:** Qualitative, exploratory research with national coverage, conducted between April and May 2023 with 22 nurses specializing in forensic nursing, through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. **Results:** Three thematic categories emerged: "Training of nurses to work in the prison system," "Nursing care provided to persons deprived of liberty," and "Organization of services for the practice of forensic nursing". **Conclusion:** Forensic nursing is a promising avenue for advances in prison care. There is an urgent need to reassess academic training, the care provided in this environment, and the working conditions faced by professionals daily to promote effective and humane forensic nursing practice within prisons.

DESCRIPTORS: Forensic Nursing; Correctional Facilities Personnel; Working Conditions; Professional Competence; Education, Nursing.

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, 10.74 million people are deprived of their liberty, with Brazil ranking third in the world in terms of prison population¹, with 644,316 people housed in 1,388 prisons across the country². These facilities across the country have a total of 1,763 nurses.

Considering the size of the incarcerated population and to increase health care for this population, guaranteeing them universal and equal access to the Unified Health System (SUS), the Ministry of Health established the National Policy for Comprehensive Health Care for Persons Deprived of Liberty in the Prison System (PNAISP) in 2014 to promote the comprehensive health of this population, which lacks health professionals in prison units to meet their needs and inherent rights as citizens³. Therefore, the presence of a health team and a qualified nurse within the prison is essential, as it is an indispensable profession when it comes to promoting, maintaining, and restoring health in a place of deprivation of liberty⁴.

According to the PNAISP, the specific duties of nurses include providing health care to prisoners, conducting nursing consultations, procedures, and group activities; requesting additional tests; prescribing medications and referring patients to other services when necessary; carrying out scheduled activities and/or responding to spontaneous requests; planning, managing, preventing, and promoting health; participating in and carrying out continuing education activities; and managing the necessary supplies⁵.

Given the complexity of the duties and context of the prison system, it is imperative to expand forensic nursing, as its work has a direct impact on both the healthcare system and the judicial sphere. The practice of forensic nursing transcends the discipline of nursing, as it requires in-depth knowledge, in the belief that it aims to enrich the criminal and legal process, preserving the integrity of the individual⁶.

The Federal Nursing Council (COFEN) regulated the work of forensic nurses through Resolution No. 556/2017. In this context, professionals are responsible for providing adequate assistance to victims, as well as collecting and preserving evidence, thereby contributing to the clarification of cases and supporting the patient's life. With this regulation, forensic nurses can now work in various settings, both inside and outside hospitals, including mass disaster situations, psychiatric contexts, and the prison system⁷.

Although there is a gap in the training of nurses for forensic practice, change is necessary, since the quality of care depends on the knowledge of professional nurses⁸. According to one study⁹, nurses working in prisons report job dissatisfaction, lack of training, and specific skills, which directly compromise care and personal relationships.

Professional demotivation stems from insufficient staffing levels, high demand, low wages, and unhealthy working conditions, reflecting a care model that is still centered on a medical-curative approach in the country's prisons¹⁰.

Thus, a necessary but very complex articulation emerges attention to the health of people deprived of liberty versus the valorization of the role of forensic nurses in the prison system. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the training of nurses through training for the practice of the profession in intramural environments¹¹.

Given the above, this study aims to "Analyze the perception of forensic nurses about their work in the Brazilian prison system and the impact of nursing education on the development of forensic science skills in this context."

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach and an exploratory design. The study was presented using the checklist from the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) instrument¹².

Participants were selected using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling technique. Invitations were sent via social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram, as well as email, reaching nurses working in prisons nationwide. Individuals were invited through referrals from the first author of this study and, subsequently, through suggestions from the participants themselves, forming referral chains to locate potential interviewees. Data collection was interrupted when referrals began to repeat themselves, with no additional responses to the online questionnaire via Google Forms®. Interviews were then scheduled and conducted online.

After the invitations were sent, a form was made available on the Google Forms® platform to verify interest in participating in the research. In it, the professionals provided information about themselves and consented to the research terms and conditions. Those who met the inclusion criteria participated: nurses with a specialization in forensic nursing and with practical or academic experience in the country. Professionals who no longer worked in the prison system without the specific specialization in their work, and those who did not respond or who had scheduling conflicts for the online interviews, were excluded.

A total of 22 nurses participated in semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2023 via Google Meet®, with an average duration of 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the researcher himself with the following guiding questions: "During your nursing degree, did you receive guidance on nursing care for people deprived of their liberty?" and "How do you recognize the role of the forensic nurse within the prison system?" All interviews were recorded, transcribed in full in Microsoft Word, and coded to ensure anonymity, with participants identified by codes such as FN01, FN02, and so on.

Thematic analysis was conducted according to Bardin¹³ in three stages: pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and interpretation of the results. In the pre-analysis, the researcher transcribed the interviews in full using Microsoft Word, identifying preliminary themes at this stage. In the material exploration stage, relevant excerpts were analyzed and organized by themes. Finally, in interpreting the results, the data were grouped by similarities, interrelated, and contextualized in relation to the problem and objectives of the study.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Catarina, under opinion No. 5,808,287, under the guidelines of Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council¹⁴. All participants signed the online FICF, ensuring compliance with ethical principles throughout the research.

RESULTS

Based on the results analyzed, three main categories emerged: "Nursing Training for Work in the Prison System," "Nursing Care Provided to Persons Deprived of

Liberty,” and “Organization of Services for Forensic Nursing Practice.” Chart 1 shows the categories, with their respective subcategories and units of registration.

Chart 1. Categories, subcategories, and registration units. Florianópolis, SC, Brazil, 2024

Categories	Subcategories	Registration units
Nursing training for the prison system	Working without specialization	- Non-specialized professionals
	Unprepared to work in the prison system	- They don't feel prepared to act. - The subject was never covered in undergrad.
	Training professionals	- Professionals who are already in prison and need training. - Make training compulsory.
Nursing care for people deprived of their liberty	Providing care	- Better quality care when you have the title of specialist. - Infectious diseases.
	Fear when carrying out activities	- Dangerousness. - Unhealthy. - Living with violence.
Organization of services for forensic nursing practice	Precarious work	- Lack of supplies. - Living with infectious diseases. - Inadequate working conditions.
	Application of protocols by forensic nurses in the prison system	- Overcrowding is a difficulty.
	High demand	- A country with a large number of people deprived of their liberty.

Source: The authors (2024).

Based on the information presented in Chart 1, excerpts from the interviews with the research participants are presented below.

Nursing Training for the Prison System

The nurses’ reports highlight a significant gap in the teaching of forensic sciences during undergraduate studies, which directly impacts the preparation of professionals working in the prison system:

[...] During my undergraduate studies, no one ever mentioned any care or health in the prison environment [...] (FN13)

The lack of preparation during initial training led some professionals to seek specialization in the field on their own initiative. However, even among those who

entered the prison system already specialized, the perception of insufficient preparation persists:

[...] I don't feel prepared to work in the prison system. (FN07)

For example, today I have no training in the prison system; I don't know how to deal with the aggressors [...]. (FN14)

Understanding the nuances of imprisonment, including what deprivation of liberty entails, requires considerable effort. I understand that these are the activities of a forensic nurse. (FN16)

Similarly, there was agreement on the need for professionals to receive training and specialization in forensic nursing to provide quality care within the prison system. To make matters worse, they reported that this topic was not covered during their nursing degree.

[...] Within the prison system, where I already have a nurse, he needs to be trained to work there. (FN11)

[...] We need to assume that training is mandatory. (FN13)

Given this scenario, the need for specific training to work in prison environments was widely highlighted:

The nurse currently working there does not require training in forensic nursing. [...] It is essential to have a nurse with this knowledge available. (FN13)

Nursing care for people deprived of their liberty

The relationship between training in forensic nursing and the quality of care provided in the prison system was evident in the reports. The prison context poses additional challenges, especially due to the constant presence of multiple forms of violence:

People who work in prisons also work with forensic nursing, which is very intense due to the violence. We deal with various types of violence: institutional, gender, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial, and many others. (FN13)

The dialogue also reveals the feeling of fear that is often present in care, both related to the dangerous nature of living with violence within the prison walls and to the unhealthy conditions of living with infectious diseases.

It's not easy, it's hard, and it's super risky. When I say risky, I don't just mean dangerous. Still, beyond the danger, which is a huge challenge, there are the unsanitary conditions we face, being around people with tuberculosis all the time, people with leprosy all the time, overcrowding, and respiratory diseases. (FN13)

All participants agreed that the situation requires changes to the poor conditions experienced daily.

Organization of services for forensic nursing practice

In this last category, there was no disagreement in the reports regarding the inadequate working conditions and other difficulties faced while working with this population, such as the high demand:

These are professionals who are forgotten, professionals who are there at the mercy of violence, who experience violence, and who enter there without adequate working conditions, living in chaos, abandoned, and in need of a lot of support. They require training; it is difficult to work with a population deprived of liberty. (FN16)

It's chaos. There should be a minimum of tools available through our nursing process to legitimize our care. Let's get together and do some research; everything can be done. (FN01)

Overcrowding in prisons hinders the implementation of care protocols. It intensifies health challenges, increasing the risk of spreading infectious diseases:

[...] We live in a country where the prison population is growing enormously, increasing absurdly every year. We are talking about numerous prisoners, considered one of the highest in the world. (FN09)

We begin with overcrowding. Any overcrowded environment makes it very difficult to implement any protocol. That is the problem. (FN13)

The difficulty of implementing protocols in the prison environment was highlighted by the professionals interviewed, with overcrowding being a primary obstacle.

Given these conditions, it is essential to restructure nursing services in prisons, including training professionals and implementing measures that guarantee the safety and dignity of both workers and the incarcerated population.

DISCUSSION

Caring for individuals deprived of their liberty presents complex challenges, given the prison environment, which contributes to the worsening of various diseases, in addition to other peculiarities. This highlights the crucial importance of professionals having high-quality knowledge and training to provide excellent care¹⁵.

However, it is worth questioning whether nursing degrees should include specific training for all specialties or whether this responsibility should be directed to postgraduate studies. The lack of specialized training to work in the prison system can compromise the quality of care provided and limit the availability of specific interventions that are often necessary¹⁶.

According to Resolution 556/2017 of the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN), forensic nurses are qualified to work in prisons. However, as noted in reports by forensic nurses, many of them do not feel prepared to work in this environment. Much of this is due to the resolution categorizing nursing specialties into three broad areas, with 51 specialties⁷ in area I alone, which includes forensic nursing. Thus, it is not feasible for undergraduate curricula to cover all these specialties in depth without compromising generalist training.

Studies^{8,17-18} indicate that the absence of subjects focused on forensic and prison nursing in undergraduate courses has an impact on the training of professionals and on stimulating interest in the area. However, this should be analyzed in consideration of national curriculum guidelines, which emphasize generalist training, with specializations providing training for specific contexts. Thus, the discussion on curriculum gaps

should consider whether there is a feasibility and need to include forensic nursing in undergraduate programs or whether further training would be more appropriate.

The nature of nurses' intramural work reported in the research, such as high demand and fear of contamination due to unsanitary conditions, is also discussed in an international study, which shows that nurses working in the prison system had longer working hours, fear of contracting infection at work, and perceived that they were provided with less personal protective equipment (PPE)¹⁹.

Prison overcrowding was exposed as the main difficulty in implementing protocols and as a fuel for the spread of disease. It is worth noting that there was a higher incidence of COVID-19 transmission during the pandemic among incarcerated individuals, precisely because of overcrowding and poor ventilation²⁰. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, tuberculosis, considered the most lethal infectious disease, remained prevalent in prisons, with an incidence up to 10 times higher than in the general population. These data corroborate participants' reports of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and concerns about contamination while working in this adverse environment²¹.

In addition, healthcare professionals working in the prison system constantly face a lack of material resources to carry out procedures, precarious employment conditions, and a lack of preparation and training for their work^{15,22}.

These professionals experience several stressful factors. One of these, cited in the study, is fear due to frequent exposure to violence within the system, making forensic nurses indispensable in these cases. Another factor is the excessive workload of these professionals, given the overcrowded environment. In this regard, epidemiological data indicate that the incarcerated population has significantly higher rates of chronic diseases and contagious infections than the general community, increasing the demand for these nurses²³.

Violence is a concern for professionals working within the prison system, and fear of violence also generates insecurity and professional exhaustion, compromising the work process and, consequently, the health of these professionals²⁴. Constant exposure to violence may reaffirm the need for nurses with forensic expertise in these environments.

Within this context and given all the difficulties and limitations to the provision of nursing care resulting from the prison system itself and the well-known precarious conditions that exist in this environment, it becomes a place of significant risk to health and healthcare, which is still far from being as good as it should be²⁵.

It is the responsibility of the state to guarantee health, material, social, educational, legal, and religious assistance to citizens deprived of their liberty. Ensuring these constitutional rights aims to facilitate the reintegration of citizens into society, in addition to preventing new crimes²⁶.

One limitation is the small number of forensic nurses participating in this study who work in the prison system. However, I would like to point out that all 22 participants identified the issue of training for forensic nurses in the prison system as a challenge that needs to be prioritized in the field of nursing.

In this perspective, forensic nursing is a promising avenue for advances in prison care. Therefore, it is necessary to: reassess the health care offered in the prison system, promoting an integrated approach that prioritizes prevention and health promotion; address the absence of specialized training and the lack of an adequate approach in undergraduate curricula regarding forensic and prison nursing; address the lack

of specific training for nursing professionals in forensic practice; current institutional policies limit the role of health professionals in forensic activities within prisons, even when they have the necessary knowledge; and increase the volume of research in the area to reduce the existing invisibility of nurses' work in the prison system and of the portion of the population deprived of liberty.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the perceptions of forensic nurses regarding their work in the Brazilian prison system, highlighting both the importance of these professionals and the challenges they face, such as low recognition and structural difficulties that hinder the application of skills acquired through forensic nursing training. Limitations in practice were identified, including fear of performing activities due to high danger, risk of infection, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate protection for professionals. The organization of services is compromised by poor working environments and a shortage of supplies, which directly affect the quality of care and continuity of care.

The research also highlighted gaps in the training and qualification of nurses, affecting health promotion within prisons. Despite COFEN's recognition, forensic nursing lacks greater educational and institutional investment. Nurses' limited knowledge of forensic demands points to the need for specific guidelines for this area.

Although the sample was limited, the study contributes to understanding the reality experienced by forensic nurses, highlighting the importance of the data collected for advancing knowledge in this field.

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Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work - **Hilleshein AG, Santos DG, Vargas MAO**. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content - **Hilleshein AG, Santos DG, Citolin MO, Fernandes VMB, Vargas MAO**. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved - **Santos DG, Vargas MAO**. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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