



PUNITIVE AND RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN THE GREEK CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: AN INNOVATIVE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLICE OFFICERS, JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the potential for the rehabilitation of prisoners within the Greek correctional system, based on the views of practising professionals (police officers and youth probation officers) and social science students. Using a mixed-methods approach (quantitative research via questionnaires and qualitative research via semi-structured interviews), the study reveals strong scepticism regarding the effectiveness of prison as a means of rehabilitation. The findings highlight that overcrowding, which stands at 127 per cent, and adverse living conditions transform correctional facilities into places of 're-education' in crime rather than rehabilitation. Particular emphasis is placed on the differences in attitudes between professional groups, with youth probation officers adopting a clearly less punitive approach compared to police officers. The study concludes that there is a need to adopt restorative models, along the lines of the Scandinavian systems, with the aim of protecting the rights of detainees and ensuring their effective social rehabilitation. The study contributes to an under-researched area, as it is one of very few pieces of research to systematically and comparatively document the views of serving police officers and juvenile probation officers in Greece, populations to whom research access is, by its very nature, particularly difficult.

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INTRODUCTION

Key criminological theories, such as classicism, positivism or critical criminology, differ markedly in their understanding of the concept of punishment and the purpose it serves in society. The deprivation of an individual's liberty – apart from the death penalty where it is still imposed – undoubtedly constitutes the most severe enforcement of public order against an offender, aiming both at their rehabilitation and at safeguarding the legal rights of citizens who have been harmed or may become victims of their deviant behaviour. However, conditions of detention have always differed and continue to differ significantly between states, meaning that the correctional approach to crime is not uniform, even within the European

area. In Greece in particular, prisons have been plagued in recent years by overcrowding and poor living conditions, with the result that protests and riots by prisoners demanding reform of the prison system are not uncommon. On the other hand, imprisonment, whilst a harsh measure, is provided for by law, and its imposition by the judicial authorities is often the only way to protect the community from the illegal activities of criminal groups or individuals. Given these circumstances, is rehabilitation possible in prison, both in our country and in general? Officials within the criminal justice system – police officers and youth probation officers – as well as social science students, i.e. professionals who are currently called upon or will be called upon in the future to implement the institutional framework, were asked to answer this question. The research was carried out through the distribution of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and its findings demonstrate that rehabilitation in prison is particularly difficult, not only in Greece – where it suffers from a multitude of shortcomings – but also in general.

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Sentences and detention in Greece

In Greece, the deprivation of citizens' liberty, apart from offences committed in flagrante delicto, takes place within the framework of pre-trial detention (pre-trial custody), which is imposed when there is strong evidence of guilt and it is deemed that the accused is a flight risk or likely to commit further offences, as well as when custodial sentences are imposed by the competent criminal courts. Until 2019, when Law 4619 introduced the new Criminal Code, detention was also a form of custodial sentence, imposed for minor offences; this has now been abolished (Papadamakis, 2019; Charalampakis, 2014).

Overcrowding, informal hierarchies and living conditions in Greek prisons

The General Secretariat for Anti-Crime Policy of the Ministry of Citizen Protection publishes detailed data every fortnight on our correctional facilities and their prisoner capacity (Ministry of Citizen Protection, 2026). An analysis of this data reveals that, over time and with fluctuating rates, there is overcrowding in our prisons. Specifically, on 2 February 2026, the date of this study, the number of prisoners in Greek prisons stood at 13,629 compared to a total capacity of 10,763, resulting in an average occupancy rate of 127 per cent.

If we focus exclusively on the institutions to which male convicted criminals or remand prisoners are sent, we observe that the overcrowding rate may be much higher, as correctional institutions such as agricultural prisons, women's prisons and health, mental health and rehabilitation centres have occupancy rates of less than 100 per cent, thereby reducing the overall average. Notably, the prisons in Komotini and Korydallos have occupancy rates of 217.28 per cent and 165.22 per cent respectively, whilst in the youth detention centres in Avlona and Volos, the number of inmates is double the intended capacity, with overcrowding rates of 197.7 per cent and 227.78 per cent respectively (Ministry of Citizen Protection, 2026).

At the same time, in attempting a human geography of Greek prisons, we observe that the proportion of foreign nationals in custody from 2009 to the present day is higher than that of Greek nationals. More specifically, in 1984 foreign prisoners accounted for 14.9 per cent, in 1992 for 22.3 per cent, in 2000 to 48.4 per cent, whilst from 2009 onwards they have consistently exceeded 50 per cent, reaching as high as 63 per cent in certain periods (Stoukas, 2023). There is also an 'invisible' overrepresentation of Roma, who, whilst accounting for no more than 2.5 per cent of the total population (Divani, 2001), account for 30 per cent of Greek nationals in Korydallos Prison and 11 per cent of the total prison population (Asimakopoulos, 2021).

Furthermore, there are socio-economic inequalities amongst prisoners, which are further entrenched by the existence of informal hierarchies and unwritten rules of law, imposed by the more powerful prisoners upon the more vulnerable. At the top of the informal hierarchy in an adult prison are leaders of powerful criminal organisations and 'seasoned' repeat-offender prisoners with a wide network of associates, whilst even in juvenile prisons, 'seniority' commands greater respect (Aloskofis & Panagos, 2025; Vidali, 2019).

At the same time, the multicultural nature of prisons plays a significant role in the formation of informal groups based on ethno-cultural identities. This informal hierarchy is sometimes

exploited by prison administrations with the aim of achieving a semblance of 'order', whilst distorting the purposes of the sentence and strengthening organised criminal networks. These circumstances set negative examples for prisoners, particularly younger ones, creating serious obstacles to their smooth reintegration (Aloskofis & Panagos, 2025).

Furthermore, with regard to correctional facilities in Greece, in 2022–2023, a Special Report was carried out by the Greek Ombudsman in its capacity as the National Preventive Mechanism against Torture and Ill-Treatment, involving on-site inspections at numerous prisons. The report states that overcrowding, staff shortages, inadequate healthcare, high levels of intimidation and violence amongst prisoners, difficulties in accessing education and inadequate infrastructure remain persistent problems in Greek prisons (Ombudsman, 2024). These findings are consistent with a corresponding report by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) on Greece (Council of Europe, 2022).

Living conditions in prisons are a key issue on which the state is taking action by maintaining or establishing new correctional facilities – a prime example being the forthcoming relocation of Korydallos Prison to Aspropyrgos – whilst the recent amendments made by Law 5187/2025 to the Code of Criminal Procedure, concerning the electronic monitoring of prisoners (electronic tagging), are expected to help alleviate overcrowding and facilitate the rehabilitation of prisoners. A key issue, however, remains equipping them with skills through education: the operation of primary and secondary schools and Second Chance Schools within prisons, access to higher education, distance learning for student-prisoners, educational leave, the opportunity to sit examinations and participate in vocational training programmes, as well as the awarding of scholarships by the University of Greece to enable prisoners to enrol on undergraduate programmes (Misyrlis, 2020; Misyrlis, 2021).

The research

Aim of the research and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate and conduct a comparative analysis of the perceptions of serving law enforcement professionals (police officers), welfare workers (juvenile probation officers) and social science students regarding restitution and rehabilitation within the criminal justice system. The research focuses on the possibility of rehabilitating prisoners within the Greek prison system and assesses the need to move from punitive to restorative models of justice.

The specific research questions investigated are as follows:

- a) What are the views of professionals and future social science practitioners (students) regarding the correctional role of prison, and to what extent do they consider imprisonment to be an effective means of reintegration?
- b) How do participants assess the current conditions of the Greek correctional system (overcrowding, adverse conditions) in relation to the rehabilitation or 're-education' of offenders?
- c) What are the main differences in perceptions between professionals in the criminal justice system and social

science students regarding the adoption of punitive or restorative approaches, and between police officers and youth probation officers on the same issue?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and to answer the research questions, primary research data were utilised, which were collected by the researchers during both the quantitative and qualitative phases, all of which took place in 2025. The choice of this mixed methodology was not arbitrary, but is explained by the principle of triangulation, whereby the combination of quantitative and qualitative data effectively allows for the cross-checking and mutual confirmation of findings, thereby strengthening the validity of the research's overall conclusions. Quantitative research undoubtedly provided a broad and generalisable snapshot of the sample's perceptions, whilst the qualitative research, precisely because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the professionals' own interpretations and experiences, complemented and enriched the quantitative findings interpretatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants

The total sample for the quantitative study comprised 246 individuals. More specifically, it comprised 167 professionals from the Greek criminal justice system (128 police officers and 39 juvenile probation officers) as well as 79 social sciences students (29 from Panteion University and 50 from the University of Patras).

The selection of participants for this study was not carried out using probability sampling, but by combining, on the one hand, elements of purposive sampling (purposive sampling), as the study was aimed at specific professional groups directly relevant to the subject under investigation, and, on the other hand, elements of convenience sampling, given that the participation of respondents was ultimately based on the voluntary response of those who were available.

The inclusion criteria were unquestionably professional status (police officer or juvenile probation officer) and active service at the time the research was conducted, whilst retired officers and probation officers who worked exclusively in Social Welfare Services were excluded. Consequently, the findings of the study should be interpreted with due caution regarding their generalisability to the population as a whole.

The average age of the participating professionals was 43.2 years, whilst 64.7 per cent were 'men' and 35.3 per cent 'women', with an average length of service of 21 years. With regard to the student questionnaire, their average age was 20.8 years; 12.7 per cent of participants were 'men', 86.1 per cent were 'women', whilst 1.2 per cent selected 'other' as their gender.

Meanwhile, for juvenile probation officers—who constitute a professional group that is clearly understaffed—the sample for the quantitative survey comprised thirty-nine juvenile probation officers, a small number overall, but which is nevertheless considered fully representative as it accounts for almost half of their total number.

Owing to the fact that qualitative research allows the researcher to explore in depth issues initially defined, as well as to

highlight new aspects of the subject under investigation which emerge from the respondents' experiences and which may not have been predetermined in the initial of the research process (Iosifidis, 2008). Social science students were excluded from the qualitative research due to their limited practical experience in the subject under investigation. Consequently, the qualitative research was carried out with a sample consisting exclusively of twenty professionals from the criminal justice system (ten police officers and ten juvenile probation officers).

Data Collection Materials

Quantitative Research Tool

A structured questionnaire was used as the methodological tool for the quantitative research, whilst for its design, scales relating to restorative justice that had been used in studies in Greece and abroad were consulted; these formed the theoretical basis for the development of the questionnaires: **the Restorative Justice Attitudes Scale** (Okimoto et al., 2012), **the Crime and Punishment Attitudes Scale** (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011), **the Social Values and Justice Preferences scales** (Schwartz, 2012) and **the Procedural Justice Scale** (Blander & Tyler, 2003). The relevant questions were translated into Greek and subjected to a back-translation process (back-translation) to ensure their linguistic equivalence; however, a full process of psychometric calibration or validation of these instruments within the Greek population was not actually carried out, as this was not the aim of the present study; the tools were utilised exclusively as a theoretical and research basis for the development of the two questionnaires, tailored to the study's research questions. Specifically, two questionnaires were developed: the first aimed at professionals within the criminal justice system (police officers and juvenile probation officers) and the second at social sciences students at Panteion University and the University of Patras. The questionnaires were predominantly on a 1–5 Likert scale, with the questions organised into two sub-scales: punitive and restorative attitudes. It should be noted that the questionnaires were anonymous, and before participants began completing them, they were provided with an information letter from the researcher explaining the purpose of the study, requesting their voluntary participation and informing them of their right to withdraw from the process at any time (Babbie, 2018). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.896 for the professionals' questionnaire and 0.857 for the students' questionnaire, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Qualitative Research Tool

The interview is one of the most widely used methods for collecting qualitative data in the social sciences, enabling the researcher not only to explore issues they have initially defined in greater depth but also to uncover new aspects of the subject under investigation, which naturally emerge from the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees themselves and may not have been predetermined in the initial research design (Iosifidis, 2008). In this context, in order to investigate the perceptions of police officers and juvenile probation officers, the use of semi-structured interviews was deemed the most appropriate methodological tool for collecting the research data for this study (Denscombe, 2003; Chorianopoulos, 2006), as these combine a pre-determined structure with the necessary degree of flexibility. It must be

recognised, however, that when conducting an interview, the researcher can never be a completely neutral data collector; this necessitates careful management of the process and vigilance regarding subjectivity, both on the part of the researcher and the interviewees (Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Iosifidis, 2008; Lydaki, 2001; Mason, 2009).

To carry this out, two separate interview guides were drawn up: one for the interviews with police officers and one for those with youth probation officers. Although the sequence of questions as set out in the respective guide was generally followed, in some cases, depending on the interviewee's rank, position or length of service, minor adjustments were made to the questions in order to produce more comprehensive primary data (Psarrou & Zafeiropoulos, 2004; Schnell, Hill & Esser, 2014), with the researcher aiming to minimise intervention during the interviews as much as possible, whilst also striving to faithfully convey the participants' personal style when transcribing the material.

Prior to each interview, the interviewee received a letter from the researcher in good time explaining the purpose of the research; this letter also outlined the confidentiality of the data, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the process at any time. Following the completion of each interview, there was a brief open discussion, which served as a process of reflection on the preceding interview, given that the thoughts, impressions and feelings of both the researcher and the participants constitute, in themselves, important research material, which is evaluated and ultimately taken into account in the analysis (Flick, 2017).

Research Process

Pilot Study

Furthermore, prior to conducting the quantitative and qualitative research, a pilot study of the research instruments was carried out on a small portion of the respective sample, with the aim of testing the research instruments and identifying any potential weaknesses and shortcomings (Creswell, J. & Creswell, D. 2018) and minor corrections were implemented.

Main Phase, Permits and Ethics

In order to carry out the investigation, it was necessary to obtain the relevant authorisations; specifically, in order to conduct the investigation amongst police personnel, it was essential to obtain a registration permit from the Greek Police Headquarters, which was granted to the investigator following his application and the submission of all the necessary supporting documents.

Furthermore, the research proposal was approved by the General Assembly of the Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work at the University of Patras prior to the commencement of data collection.

In both parts of the research, the voluntary participation of the respondents, following their being informed of the purpose and procedure of the research, constituted their consent to the use of the data within the context of this study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

For the processing (statistical analysis) of the research data collected from the questionnaires of the quantitative survey, which were aimed at professionals within our criminal justice system (police officers and youth probation officers) and social science students, the IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 28 was used. To investigate the research questions and hypotheses, the relevant categorical variables were paired and a cross-tabulation analysis (Cross-Tabs Analysis), with the chi-square (χ^2) test being used to determine the statistical association between the variables under examination, at a level of statistical significance of $p \leq 0.05$ (Iseris, 2016).

Furthermore, prior to the final selection of appropriate statistical tests, a normality test was carried out on the variables using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, which clearly indicated the need for non-parametric tests. To compare the two independent samples for ordinal-scale variables or those with a non-normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney (U) test was also used; this is the non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for independent samples (Mann & Whitney, 1947). Furthermore, in addition to statistical significance (p-value), the practical significance of the findings was also assessed using effect size measures, specifically Cramer's V, to measure the strength of the association in the contingency tables, as well as the Rank-Biserial Correlation (r) to determine the magnitude of differences in the Mann-Whitney comparisons, so that the interpretation of differences between the study groups is not limited solely to statistical significance. In cross-tabulations where the minimum expected cell frequency fell below 5, Fisher's Exact Test was used in place of the chi-squared test, as it does not rely on this assumption.

Finally, it should be noted that, given the large number of bivariate comparisons—that is, contingency tables—carried out as part of this quantitative study, no correction for multiple comparisons, such as the Bonferroni correction, was applied. This fact inevitably increases the likelihood of a Type I error, that is, the erroneous rejection of the null hypothesis in any of the individual comparisons, a factor which should be taken into account when interpreting the individual statistically significant findings of the study.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, as this was deemed the most appropriate method for the purposes of the study. The transcribed interviews were initially coded manually into individual categories (open coding), which were then were grouped into broader thematic areas, such as the punitive nature of imprisonment, the psychosocial effects of incarceration and living conditions within correctional facilities. The approach to the material was, for the most part, inductive, given that these themes emerged naturally from the content of the interviews themselves and not exclusively from the predefined categories of the interview guide (Denscombe, 2003; Iosifidis, 2008).

RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

With regard to when the role of the criminal justice system in our country is best fulfilled, we observe that less than 11 per cent of participating police officers and juvenile probation officers propose, as the optimal solution, the imposition of a

custodial sentence on the offender in a correctional facility in order to ensure the protection of society as a whole from their unlawful actions. The majority of respondents, 65.9 per cent, believe that the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled when it contributes to improving the victim's life and lays the foundations for the offender's rehabilitation, whilst the second most common response among criminal justice system officials, at almost 23 per cent is that the criminal justice system best fulfils its role when the person who commits a crime receives the sentence prescribed by law, as this deters them from committing a further criminal act. This position clearly represents a more punitive approach, which, however, does not necessarily entail the imposition of a custodial sentence on the offender – an option which, as mentioned, was chosen by only 10.8 per cent of participants. Furthermore, a negligible proportion of the sample, less than one per cent, argued that the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled when the victim's needs are met on a material and emotional level, through compensation and moral redress, essentially disregarding the handling of the offender.

If we attempt to focus on a more specific analysis of the sample of professionals within the criminal justice system in Greece, distinguishing the responses of juvenile probation officers from those of police officers, we observe that none of the juvenile probation officers who took part in the survey did not identify the imposition of detention on the offender as the optimal solution, whereas among police officers, this position was proposed as the optimal solution by 14 per cent of the survey participants. This discrepancy clearly indicates a more punitive approach on the part of police officers compared to juvenile probation officers with regard to dealing with juvenile offenders, which, to a certain extent, is understandable given the nature of the police profession. However, in any case, this punitive stance – that is, the imposition of a custodial sentence on the offender to ensure the protection of society as a whole – is not endorsed by professionals within our criminal justice system, since even the 14 per cent of police officers who propose this as the optimal solution—whilst a significant and measurable proportion—nonetheless clearly represents a minority view amongst the professionals in our criminal justice system.

As regards when the role of the criminal justice system in our country is best fulfilled, we note that a proportion marginally greater than 10 per cent of the students taking part in the survey propose, as the optimal solution, the imposition of a custodial sentence on the offender in a correctional facility in order to ensure the protection of society as a whole from their unlawful actions. The majority of respondents in this case too – 62 per cent – that the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled when it contributes to improving the victim's life and lays the foundations for the offender's rehabilitation, whilst the second most common response among future professionals in the criminal justice system, at a rate of almost 23% of the sample, is that the criminal justice system fulfils its role best when the person who commits a crime receives the sentence prescribed by law, as this deters them from committing further offences. At the same time, approximately 5 per cent of the student sample argue that the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled when the victim's needs are met on a material and emotional level, through compensation and moral redress,

whilst essentially disregarding the offender's treatment.

This study also investigated whether there is a statistically significant difference between the views of professionals within the criminal justice system (police officers – youth probation officers) and social science students regarding the choice of criminal justice model. In other words, the study investigated whether professional status, as well as the experience or knowledge derived from it, does or does not influence the views of the two samples (professionals within the criminal justice system and social science students) regarding the question of which procedures – punitive or restorative – best fulfil the role of the criminal justice system. The results are presented in the tables below.

Hypothesis (H₁): There is a statistically significant difference between students and professionals regarding their choice of justice model.

Table 1. Views on how the criminal justice system best fulfils its role, by participant status (N=246)

Response	Students (N=79)	Professionals (N=167)	Total (N=246)
A. Imposition of the pre-scribed penalty (deterrence against further offences)	18 (22.8%)	38 (22.8%)	56 (22.8%)
B. Meeting the victim's needs (material/moral redress)	4 (5.1%)	1 (0.6%)	5 (2.0%)
C. Imprisonment of the perpetrator to protect society as a whole	8 (10.1%)	18 (10.8%)	26 (10.6%)
D. Improving the victim's life and rehabilitating the offender	49 (62.0%)	110 (65.9%)	159 (64.6%)
Total	79 (100%)	167 (100%)	246 (100%)

Table 2. Results of the chi-squared test (Characteristic × Views on the role of the criminal justice system)

Statistical test	Value	s.e.	p
Pearson χ^2 ^a	5.403	3	0.145
Likelihood ratio	5.003	3	0.172
Linear Relevance	0.242	1	0.623
N	246		

^a Minimum expected frequency = 1.61 (see relevant note below)

in the text).

The asymptotic significance is 0.145, which is greater than 0.05; therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected, and it is concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between the category (Student/Professional) and preference regarding the criminal justice model. Put simply, the two groups (students and professionals) think similarly, or their differences are random with regard to how they believe the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled. Therefore, despite the undoubted professional experience of the professionals participating in the survey (police officers and youth probation officers), their views are not far removed from those of social science students, a finding that may indicate a shared culture or a common recognition that the criminal justice system must have a dual purpose: namely, to aim both at improving the victim's life and at rehabilitating the offender.

It is worth noting, however, that in this particular cross-tabulation, 25 per cent of the cells – that is, 2 out of 8 – had an expected frequency of less than 5 (with a minimum expected frequency of 1.61), a fact which partially undermines the basic validity assumption of the Pearson chi-squared test. This result, therefore, may be interpreted with some caution, possibly in conjunction with alternative tests, such as Fisher's Exact Test, which are undoubtedly more suitable in cases of small expected frequencies.

From the overall results of the quantitative survey, it is clear that the views of the two samples do not differ regarding how the criminal justice system can most effectively fulfil its role, favouring rehabilitation over punitive measures, but there is also an overall divergence of views among the professionals surveyed within our criminal justice system, as well as among social science students, regarding the imposition of imprisonment on an offender in order to ensure the protection of society as a whole from their unlawful actions. Around nine in ten respondents indirectly advocate for in-prison or out-of-court solutions that focus on improving the victim's life, the reintegration of the offender and the protection of the community, whilst clearly distancing themselves from the imposition of imprisonment on the offender – a view which, where expressed, is clearly a minority position.

RESULTS: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

In the qualitative research, during the individual interviews, a more targeted effort was made to investigate whether practitioners within the criminal justice system in Greece, that is, the professionals who are called upon daily to apply the institutional framework, consider rehabilitation in prison to be effective. The question was not posed as it was in the quantitative study – that is, as a multiple-choice question amongst others – but as a direct question to each interviewed police officer or youth probation officer.

The results of the qualitative research showed that all the police officers who took part in the study generally believe that prison does not reform offenders; on the contrary, it reinforces the delinquent behaviour of prisoners after their release. In particular, eight out of ten police officers explicitly supported this view, whilst two out of ten expressed some reservations, namely that a small percentage of prisoners might be reformed, though they too concurred with the general view

that rehabilitation in prison is not effective. Below are some representative responses from the police officers who took part in the survey.

- *“To date, and based on studies that have been carried out, there have been no results in terms of rehabilitation... Yes, people who have ended up back in prison... I'd say 99.9 per cent.”*
- *“In most cases, prison is like a postgraduate course... The conditions inside are very harsh because the inmates are treated very badly by the other prisoners who are inside and hold the upper hand. Prisons are sick!”*
- *“My experience has shown that offenders who go to prison... as soon as they're released, they commit crimes again... And many of them commit even more serious offences. In other words, if they used to commit thefts, they'll now turn to robberies. If they used to act alone, they'll now organise themselves.”*
- *“My view is that of the juveniles who go to prison, a very large proportion will return having been retrained and will have acquired expertise in many other areas apart from those for which they may have been sent to prison – things which will perhaps help them to be more adaptable and more cautious in their future life in society. Of course, I do not wish to generalise; some may well come to their senses, but unfortunately my experience shows us that those who have served time in prison will, to some extent, end up back there.”*

The youth probation officers who took part in the survey also argued that rehabilitation in prison cannot be effective. In fact, the majority of them believe that rehabilitation cannot be achieved through imprisonment or detention, viewing incarceration in general as the wrong measure. Below are some of their responses.

- *“I don't think rehabilitation takes place in prison. Prison serves a purely punitive purpose, at least as it operates in Greece. The positive aspect is that some prisons have schools. But how do these schools operate, and on what basis? In any case, I believe that a prison cannot serve a rehabilitative purpose, but only a punitive one.”*
- *“... Kassavetia may currently have three times the population it is designed to accommodate. Avlona is a prison where, every time I've been in, I've come out ill. The cells there are something else; you can only stay there on psychiatric medication. If you're not on psychiatric medication – antidepressants or whatever – a normal person simply can't cope there.”*
- *“Two words, just now, that you mentioned, which are completely at odds with each other. I mean, rehabilitation and prison just don't go together...”*
- *“All prison can do is drive a teenager like that into depression. It has no positive effect whatsoever. I've seen far too many children go into prison and come out a complete wreck.”*
- *“...I'm not in favour of prison, but there are some cases where it's been shown that if they'd stayed out, it would have been utterly destructive for their lives and their fu-*

ture. And prison, to a certain extent – that is, the structure provided by the correctional facility – has helped. These are exceptions, however. I believe that we should try to reintegrate these children through other kinds of educational interventions... ”.

Summarising the responses of officials within the criminal justice system to the qualitative research, the key points that emerged were the punitive nature of prison and the psychosocial consequences it entails, whilst it is clear not only for minors but also in general, that prison does not reform. The prevailing view amongst police officers is that the imprisonment of an offender in a correctional facility in our country not only fails to reform them but, on the contrary, entangles them in crime by teaching them methods and processes with which they were previously unfamiliar or in which they had not specialised. Juvenile probation officers focus more on the psychological burden that prison places on a minor, whilst arguing that rehabilitation and imprisonment cannot coexist, referring not exclusively to Greek prisons but to prisons in general. In other words, they consider that the rehabilitation and reintegration of the offender through the serving of custodial sentences is, as a rule, not possible regardless of the living conditions during their imprisonment.

DISCUSSION

The research investigated the perceptions of police officers, youth probation officers and social science students regarding rehabilitation and correctional justice within the Greek penal system, namely to what extent imprisonment is considered an effective means of reintegration. With regard to the first two research questions, the findings clearly demonstrate that both practising professionals and future social science practitioners believe that Greek prisons do not reform; that is to say, they do not provide prisoners with the tools that would contribute to their smooth reintegration into society. A telling example is one interviewee's remark that prison functions as a 'postgraduate course' in crime, an image that realistically captures the Greek prison system's inability to fulfil its rehabilitative role.

Imprisonment, beyond the protection it may offer to the community, profoundly alters an individual's characteristics through 'institutionalisation', which is associated with a reduced quality of life, a lack of adequate stimuli and emotional motivation, and adaptive 'minimal expectation' strategies (Goffman, 1961; Tsalikoglou, 1989). The prisoner is gradually transformed from a citizen with rights and obligations into an individual cut off from the wider social environment. If we add to this the structural weaknesses of the Greek prison system – overcrowding, staff shortages, inadequate healthcare, high levels of intimidation and violence amongst prisoners, difficulties with education and inadequate infrastructure – as documented in the reports of the Greek Ombudsman (2024) and the Council of Europe (2022), it is easy to see that the symptoms of institutionalisation are intensifying even further, providing empirical confirmation of the participants' negative attitude towards the rehabilitative role of prisons in our country.

Of particular significance is the fact that this finding does not originate from the prisoners themselves or from those in their immediate circle, but from professionals – both current and trainee – within our penal system, that is, from individuals with

professional training and experience who are called upon daily to apply the institutional framework, or from young academics who will be called upon to apply it in the future. The research findings thus stem from a sample which, through the research itself, indirectly acknowledges that its contribution to a system for the reintegration of prisoners fails to achieve the desired outcome. It is indeed noteworthy that even police officers – who have historically been the main pillar of law enforcement in our country and more broadly – largely acknowledge the failure of incarceration. The attitudes of professionals within our criminal justice system towards imprisonment – and particularly those of police officers – reinforce the argument that the crisis in the Greek prison system is now widely acknowledged amongst its staff.

This finding is fully consistent with the international literature: the inability of closed prisons to rehabilitate offenders, combined with the social exclusion experienced by ex-prisoners due to their stigmatisation (Kasapoglou, Koros & Koulouris, 2021), is described in criminological terms as the vicious cycle of the 'revolving door' and is consistent with Labelling Theory, according to which social stigmatisation pushes the accused to adopt the 'criminal identity' attributed to them by society, making their reoffending almost inevitable (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Zafirakis, 2002). Moreover, according to Labelling Theory, delinquency is not an ontological characteristic of specific types of behaviour, but a characteristic attributed to it by society itself (Vidali, 2022). In Greece, where the system focuses more on punishment than on rehabilitation, recidivism rates among former convicts are close to 60 per cent (Region of Attica, 2024).

In contrast, Norway has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world, at around 20 per cent, whilst in the other Nordic countries the recidivism rate also remains low, ranging from 24 per cent to 31 per cent (Manouka, 2021; Ragnar, 2010), in stark contrast to the United States, where recidivism rates reach or exceed 70–80 per cent within a few years of release (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). The Scandinavian prison system is based on Restorative Justice, with the fundamental rationale that the deprivation of liberty itself constitutes punishment, whilst life in prison should resemble life in the outside world as closely as possible – with access to the internet, libraries, organised gyms, a private room and a requirement to work to earn money within the prison (Artinopoulou, 2010; Tsunakou-Rousia, 2019). In contrast, in the Greek context, as evidenced by prisoners' testimonies, practices driven by expediency continue to exist – such as vindictive transfers, unjustified withdrawal of leave, and anxiety over daily wages – which do not effectively promote reintegration, in contrast to the Scandinavian model, where everything is regulated directly by law rather than by considerations of expediency (Tsunakou-Rousia, 2019). The Greek reality therefore fits into a broader international pattern of failure on the part of closed correctional systems to manage both the period of imprisonment and the 'post-release' period effectively.

With regard to the third research question, no statistically significant difference emerged between professionals and students concerning the choice of the appropriate model of criminal justice ($p=0.145$), a finding which must, however, be interpreted with the relevant caveat mentioned in the methodology, due to the low expected frequencies in certain

cells of the relevant table. Put simply, the two groups think similarly, or their differences are random, regarding how they believe the role of the criminal justice system is best fulfilled: indeed, the proportion of those who selected the imposition of the statutory sentence as a deterrent was almost identical in both groups (22.8% among both students and professionals). The two groups therefore appear to share a common view that the system must have a dual purpose – improving the victim's life whilst simultaneously rehabilitating the offender – with nine out of ten participants, regardless of their status (89 per cent of professionals, 90 per cent of students), clearly rejecting the imposition of simple imprisonment as the optimal solution.

However, a clear distinction can be observed within the sample of professionals: not a single youth court officer chose detention as the optimal solution, compared with 14 per cent of police officers. Given the small expected frequency in this cell, Fisher's Exact Test was applied rather than the chi-squared test, yielding an approximate two-sided p-value of 0.008, which is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (Cramer's $V = 0.308$, indicating moderate practical significance of this difference). This discrepancy can be understood in light of the different nature of each group's encounter with crime: police officers come into contact with the 'immediate' consequences of the criminal act and with the victim themselves, that is, during the phase of retributive justice, whilst youth probation officers focus on the care and rehabilitation of the offender (rehabilitative/restorative justice) at a much later stage of the criminal proceedings, usually without any contact with the victim. This finding is consistent with the international literature, which confirms a consistent difference in mindset depending on the professional role of each group, as well as their experiences and training (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Lutze & Brody, 1999). The very small proportion of police officers who favour detention, which is empirically comparable to figures from previous years, likely reflects a sense that the justice meted out is inadequate given the seriousness of certain incidents, given that police officers are directly confronted with incidents of violence (Vidali, 2007), whilst suggesting, on the whole, a shift towards more modern, restorative approaches in Greece as well. However, neither police officers nor juvenile probation officers completely reject the need for detention in rare cases where there is no other option for the protection of the community, whilst acknowledging the onerous nature of this sanction. The restriction of liberty, moreover, is not arbitrary but is permitted by the Constitution under strict conditions, without, however, aiming to isolate the convicted person, but rather to facilitate their future reintegration into society (Supreme Court 1001/2019).

Overall, the sample's responses indicate a shift away from purely punitive models and the emergence of a new generation of prison officers with a more human-centred approach, in which the Restorative Justice model is likely to function more effectively. Reducing overcrowding in prisons and improving living and health conditions within them are therefore not only a legal obligation of the state in question, but also a demand from the officers themselves in order to carry out their work more effectively. The limited differences between police officers and juvenile probation officers could potentially be further reduced through joint training for both groups on Restorative Justice, as is, moreover, required by our current

institutional framework (Article 70 of Law 4478/2017). Greece could take a leaf out of Norway's book: consistency in the application of the law, so that its professionals too may believe in and contribute to the rehabilitation of prisoners through a more human-centred approach, recalling the view of the British criminologist Alexander Paterson, as early as 1920, that the purpose of imprisonment is rehabilitative rather than punitive in itself (Ruck, 1951). Finally, future research that also incorporates the views of the prisoners themselves or the victims of the criminal offence would help to form a more comprehensive picture regarding the issue of incarceration and the restorative process.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings, imprisonment should merely temporarily deprive the convicted person of their right to liberty, whilst at the same time guaranteeing the protection of the community. In the administration of justice, whilst it may not be strictly required, it is at least considered very important for the community to recognise this general preventive purpose of the sentence; that is to say, by imposing the 'punishment', the State seeks not only to reform a specific individual but also, through the general prevention of crime, to protect others from that person's criminal behaviour. However, there is a general perception, as also reflected in the research conducted as part of this study, that in Greece our criminal justice system has never managed to make the most of a prisoner's time in prison for their own benefit and for the benefit of society as a whole, rather than simply cramming people into prisons, who, upon their release, will be better equipped to carry out criminal acts. Prison must serve a purpose, which should be rehabilitative rather than punitive, a purpose whereby the time spent there must be put to good use for those who are detained and, by extension, for the community. In other words, the State, aiming at the rehabilitation rather than the punishment of the offender, should ensure that prisoners are deprived only of their right to liberty for the duration of their sentence, whilst it is considered appropriate to ensure that prisoners can exercise all their other rights, in line with Scandinavian systems, with the aim of their rehabilitation and reintegration.

This study also adds to the field, as it is one of very few Greek studies to systematically and comparatively document the views of serving police officers, youth probation officers and social science students on the issue of rehabilitation. Access to professional groups such as police officers and youth probation officers can be described as particularly difficult in Greece, as it requires time-consuming authorisation procedures from the relevant administrative authorities, a fact which makes the sample obtained in this study, particularly in terms of its qualitative aspect, especially valuable for future researchers in the field.

Limitations of the research

Based on the content of the research and the methodology described, certain research limitations of the study have also come to light. In particular, in order to conduct the research with police personnel, special written authorisation was required from the Greek Police Headquarters, which was granted following a relevant request and the submission of all supporting documents. At the same time, the following were excluded from the semi-structured interviews due to their

limited practical experience: social science students, who took part only in the quantitative research (questionnaires); this factor limits the scope for an in-depth analysis of their views compared with those of the professionals. Thirty-nine youth workers took part in the quantitative research; this sample is undoubtedly considered representative, as (it accounts for almost half of their total number), but is in fact small in numerical terms, a factor which may constitute a further methodological limitation.

There were also geographical limitations to the study, as the sample of students came exclusively from two academic institutions (Panteion University and the University of Patras), a factor which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalised to all social sciences students in the country. At the same time, the qualitative research interviews were conducted with ten police officers and a corresponding number of juvenile probation officers, which, whilst offering the possibility of an in-depth analysis of the data under investigation, may not provide a sufficiently large sample size to allow for statistical generalisation to the entire population of these two professional groups. Furthermore, the study focuses solely on the professional groups of police officers and juvenile probation officers, excluding other professional groups within the criminal justice system such as judges, prosecutors and prison officers, who could have contributed their professional experience to yield further meaningful results, whilst the overall understanding of the issues addressed in the research is undoubtedly limited by the lack of research data derived from the prisoners themselves or from the victims of the criminal offence.

A further limitation is undoubtedly the marked over-representation of men in the sample of law enforcement officers (64.7 per cent), which, whilst reflecting the current composition of the security forces in our country, did not, in practice, allow for further investigation of the gender variable through multivariate analysis models. Finally, the fact that the researcher himself is a serving officer of the Hellenic Police, who conducted this study, amongst others, on his colleagues, must be acknowledged as a limitation. Despite the systematic effort made to maintain investigative neutrality, as well as the process of reflection undertaken after each interview, the influence of this 'insider' (insider) research position on the degree of candour or the direction of the responses given by the participating police officers.

A further limitation is the fact that, although the questions drawn from international scales (Blander & Tyler, 2003; Okimoto et al., 2012; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Schwartz, 2012) were subjected to back-translation to ensure their linguistic equivalence, no comprehensive psychometric calibration or validation of these instruments was carried out in the Greek population, a factor which may potentially affect their conceptual equivalence.

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