

Prison and physical activities in Italy: practices and utilities for the creation of new proposals

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Abstract:

This work analyzes the benefits that physical activity could bring in a hard context such as the prison one. After an explanation of the fundamentals of the Italian Penitentiary System, essential to understand the possibilities that professionals that interact with that world have, the authors expose the psychophysical conditions that a prisoner suffers from the very first months of conviction. It will then be purposed a selected literature which shows how different physical activities could improve that conditions and, moreover, how they can be concretely useful for the aims of the prison sentence: re-education and re-socialization. These previous argumentations allow the authors to hope for greater attention to sports activities in prison and to lay the foundations for further empirical studies in the prison context.

Key Words: Prison; physical activities; public health; conditions of detention

Introduction:

Italian Penitentiary System and physical activities in prison

The purpose of the prison sentence in Italy is established by Article 27 of the Constitution and, it is intended as re-educative. Sports and recreational activities are provided by the Penitentiary System as tools to be implemented in re-education, but the problems interrelated with overcrowding and the architecture of prisons sites make the actual practice of these activities very arduous (Dolcini, 2016). It is reported that the detainees have experienced a worsening of their psychophysical conditions since the first months of imprisonment, and it has been verified that a greater onset of pathologies is related to the prison lifestyle (Testa & Federici, 2010). On the other hand, it has been shown that physical activity can make up many of the problems linked to a closed and sedentary life context. A general improvement in physical conditions and a greater mental well-being are related, in particular, to the performance of an activity in itself and to an increase in self-esteem. Several studies have also shown that sporting practice can be supportive in programs related to the inclusion and re-socialization of prisoners and, in general, in the decrease of the possibility of relapse (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009b).

Starting from what emerges by the current legislation about the treatment and re-education of prisoners in Italy, in line with the underlying principle of the restrictive penalties implemented, the Penitentiary Law in the law of 26th July 1975, n. 354, amended by the recent legislative decree 2nd October 2018, n. 123, in article 15, states textually that the treatment of the prisoner should avail, first of all, «education, professional training, work, participation in public utility projects, religion, cultural, recreational and sporting activities, all this by making appropriate contacts with the outside world and relations with the family" (Piarulli et al., 2018).

In details, articles 59 and 60 of the aforementioned decree, concern with outlining recreational and sports activities which, in line with rehabilitative objectives, are included in the program to be implemented with regard to the treatment of prisoners.

Article 59 states that sporting activities are to be submitted mainly to young people and, for this reason, they should involve national and local authorities.

The same Penitentiary Law provides the presence of recreational and sports activities within the penal institutions, for the purpose of a re-educational treatment aimed at the realization of the prisoner's personality (Basco et al., 2006).

In Italian, European as well as in American penitentiary systems, we find remarkable similarities with regards to different problems: prison overcrowding, inadequate spaces for receiving this supernumerary and the presence of users who very often commits criminal acts that are not proportionately compliant to the penalties received. And, therefore, of alternative measures to detention.

But there are also many differences regarding treatment and penalties; in the Italian legislative system we find that laws –and the attempt to implement them –aim at the humanization of the condemned, at the non-

depersonalization and maintenance of the fundamental rights of the person and not at its degradation. (Camus, 2018).

Sport, seen first and foremost as a mean for fighting isolation, as a tool for health promotion and more generally for the well-being of every citizen, is among the objectives listed in the 2007 White Paper on sport, initiative of the Commission and of the European Parliament.

The Commission also recognizes the essential role that sport plays in contributing to the strengthening of active citizenship (Giansanti, 2015). The innumerable applicable disciplines are not feasible, however, due to the limits set by spaces and structures incompatible with the prison environment and also due to the use of tools that could be potentially dangerous in some cases (Basco, et al. 2006).

The prisons, as they are designed and built, present innumerable limits to the practice of sports. The architectural limits already impose alternatives to detention – as it has already been discussed – due to reasons of overcrowding, inadequate structures, and uninhabitable spaces, in Italy as in English-speaking prisons, and do not allow the majority of sporting activities. In some cases, it is not really possible to implement them (Scarcella, 2001).

Moreover, a preventive medical evaluation of physical fitness for sporting activities is foreseen for each prisoner. Beyond the obstacles due to the inadequacy of the spaces in the detention facilities, the activities that, following a preliminary analysis, emerge as most suitable for the aforementioned situation are: football, handball, basket, volley, tennis, bowls, jogging, walking, free body activity, and gym.

There are also cases of more recent sports protocols, in which, in order to detect the benefit in terms of health and correct personal-social dynamics, different disciplines have been included:

- toning motor activity;
- cardio fitness;
- dancing;
- step;
- stretching;
- postural gymnastics;
- relaxing gymnastics;
- postural gymnastics;
- low intensity physical activity recovery.

The involvement of external organizations and the performance of physical practices is useful to facilitate the connection with external realities and the start of an effective and re-socializing future reintegration, reducing the isolation caused by the restrictive condition.

Following these principles, there are various collaborations between the Ministry of Justice - DAP (Department of Penitentiary Administration) and CONI (Italian National Olympic Committee), among which the Project 'Sport in prison', which took place after having signed the agreement Protocol of December 2013, stands out. The main aim was to improve the living conditions of prisoners through sports (<https://www.coni.it/it/sport-in-carcere.html>). The project, which started on an experimental basis from two pilot cities, Rome and Bologna, later involved 12 Italian cities, and then expanded into a network of additional penal institutions in the area.

Of particular importance, a further Italian project implemented in the Brancaglione prison (AN), which offered the following sports: weight room, aerobics room, multipurpose field for five-a-side football, tennis, and basketball; moreover, also a library can be found in the structure. Additionally, among the participants, 20 male prisoners, about 40 years old, were involved in the project.

The project, structured in detail, included different training cards, to be applied at different point in time, the administration of questionnaires and evaluation forms of different physical parameters.

One of the most relevant data, to be underlined, is the considerable level of stress to which prisoners are subjected in their coercive state which leads to consequent deterioration of health (Ceccarini et al., 2017).

The most common psychophysical problems in the prison environment

The total lack of privacy and adequate space for normal daily activities are factors that influence both the physical and the psychic condition of prisoners. The deprivation of freedom, in particular due to the impossibility of movement, has by now well-known effects on the health of those who are imprisoned. Added to this condition there are the typical situations related to a conviction for any offense: disjointed social and family relationships, frustration, a sense of defeat, difficulty in thinking about the future. Prison is a real and severe punishment which, even if deserved in a retributive perspective, like every other form of punishment (would also have) has the purpose of "educating", making those who have committed one or more errors understand that their actions are worthy of blame and it is desirable that they put effort in not to perpetrate any others. This goes far beyond the moral perspective. It is precisely the Italian Constitution with Article 27 that sets the goal of punishment to be re-educative and re-socializing. Moreover, a logical dimension is also involved: penalties have a term. Once the punishment is exhausted, the offender will have paid his debt with the community and will return to be part of it. Taking care of him during the detention is therefore of fundamental importance from every

point of view, in the first place perhaps, precisely for the prevention and protection of society, perceived as so important in this historical period.

Like every person, the prisoner suffers the consequences of his own habits and everyday environments. Sedentariness and boredom therefore have the dual effect of increasing the possibility of contracting psychophysical disorders and of making the existing ones even worse. From the first months, in fact, most of the constricted feel a general worsening of their condition starting from the senses: some begin to suffer from vertigo, the sense of smell is compromised in 31% of them, they present then poor eyesight, hearing disorders and a progressive lack of energy (Gonin, 1994). But it is only the beginning. Obligatory hypokinesia causes extensive damage, starting with the cardiovascular system. Mostly:

- increase of the sympathetic tone with consequent tachycardia;
- shortening of diastolic time, reduced venous return, reduced coronary flow and increase of oxygen consumption which leads the subject to fatigue at the slightest effort;
- alteration of the baroreceptor mechanism therefore orthostatic hypotension, venous stasis, and phlebotrombosis or pulmonary embolism.

The increased risk of a deterioration in the functions of the cardiovascular system has also been detected in the female prison population (an example, Plugge et al., 2009).

On the articular myologic level, cartilage degeneration, connective tissue augmentation, muscle fibrosis, reduced presence of synovial fluid, and depletion of glycogen production are encountered.

In the respiratory system, the dynamic reduction of cost-diaphragmatic efficiency, the elasticity of the thoracic cage, and the consequent capacity of the respiratory volume lead to an alteration of the functional capacity. It is therefore possible to speak of a hypokinetic syndrome (Federici & Testa, 2010). Hereabove, we have mentioned the systems that suffer the greatest damages, nonetheless the body is involved in its totality.

There is a shortage of research on specific pathologies found in prisons, and the few carried out have mainly focused on infectious and/or sexually transmitted diseases, also related to addictions (see for example the work of Esposito, 2007). On the other hand, sexually transmitted diseases are not only those with a greater social impact and public interest, but within the prison they also have an incidence ten times greater than normal civil society, due to sexual promiscuity and the use of syringes, homosexuality induced by the context of deprivation, disorders, and general alteration of sexuality.

However, it should be noted that the most frequent and annoying problems for prisoners are those related to teeth, feeding, and digestion.

Consideration should also be given to psychological problems, often related to the detention context and occurring during the execution of the sentence, which are relatively: mood disorders, anxiety, depression, hyper-excitation or absolute passivity, uncontrollable aggression, panic attacks to real paranoid delusions (Sarzotti & Mosconi, 2004). Although not reaching the pathologies, a lowering of self-esteem appears normal, which is fundamental for the good functioning of any human being, especially in moments of difficulty and imposed change. Albert Bandura writes, more precisely, about "self-efficacy" which refers to the perception that a person has of his own effectiveness in managing events; it represents a sort of generative capacity of energies, and means that every human being has available, albeit in a different way (Bandura, 2010). It is the power that individuals believe they have in their lives through their actions. If a subject believes he has no effect on events and situations he lives, or that holds little or no control on the choice of his own actions, he will hardly find himself in a healthy emotional balance. He will have more difficulty coping with adversity, but also simply choosing to act (Bandura, 2006). Consider how much this can influence any re-educational projects, even if in agreement with the educators.

A difficult situation, therefore, arises to be managed by all the penitentiary staff (which in turn often suffers from problems linked to imprisonment, however differently) and which can significantly affect public health, in the event that someone does not consider them worthy of attention to the general condition of prisoners.

Physical activity and sport for convicts' health

One of the most tested solutions to improve the general well-being of prisoners and to increase the possibilities of better educational outcomes, was the implementation of projects related to physical activity (for example, Ceccarini & Federici, 2017). Without any doubt, sport has shown numerous positive effects on convicts' psychophysical conditions. First of all, which is a factor not to be underestimated, the physical activities and/or projects related to them, contribute to deal with the sense of boredom which afflicts detainees. The perception of time in prison is slower, and the lack of spaces and activities that it is possible to perform contribute to make life hard and tough. Therefore, the opportunity to move helps to make time pass faster by and give the perception of having "done something" (Martos-García et al., 2009).

Physical activity helps to prevent cardiovascular disease and lowers the risk of contracting various diseases (Alves et al., 2016; Kyu et al., 2016). Furthermore, by doing physical activity the individual perceives himself as healthier and the regular performance has also been correlated to greater personal satisfaction and happiness (Lera-López et al., 2017; Severino et al., 2019).

Inmates who had the opportunity to practice sports regularly showed also lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms, they also perceived a better general mental well-being. Some of them have also

shown greater confidence in the future and a concrete expectation for existential improvements (Cashin et al., 2008). It should be taken into consideration that these benefits also directly affect the penitentiary staff, who can perform duties in a safer manner and, thus, has a lesser burden of stress.

There are also good outcomes regarding the correlation between physical activity and greater self-esteem and self-efficacy, even among the younger prison population (Menéndez-Santurio & Fernández-Río, 2016; Loeb et al., 2011; Marcolongo & Mariani, 2018). Studies carried out on samples of convicted people from different States have shown relevant results and they all have proven that the individuals who participated in sports projects later showed a greater sense of control over themselves and over the situations, and also greater self-confidence in the future and in their abilities. Even the academic results, when prisoners have the chance to attend education courses of any level, have improved. The detainees showed more confidence in their cognitive abilities, usually lower than the average in the prison population. This is also due to the fact that usually prisoners have some more frequent variables: socio-economic origins and educational levels are usually among the lowest (Eikeland et al., 2013). It therefore appears almost obvious that a person who is not accustomed to study or who is not inclined to it, faces difficulties in education. It is consequently of great interest to notice that physical activity in prison has led prisoners to perceive themselves with more possibilities in this aspect too, which is normally perceived as distant and not in their wheelhouse. (Roth et al., 2016).

Finally, another considerable result highlights a significant correlation between the practice of physical activity and the acquisition of greater impulse control and a lower level of physical and verbal aggression (a pioneering study by Wagner et al., 1999). Once more, in the prison population, especially among those detained for violent crimes, there is less control and recognition of emotions, as well as a lower average IQ. Some studies have shown, even among the detained population, that physical activity can even improve executive functions, such as working memory and problem solving (Mejers et al., 2015; Diamond, 2015). Therefore, there are considerable results under two points of view linked to mental functioning: the emotional one, with a lower rate of aggression and a better management of emotions, and the more purely cognitive one.

The benefits brought by physical activity can clearly be of great impact and help in the educational activity proposed by prison. Since a critical review of one's anti-juridical conduct and being able to think of a really feasible life project once the detention ends are crucial for a successful outcome of the imprisonment, sport appears as a great possibility that it is given to the detention system as it is really effective and meaningful (Devis-Devis et al., 2012).

Physical activity and sport to promote re-socialization

It is known that deviance is closely correlated with the phenomena of social exclusion: assuming that there is a close relationship between social processes, these ones influence both the inclusion and exclusion of individuals, who, in the second case, can lead to phenomena of deviance and even criminality (Patrizi, 2007). Taking into consideration the Penitentiary Law and its founding principles, sport carries within itself those values, such as friendship, solidarity, and discipline, which can be placed at the base of a complete educational treatment. It refers to the legislative decree of 2nd October 2018, n. 121, in paragraph 2 of article 1, which presupposes the involvement of sport in the process of re-education, re-socialization, empowerment, and reintegration into the free life of the prisoner.

Sport, so far as one of the fundamental tools used for this purpose, involves important characteristics: it favours the confrontation with different individuals, given by a comparison between different cultures, and the consequent human and social growth (Moscoso- Sánchez et al., 2017).

It is also the first channel of diffusion of these values, since it demolishes every type of barrier and fosters the impulse to aggregation. What here above stated, goes hand in hand with the objectives of re-education, which is aimed at the formation of a personality that integrates the psycho-social aspects and the respect of the rules of civil coexistence. To achieve this, the detained person must acquire renewed skills, knowledge and competences that make him able to re-enter more productively into society, both socially and economically (Castillo, 2004).

Contributions of physical activity to the reduction of antisocial behaviour

Sport and physical activity also showed potential effects in reducing antisocial behaviour inside and outside the prison walls. The effects in both cases are considered indirect rather than direct: the increase in self-esteem, the use of time that would otherwise be invested in unlawful activities, and the links that sport can contribute to form are the variables that can take to a significant decrease in deviant behaviour as secondary effects (Dimitrova & Dishkova, 2017). These physical activity outcomes were firstly analysed as forms of prevention in the juvenile environment (Marmol et al., 2017), in particular among those boys born and raised in marginal and disadvantaged areas of the city. Sports-centred programs have been brought to schools and suburbs, precisely to increase children's sense of responsibility, especially those with more complex experiences (see for example the interesting Australian case, Morris et al., 2003). One of the models that seems to have been effective even among minors at risk of dropping out of school is the Hellison model for social and personal responsibility (Gordon & Doyle, 2015). Physical activity, therefore, by touching some of the risk factors of criminal activity and soliciting those that are indirectly protective, has proven to be a useful investment. Practicing sports has shown positive effects on the reduction of antisocial behaviour even in prison, although

there is a shortage of studies with a real follow-up after the sentence. As a matter of fact, most of the activities in prison aim to reduce the possibility of relapse, therefore the beneficial effects that physical activity has shown that the reduction of aggressive behaviours and feelings of anger (Wagner et al., 1999) within the detention walls are not indicative of what might happen outside. It is of undoubted interest to notice that practicing sports in prison can lead to a better conception of oneself, to the improvement of executive abilities, to cope with the sense of boredom and to a renewed perception of the rules and their usefulness (Castillo, 2004). Penitentiary staff is satisfied whenever a similar activity is proposed since prisoners, like children, are more tired and therefore "tameable", but programs with long-term effects are rarely conceived. What is most pressing is the short-term goal of keeping the prisoners under control. In this sense it can therefore be said that physical activities in prison also have the function of social control, as well as outside (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009b). Playing sports, always assuming rules, in prison solicits the reward and punishment mechanisms that can be formative even at the exit from it (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a). To behave correctly during activities, with the other convicts and with the prison staff, leads to have advantages which by return lead to real benefits. This leads the inmates to do their best even in terms of acceptance of rules and attitudes that on other occasions would make them explode. In this sense, physical activity is part of real processes of inclusion in which prisoners of different ethnicities, with different characters and imprisoned for different reasons, cooperate together for purposes they share: starting from fighting against boredom to having benefits. Being good at physical activity also contributes a lot to the perception of masculinity that prisoners usually want to have. They are pushed to practice and train to show themselves and others to be strong and "male" (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009a). It must not be underestimated the fact that practicing some sports, such as martial arts or boxing, can help prisoners to calm down even if they have had arguments between them. This can become a real lifestyle, taking into consideration the philosophies which manifest themselves through different fighting styles. If, on one side, it may seem that violent people are taught to be more violent, in reality they are taught above all to control violence and use it according to certain principles.

Finally, to evaluate the hypothesis that sport can actually act as a deterrent even after leaving prison, the psychophysical benefits already mentioned in the previous paragraphs can be taken into consideration. If practicing physical activity leads to a better state of health, a better perception of oneself, an increase in self-efficacy, and even a development of the cognitive executive faculties, it is thus to be considered concretely the possibility that targeted programs, which also encourage the continuation of sports activities outside prison, may have concrete deterrent results.

Conclusions

The Italian Constitution provides that the penalty must aim at re-education and socialization. Penitentiary Law, with the law of 26th July 1975, n. 354, has made this purpose its own by inserting various means that should be implemented to ensure that the prisoner serves a sentence that can be as constructive as punitive. Physical activity is one of these tools. Its importance seems to be confirmed by the worsening of the psychophysical conditions that the prisoner tend to suffer from the first months of imprisonment and from the greater incidence of pathologies related to different apparatuses (Gonin, 1994). A true hypokinetic syndrome has been identified, whose aetiology is primarily due to the impossibility of regular physical movement (Federici & Testa, 2010). In addition, the conditions of imprisonment can also lead to the occurrence of mental illness and/or to worsen some already critical points of the functioning of each one, such as self-esteem.

Instead, the purpose to include physical and sport activities for prisoners is to develop Life Skills, that is, skills and abilities to be versatile and positive in dealing effectively with the challenges that daily life presents; exactly as the World Health Organization recommends (1983). Sport, contrary to what imprisonment takes away, can help to restore the skills necessary to achieve this goal, proceeding against the degradation of the personality and building the foundations for a future, a valid inclusion in society (De Vita & D'Andria, 2019).

Physical activity, inside and outside the prison walls, has shown numerous benefits on several fronts: it contributes to improve and to preserve one's health and mind (Kyu et al., 2016; Mariani et al., 2019), and it also seems that performing sports can contribute to re-education by transmitting and implementing values linked to social inclusion (Patrizi, 2007). It allows to reduce the level of boredom and the sense of constriction of prisoners, lowering their level of stress and anger, as well as for prison staff, which in turn benefits from more relaxed and controllable prisoners (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009b).

Given the empirical evidence presented by studies from different Countries, the collaboration and implementation of projects focused on physical activity in prisons are desirable. Of course, there are many difficulties, first of all those related to the spaces and to the means that can be brought into restricted structures. Since the architectural structures of the prison facilities are not suitable for the performance of sports activities, the penitentiary system has carried out revisions to allow the involvement of external communities, the main promoters of these activities. In this way it would be possible to break down the discriminatory wall that divides the inside from the outside and to contribute for a social reintegration (Allegrì P. A., Torrente G., 2018). However, a scientific draft of this kind of project would be necessary, since it might produce more accurately verified and measured outcomes resulting from the practice of a specific activity. In detail it could be interesting

the verification of possible improvements in the control of the impulses and in the management of emotions such as anger and fear. This is the next step that the authors of this work intend to take.

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