

The Greek correctional system for juvenile perpetrators: current challenges and future prospects

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INTRODUCTION

Juvenile incarceration in Greece raises complex forensic-psychiatric questions about proportionality, developmental vulnerability and prospects for rehabilitation.

Special Juvenile Detention Establishments (SJDEs) are intended to separate minors from adults and provide an educational, treatment-oriented environment rather than a purely punitive one. In practice, however, age thresholds are blurred, as adolescents close to 18 may be held with young adults up to 21 (and in exceptional cases up to 25) in the name of “educational continuity”, producing heterogeneous groups with differing needs and risk profiles.

Overcrowding, infrastructural decay and a security-oriented culture dilute the rehabilitative mandate. At the same time, high rates of trauma, substance use, neurodevelopmental disorders and emerging personality pathology among juvenile perpetrators create strong demand for specialised forensic-psychiatric care.

Within this tension between law, policy and practice, the Greek juvenile correctional system becomes a crucial site for secondary prevention of chronic offending, but also a setting where inadequate responses may amplify stigma, institutionalisation and recidivism.

METHODS

A narrative, non-experimental analysis was undertaken of the framework governing juvenile detention in Greece, focusing on the Prison Code and internal regulations for Special Juvenile Detention Establishments, age-related allocation criteria, disciplinary rules, and provisions for education, vocational training and conditional release. This was supplemented by review of Greek criminological and forensic mental health literature on prison conditions, mental disorder among juvenile offenders and reintegration after release. Sources were interpreted through a forensic-psychiatric and developmental lens to highlight how current arrangements facilitate or obstruct systematic assessment, trauma-informed care, continuity of treatment and structured aftercare.

RESULTS

Juvenile deprivation of liberty is formally separated from adult imprisonment, yet retaining young adults up to 21-25 years within juvenile institutions leads to mixed-age populations. This heterogeneity complicates peer dynamics, increases vulnerability to intimidation and exploitation, and makes it difficult to tailor regimes to younger detainees with less

entrenched criminal careers. The small number of juvenile facilities amplifies the problem, as regional needs must be accommodated within a few centralised institutions.

Although policy documents emphasise education, vocational training and social reintegration, the day-to-day ethos of juvenile establishments frequently remains custodial. Security, discipline and order take precedence, with limited time and space for structured psychosocial interventions. Individualised sentence plans are often reduced to formalities, and juvenile participation in decisions about their own “treatment” is minimal, undermining motivation to change.

Schooling and vocational training are available in principle and may be linked to sentence reduction, but programmes are unevenly distributed, intermittently staffed and vulnerable to disruption by transfers, disciplinary measures or logistical constraints. Many juveniles therefore experience fragmented educational trajectories and leave detention without recognised qualifications or practical skills, reinforcing social exclusion and weak labour-market prospects.

Psychiatric and psychological services in juvenile detention are structurally under-resourced. Systematic screening for mental disorders, substance use, intellectual disability and neuro-

developmental conditions at entry is not consistently implemented, and specialist child and adolescent forensic input is limited. Interventions tend to prioritise crisis management and pharmacotherapy, with few structured programmes targeting trauma, emotional regulation, substance misuse or offending-related cognitions. Staff training in recognising and managing self-harm, suicidal behaviour and acute psychosis is variable, contributing to reliance on restrictive measures rather than therapeutic responses.

Mechanisms for gradual release (i.e. conditional release, community sanctions, supervised work or education outside the facility) are underused and poorly coordinated with community mental health, social welfare and educational services. Post-release follow-up is often fragmented or absent, particularly for youths with complex family dynamics, migration histories or co-occurring substance use. This lack of structured aftercare contributes to a “revolving door” pattern, where gains made during detention are quickly lost in the face of unemployment, homelessness and peer pressure.

Priority reforms include introduction of standardised developmental and risk-needs assessments at admission; systematic trauma-informed and culturally sensitive programmes; strengthening

of in-house child and adolescent mental health teams; and integration of substance use services within juvenile institutions. Equally important are investment in stable educational and vocational pathways that continue after release and the creation of formal partnership protocols between justice, health, education and welfare sectors to guarantee continuity of care and monitoring in the community.

CONCLUSION

The Greek correctional system for juvenile perpetrators currently operates at the intersection of rehabilitative rhetoric and restrictive custodial practice. Transforming juvenile detention from a containment-focused institution into a developmental and rehabilitative setting requires sustained investment in specialised forensic psychiatric interventions, structured education and vocational training, and community-linked aftercare. Embedding trauma-informed, rights-respecting practices within juvenile establishments, and ensuring community services collaboration after release, could reduce recidivism, mitigate long-term psychopathology and support successful social reintegration for young offenders.