



New Trends
in Psychology

A Dual Perspective on Experiential Learning and Psychological Intervention in Prison: Formative and Clinical Insights

Ecaterina Popa¹, Brigitte Popa²

Abstract: This article explores the psychological challenges encountered in a maximum-security prison setting and highlights psychological interventions through a dual-perspective analysis that combines the experiential learning of a psychology intern with the clinical expertise of a supervising psychologist. The study examines the dynamics of mental health in detention and underscores the role of psychological interventions in managing suicide risk, hunger strikes, and severe psychiatric disorders. While existing literature recognizes the importance of psychological assessment and intervention in carceral settings, few studies merge educational practice with clinical analysis. This paper addresses that gap by presenting a locally grounded, twofold perspective linking professional development with practical insights. The methodology included direct observation, case reflection, and structured supervisory discussions. Clinical situations were jointly analyzed to identify effective strategies and extract professional learning outcomes. Emphasis was placed on reflective practice, integrating field experiences with theoretical frameworks. The analysis revealed recurrent challenges such as heightened inmate stress, communication barriers, and a high incidence of suicidal behaviors. Interventions focused on emotional stabilization, treatment adherence, and adaptive functioning. For the intern, this practicum fostered professional empathy, ethical awareness, and critical thinking skills. Findings highlight the importance of integrating formative training with clinical supervision in preparing future psychologists

¹ Ph.D, Lecturer, School of Human Advancement & Life Sciences, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, E-mail: ecaterina.popa@univ-danubius.ro.

² Student, School of Human Advancement & Life Sciences, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, Corresponding author: afterschool.ace@yahoo.com.



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

and call for specialized training in crisis intervention and interdisciplinary collaboration in correctional facilities.

Keywords: forensic psychology; clinical supervision; crisis intervention; offender rehabilitation; inmate mental health

1. Introduction

Prisons are high-stakes institutional settings where mental health care, behavioral control, and public safety converge. Consistent evidence indicates that people in custody exhibit markedly higher rates of psychological distress, suicidality, and psychiatric morbidity than community samples (World Health Organization, 2007). This elevated risk reflects the interplay of liberty deprivation, social isolation, overcrowding, and pre-existing trauma. In maximum-security units these pressures intensify, making timely psychological care essential both for inmate wellbeing and for the safe operation of the institution.

Correctional psychologists work under distinctive constraints. They must conduct structured risk assessments, respond to crises, deliver manualized psychoeducational and therapeutic programs, and navigate ethical tensions at the interface of security, confidentiality, and rehabilitation (Haney, 2018). International guidance further stresses that services should address immediate needs—such as suicide prevention and stabilization of inmates with serious mental disorders—while also pursuing longer-term goals of rehabilitation, including anger regulation, impulsivity reduction, and prosocial skill development (Council of Europe, 2023; Konrad et al., 2007).

In Romania, correctional services have increasingly adopted evidence-informed programming grounded in cognitive-behavioral principles and the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) framework. Such programs aim to lower reoffending by targeting criminogenic needs, strengthening emotional regulation, and reinforcing prosocial behavior. Their effectiveness, however, hinges on sustained staff training, high-quality clinical supervision, and routine monitoring to protect both therapeutic integrity and institutional security (Council of Europe, 2023).

This article offers a dual-perspective analysis—educational and clinical—of psychological interventions implemented in a maximum-security penitentiary in Galați, Romania. Drawing on the first author’s experiential learning as a second-year psychology student under the supervision of the prison’s lead psychologist, we

examine five core programs: suicide-risk prevention, mental-health stabilization, anger management, impulsivity reduction, and moral-empathy development. Recent empirical work underscores the relevance of this focus: post-conviction suicide-prevention initiatives are associated with meaningful reductions in self-harm and suicide events (Slade et al., 2025); meta-analytic evidence indicates that anger-management activities can decrease aggression when implemented with fidelity (Kjærvi et al., 2024); and systematic reviews support psychological strategies to prevent self-injury in carceral populations (Pedrola-Pons et al., 2024). Through observed outcomes and supervised reflective practice, we aim to inform scholarship, service delivery, and policy for improving mental health care in prisons.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention in Prisons

Suicide remains one of the leading causes of death in correctional settings, occurring at rates significantly higher than in the general population (World Health Organization, 2007). Psychological interventions are therefore a cornerstone of prison mental health services. Recent evidence shows that multi-component interventions—combining screening, psychoeducation, and therapeutic approaches—can meaningfully reduce suicidal ideation and self-harm incidents when delivered systematically and supported by post-intervention monitoring (Pedrola-Pons et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies highlight the importance of continuity of care after conviction, noting that integrated post-conviction initiatives are associated with substantial reductions in repeated suicide attempts (Slade et al., 2025). Nonetheless, meta-reviews emphasize heterogeneity in program effectiveness, underscoring the need for structured protocols, well-trained staff, and ongoing evaluation (Konrad et al., 2007).

2.2. Mental-Health Stabilization Programs

Beyond acute crisis intervention, mental-health stabilization programs address the significant prevalence of psychiatric disorders among inmates. Research documents that depression, anxiety, and psychotic disorders are overrepresented in custodial populations and are linked to institutional misconduct and poorer reintegration outcomes (Fazel et al., 2025). Psychological interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and group-based psychoeducation have demonstrated

moderate success in improving emotional regulation and reducing behavioral incidents, though studies remain relatively small and methodologically heterogeneous (World Health Organization, 2007).

2.3. Anger Management and Aggression Reduction

Anger management remains one of the most widely implemented programs in prison rehabilitation. A recent meta-analytic review of 154 studies, including more than 10,000 participants, found significant reductions in self-reported anger and institutional aggression following structured anger-management interventions (Kjærvi et al., 2024). The strongest effects were reported in programs emphasizing physiological arousal reduction, such as relaxation training and mindfulness techniques, combined with cognitive restructuring. Evidence also suggests potential downstream benefits, including improved communication skills and decreased rule violations, though findings on recidivism reduction are mixed (Lipsey et al., 2007).

2.4. Impulsivity Reduction and Self-Regulation

Impulsivity is a robust predictor of prison misconduct and violent incidents. Small controlled studies indicate that targeted interventions—such as mindfulness training, problem-solving therapy, and behavioral rehearsal—can improve inmates' ability to delay responses and manage frustration (Meijers et al., 2023). These programs are often embedded within CBT frameworks and are considered essential for reducing institutional infractions and supporting successful community reentry (Anderson & Polaschek, 2022).

2.5. Moral-Empathy Development and Prosocial Functioning

Programs designed to enhance empathy, moral reasoning, and perspective-taking are increasingly recognized as key adjuncts to risk-reduction strategies. Interventions focusing on victim impact awareness and social perspective-taking have been linked to greater prosocial decision-making and lower levels of manipulative or cruel behavior (Ward & Brown, 2021). While randomized controlled trials in prison populations remain limited, systematic reviews indicate that treatments addressing criminogenic needs—such as empathy deficits—are more likely to produce

measurable behavioral change than generic educational activities (Andrews et al., 2011).

2.6. Theoretical and Programmatic Frameworks

The majority of prison psychological interventions are grounded in CBT principles, which have been consistently associated with improvements in institutional behavior and, in some contexts, lower recidivism (Lipsey et al., 2007). The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model continues to guide the design and delivery of offender rehabilitation programs by ensuring that interventions are matched to risk level, focus on criminogenic needs, and are delivered in a manner responsive to individual learning styles (Andrews & Bonta, 2017). Recent scholarship, however, calls for careful attention to treatment integrity and local implementation capacity, warning that poorly delivered interventions may fail to achieve intended outcomes or could even have iatrogenic effects (Polaschek, 2023).

Within the Romanian context, studies have begun to document the psychological profiles of inmates and the implementation of psychosocial programs tailored to local correctional realities (Crînguș & Le, 2023). These programs have been associated with improvements in emotional stability, coping skills, and readiness for reintegration. At a national level, previous research has emphasized the relevance of psychosocial programs in Romanian correctional facilities, highlighting their role in emotional regulation, behavioral change, and post-release reintegration (Popa, 2019). Building on this foundation, the present article offers a dual perspective—clinical and educational—on the implementation and outcomes of five structured psychological programs in a maximum-security penitentiary.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted in a maximum-security penitentiary in Galați, Romania, a facility that houses inmates serving long-term sentences, including life imprisonment. Participants were adult male inmates selected by the prison's psychological service based on risk assessment and clinical evaluation. Inclusion criteria varied by program but generally targeted individuals presenting with acute mental health needs (e.g., risk of suicide), behavioral dysregulation (e.g., anger outbursts, impulsivity), or deficits in prosocial functioning (e.g., low empathy, manipulative behavior).

3.1. Programs and Interventions

In terms of the intervention programs implemented at the Galați maximum-security penitentiary, the psychological services were structured to respond both to urgent clinical needs and to long-term rehabilitation goals. Suicide risk prevention was prioritized through systematic screening procedures, crisis intervention, and supportive counseling designed to stabilize individuals in acute distress. Psychoeducational meetings complemented these efforts by promoting adaptive coping strategies and encouraging inmates to seek professional help when needed.

Mental health stabilization represented another important strand of intervention, focusing on inmates with diagnosed psychiatric disorders. This program combined comprehensive psychological assessment, monitoring of treatment adherence, and group-based exercises aimed at improving emotional regulation and overall functioning in daily prison life.

Anger management interventions were delivered in a small-group format and relied on cognitive restructuring, role-playing scenarios, anger diaries, and relaxation techniques. The main objective was to reduce the intensity and frequency of aggressive reactions, thus contributing to a safer and more cooperative custodial environment.

Work on impulsivity was designed to strengthen self-regulation capacities. Through trigger identification, mindfulness practice, problem-solving activities, and behavioral rehearsal, participants were guided to delay their responses to provocation and to adopt more deliberate decision-making strategies.

Finally, the program dedicated to empathy and moral development targeted criminogenic needs by encouraging perspective-taking and prosocial reasoning. Group discussions explored moral dilemmas and victim impact narratives, inviting inmates to reflect on the social consequences of their actions and to practice alternative, constructive behavioral choices. Together, these interventions formed a coherent and complementary set of programs grounded in cognitive-behavioral principles and tailored to the specific challenges of a maximum-security facility.

All programs were grounded in cognitive-behavioral principles and delivered by a licensed prison psychologist with specialized training in correctional interventions. Sessions were held weekly or biweekly, depending on program intensity, and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

3.2. The Role of the Psychology Intern during the Penitentiary Practicum

The first author participated as a psychology intern, engaging in a combination of observation, structured note-taking, and reflective journaling. Under direct clinical supervision, the student contributed to monitoring inmate engagement, documenting behavioral indicators of progress, and debriefing cases with the supervising psychologist. This dual role enabled the integration of academic learning objectives with real-world clinical practice, fostering professional development and ethical awareness.

Data were drawn from structured observation sheets completed after each session, combined with debriefing discussions and supervisory feedback. The approach was primarily qualitative, emphasizing rich, descriptive accounts of inmate behavior, group dynamics, and observed change over time. Reflexive journaling was used as an educational tool, allowing the student to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical insights.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

All activities were carried out in compliance with institutional regulations and professional ethical standards. Inmates participated voluntarily, with assurances of confidentiality and no impact on their legal status or sentence progression. Identifying information was anonymized, and reflections were used strictly for academic and training purposes. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the Romanian College of Psychologists and the European Prison Rules concerning psychological care.

4. Findings and Results

The analysis of the impulsivity reduction program revealed several encouraging trends in participants' behavior and emotional regulation. Overall, the majority of inmates attended regularly and engaged with the exercises proposed by the facilitator. Observational notes indicated a progressive decrease in disruptive incidents during group sessions, alongside greater willingness to participate in role-play and problem-solving tasks.

A detailed breakdown of outcomes is presented in Figure 1. Approximately three-quarters (75%) of participants completed the entire program, reflecting a high level

of retention in a high-risk custodial setting. Half of the group demonstrated measurable improvement in self-control, as reflected by fewer impulsive reactions and a more deliberate approach to conflict resolution. Interestingly, the most pronounced change was noted in the consistent use of relaxation techniques, adopted by 60% of participants as reported during final debriefings. Conversely, only 45% of participants showed a marked reduction in overtly aggressive behavior, suggesting that while emotional regulation strategies were internalized, translating these gains into behavior change in all contexts may require longer or more intensive intervention.

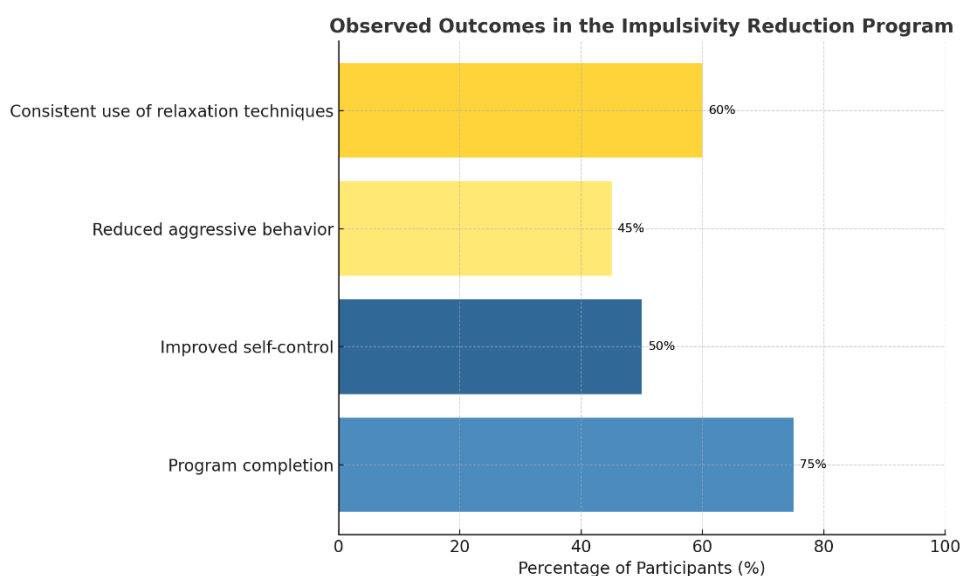


Figure 1. Observed outcomes in the impulsivity reduction program

This diagram illustrates the percentage distribution of observed outcomes among the 65 participants in the impulsivity reduction program. The highest proportion was recorded for program completion, with 75% of inmates attending and finishing all scheduled sessions. Improvements in self-control were noted in 50% of participants, as reflected in reduced impulsive responses and greater ability to pause before reacting to provocation. Consistent use of relaxation techniques, such as controlled breathing and guided imagery, was reported by 60% of participants, indicating successful transfer of skills beyond the group sessions. The lowest proportion (45%) was observed for reductions in overt aggressive behavior, highlighting that while

emotional regulation improved for many inmates, observable behavioral change may require more time or a combination of complementary interventions.

These findings indicate that while short-term behavioral programs can yield meaningful improvements in self-regulation and coping skills, aggression reduction may be a more resistant target requiring sustained follow-up. The observed high completion rate highlights the feasibility of structured psychological programs even in maximum-security facilities, provided that interventions are well facilitated and participants are supported throughout the process.

5. Discussion

The findings from this analysis indicate that structured psychological interventions can achieve meaningful engagement even in the demanding context of a maximum-security facility. The 75% completion rate suggests that inmates were motivated to participate and able to sustain involvement when interventions were delivered in a consistent and professionally supported manner. This level of participation is especially encouraging given the challenges typically associated with maintaining engagement in correctional programs and is consistent with research linking retention to more favorable behavioral outcomes (Kjærvik et al., 2024).

A salient observation is the difference between gains in emotional regulation—evidenced by improvements in self-control and the adoption of relaxation strategies—and the more modest reduction in observable aggression. This finding suggests that internal skill acquisition does not automatically translate into behavioral change in high-stress environments. Systematic reviews of anger-management interventions have similarly noted that skill generalization remains a significant challenge, requiring ongoing reinforcement and opportunities to practice techniques in realistic settings (Pedrola-Pons et al., 2024).

From an educational standpoint, the practicum provided an important platform for experiential learning. The psychology student was able to document behavioral indicators of progress, reflect on the group dynamics, and integrate theoretical frameworks with clinical observation. This process was guided by continuous supervision, which not only ensured adherence to ethical standards but also promoted the development of professional judgment and self-awareness—skills essential for future practice in forensic and clinical psychology.

6. Recommendation

Building on these findings, several practical steps can be taken to strengthen psychological services in correctional settings. Increasing program duration or offering periodic booster sessions could help consolidate emotional regulation skills and support the transfer of these abilities to real-life prison interactions. Close collaboration with custodial staff may further enhance generalization by creating opportunities for inmates to practice self-regulation strategies in everyday situations.

For professional training, structured reflection and ongoing supervision should remain central components of student practicums. These elements not only ensure ethical practice but also equip future psychologists with the resilience, critical thinking, and clinical decision-making skills needed to navigate complex prison dynamics.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal follow-up to assess the durability of change beyond the program's immediate conclusion and to identify factors that moderate effectiveness, such as personality traits, sentence length, and institutional climate. Comparative studies conducted across multiple facilities could also strengthen the evidence base by revealing whether these interventions perform similarly in diverse settings and cultural contexts.

7. General Conclusion

This study demonstrates that psychological interventions can be meaningfully implemented in a maximum-security environment and that inmates are willing to engage when programs are structured, consistent, and professionally supported. The improvements observed in self-control and the adoption of coping strategies indicate that change is possible even in highly restrictive settings.

At the same time, the more limited reduction in overt aggression highlights the need for sustained reinforcement and real-life practice opportunities to translate internal gains into consistent behavioral outcomes. These insights underline the importance of designing interventions that go beyond skills acquisition and integrate opportunities for application within the daily prison routine. The dual perspective offered by this study—combining clinical supervision with the experiential learning of a psychology student—adds a unique contribution to the literature. It illustrates

how carefully structured practica can deepen professional competence while simultaneously generating valuable observational data for program evaluation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that continued refinement of psychological interventions, combined with robust professional training and ongoing research, can improve inmate well-being, reduce institutional risk, and ultimately contribute to safer, more rehabilitative correctional environments.

References

- Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2017). *The psychology of criminal conduct* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, J. S. (2011). The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model: Does adding the Good Lives Model contribute to effective crime prevention? *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 38(7), 735–755.
- Beaudry, G., Yu, R., Långström, N., & Fazel, S. (2021). Effectiveness of interventions in prison to reduce recidivism after release: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(9), 759–773.
- Chasciar, D. R., Radu, D., Bălăsoiu, M., & Dumitrescu, A. (2025). Determinante ale reintegrării sociale post-penitenciare în România/Determinants of post-penitentiary social reintegration in Romania. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1484889.
- Council of Europe. (2023). *European prison rules*. Council of Europe Publishing. <https://rm.coe.int/09000016809ee581>.
- Crînguș, C.-M., & Le, T. K. D. (2023). Profil psihologic al deținuților din penitenciarele din România/A psychological profile of prisoners in Romanian correctional facilities. *Anthropological Researches and Studies*, 13(1), 122–139.
- Fazel, S., Wolf, A., Geddes, J. R., & Hayes, A. J. (2025). Bridging assessment and treatment for repeat suicidality in prison. *BMJ Mental Health*, 28(1), e301280.
- Haney, C. (2018). The psychological impact of incarceration: Implications for post-prison adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 73(3), 388–404.
- Kjærvik, S. L., Grøndahl, P., Mykletun, A., & Rypdal, K. (2024). A meta-analytic review of anger management activities in correctional settings. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 104, 102326.
- Klapow, M. C., Jennings, R., Alvarez, P., Li, W., & Thompson, J. (2025). The effectiveness of positive psychology-based interventions in prisons: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–16.
- Konrad, N., Daigle, M. S., Daniel, A. E., Dear, G. E., Frottier, P., Hayes, L. M., Kerkhof, A., Liebling, A., & Sarchiapone, M. (2007). Preventing suicide in prisons, part I: Recommendations from the International Association for Suicide Prevention Task Force on Suicide in Prisons. *Crisis*, 28(3), 113–121.

- Lipsey, M. W., Landenberger, N. A., & Wilson, S. J. (2007). Effects of cognitive-behavioral programs for criminal offenders. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 3(6).
- Meijers, J., Harte, J. M., Meynen, G., & Cuijpers, P. (2023). Impulsivity interventions for offenders: A meta-review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 70, 101795.
- Pedrola-Pons, A., García-Molina, P., Martínez-Sánchez, C., & Ruiz-Pérez, M. (2024). Efficiency of psychological interventions in the prevention of suicidal and self-injurious behaviours in prison: A systematic review. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 89, 101922.
- Popa, E. (2019). Rolul programelor psihosociale derulate în penitenciare/The role of psychosocial programs carried out in penitentiaries. *New Trends in Psychology*, 1(2), 34–48. <https://dj.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/NTP/article/view/81/363>.
- Saxena, K., Miller, J., Huang, L., & Becker, R. (2024). Understanding the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy on offenders. *Journal of Correctional Psychology*, 15(4), 231–245.
- Slade, K., Andrews, M., Patel, R., & Wong, T. (2025). Suicide prevention following conviction within the criminal justice system: A combined initiative trial. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16, 1501647.
- Smith, A., Jordan, L., Rahman, S., & Clarke, T. (2024). Revisiting the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural approaches in criminal justice: An updated systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 20(5), e1425.
- Ward, T., & Brown, M. (2021). Moral repair and offender rehabilitation: A strengths-based approach. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 27(6), 539–557.
- World Health Organization. (2007). *Preventing suicide in jails and prisons*. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43678>.