

Theme : Migration, Health and Equity

Mental health of detainees in Rwanda, an experience on the field.

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- Theoretical introduction:
- Mental health of detainees is a highly sensitive public health issue. Individuals who experience incarceration are prone to suffer disproportionately from poor health, especially those belonging to disadvantaged and minority groups; disparities by race or ethnicity are largely observed (Wildeman and Wang, 2017). Health inequality between detainees and the general population are widespread and attributed to socio-economic and behavioral issues (Fazel and Baillargeon, 2011). Alcohol misuse, high rates of intravenous drug use leading to increased risk of infectious diseases and smoking deserve to be mentioned as causes of this health imbalance.
- Robust evidence exists of higher prevalence of mental disorders in detainees compared with the general population (Fazel, Hayes et al., 2016).
- Context of the study:
- Rwanda is a small country situated in central Africa and belonging to the eastern African community. The historical development of the Rwandan psychiatric system can be described in four phases (Eytan et al, 2018):
 1. The pre-colonial period (traditional approaches were the only form of mental health care).
 2. The colonial period (starting inputs of western psychiatry).
 3. The post-independence period, beginning in 1962. Construction of the sole psychiatric hospital of the country, the Caraes Ndera Teaching Hospital, in Kigali, run by the Brothers of Charity.
 4. The post-genocide period, starting after the cataclysmic genocide against the Tutsi in 1994.
- Directly after the genocide, the focus of the country was on judicial and other reconciliation initiatives. However, only one year after the end of the genocide the new regime in Rwanda instituted a mental health policy (Sabey, 2019) demonstrating recognition of the psychological burden inflicted to the people by the violence. However, there is still until now a scarcity of mental health professionals in the country and the implementation of this policy is still ongoing, especially regarding the development of forensic psychiatry.
- The University of Geneva hosts a long time cooperation with the University of Kigali, Rwanda, with, among others, a specific objective to develop a training program in mental health for Rwandan health professionals. During the years, substantial improvements took place regarding general training in psychiatry. On the contrary, the situation of forensic psychiatry is still a topic of concern (Eytan et al, 2018) due to lack of resources and of mental health legislation.
- Objectives of the last two humanitarian missions conducted on the field (2022 and 2023):
 1. Focus on the assessment of the needs in terms of mental health care for forensic patients in the psychiatric hospital of Ndera, Kigali.
 2. To build knowledge about clinical, demographic and cultural factors associated to mental health vulnerability among detainees in the region.
 3. To provide a tailored forensic psychiatry program of training and task-shifting.



Photos of the Caraes Ndera Teaching Hospital,
in Kigali,
(taken by the authors)

