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► **To cite this version:**

Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy, Benoît Coquard, Arthur Vuattoux. Incarcerated Minors and Their Health: The Lack of Data and the Risk of Institutional Stigmatization. ISA World Congress of Sociology, International sociological association (ISA), Jul 2018, Toronto, Canada. halshs-01849102

HAL Id: halshs-01849102

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01849102>

Submitted on 25 Jul 2018

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Incarcerated Minors and Their Health: The Lack of Data and the Risk of Institutional Stigmatization

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Context:

- In 2015, the French Ministry of Health suggested a study be launched on the sexual health of young people in prison.
- At any given moment, approximately 800 young minors are incarcerated.
- We met 72 young boys (n=60) and girls (n=12) in 5 French prisons.
- We also met many professionals working in prisons, coming from 4 separate professional sectors: guards, educators, teachers and health professionals.
- The goal of this research was to document the behaviour, knowledge and representations of that population in relation to HIV (and other STIs), contraception, consent, and other matters concerning their sexuality.
- In this study, we define sexuality as sexual discourse, representation and practice.
- In France, the only studies about young people and sexuality were conducted on educated young people, whereas those that we study are often dropouts from school before they begin their sexual life.
- This research was conducted by the *Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire*, by Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy, Benoît Coquard and Arthur Vuattoux.

Method:

- The young people we met were between 13 and 18 years old, with an average of 16 years old.
- 39% of their parents were unemployed, 22% worked in middle class occupations.
- A lot of these young people stopped going to the school at the beginning of the secondary school, and a lot of them had already been to prison before their current incarceration.
- It was very important for us to address the issue of young people's sexuality in prison qualitatively.
- We used in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation with minors.
- Each interview could last between 1 and 3 hours, and we didn't define sexuality or sexual health in advance.
- So, these interviews gave us the chance to speak with the minors about their personal lives, love, friendship, and, of course, of their experience with sexuality, outside and inside prison.
- Interviews were conducted face-to-face, with one of the three sociologists.
- During the interviews, our questions were about everyday life, first experiences with sexuality, sexual health and emotional aspects of sexuality.
- We spoke about everyday life in prison, but also about the place they lived outside, often in poor urban areas.
- Sometimes, they wanted to deal with the reason they went to prison, and described their life paths from the beginning of adolescence to their experiences in prison.

Goal of this paper

- In this paper, we don't want to speak about the main results of the study (which can be downloaded, in French, at the following URL: www.injep.fr).
- We would like to highlight a particular moment of the study, when we chose to discuss the first results with the relevant institutions: the French Ministry of Health, but also prison workers.
- It was important for our research team to present the results to the participants before their publication, because it allowed a real debate about the data, on the terms we used to speak about prison or about young people's sexuality.
- Our paper invites you to think about the challenge of speaking with prison workers about young people's sexuality and personal life, and about the way we can avoid, with our data, reinforcing stigmatization of the people we are studying.

The need for dissemination of knowledge amongst subjects of study

- Too often, the people we study are considered first as objects of our work, then as the audience of our analysis.
- There was no real discussion *during* the writing of our analysis with our objects of study: the contact between researchers and social actors or institutions was suspended.
- In light of the work of Michael Burawoy on "Public sociology", we think that the dissemination of knowledge is not a final point of the research process, but a step into this process.
- In our study, we decided to discuss the first results during the writing of the research report.
- Because we study both professionals and incarcerated young people, we organized two types of restitutions.
- For 6 days, we spoke, on the one hand, with professionals of all sectors.
- But on the other hand, we discussed our first results with small groups of incarcerated young people.
- Sometimes, it was the young people we met in interviews, but sometimes it was other people, more recently incarcerated.
- These discussions were very informative, because the young people had expressed their view of their generation, and not only about their own experiences.
- The fact that we situate the discussion at the group level, speaking about "incarcerated young people in general" allowed the young people we met to speak about their feelings of social exclusion compared to those what they called "the other young people".
- We understood that these "other young people" are students, educated young people, but also young white people, for incarcerated youths that self-identify as "Black" or "Arab".
- So this discussion about a study, directly with the young people that we studied, corroborates the pertinence of an analysis of their social patterns in terms of gendered, economic, and racialized experiences of youth.

The risk of reinforcement of stigmatization

- The presentation of the results to the young people we studied was important, both for the analysis and from an ethical point of view.
- The presentation to professionals was important for the same reasons, but also in order to guarantee the best possible relationship with the institutions, and in order to help future research that could be conducted in the same place.

- However, a challenge resulted from this interaction with institution, about the risk of the stigmatization of youths by professionals.
- For instance, the fact that the young minors in prison exclude themselves from the “youth” as a general category of depiction, reinforces the idea that these young people do not want to integrate themselves into society, or that they have a very binary representation of the world.
- Moreover, the subject of our study (sexuality) could expose the intimacy of these young people in a negative way.
- For instance, to speak about female prostitution could reinforce their stigmatization as “sluts”, common among professionals.
- Likewise, speaking about the difficulty for young boys to have social mobility in relation to sexuality, or to speak about their risky behavior (the fact they don’t use condoms), could reinforce their social stigmatization.

Conclusion

- To conclude, we see that the discussion of research is important for invisible and undocumented populations, like young minors in prison.
- But we must beware of the risks associated with the presentation of these results to a larger audience.
- However, to us, the benefits seem greater than the risks, and our experience shows that presenting the main results of a study to the subjects of the study before the writing of the report, leads to a better understanding of their points of view about everyday life.
- This also shows that the people that we study have a high degree of self-awareness concerning the knowledge produced about them.