



ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association



Article 19: Digitalising the Heart of Prison Life (ACJ20-A019)



DIGITALISING THE HEART OF PRISON LIFE

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Abstract

This contribution examines how the growing digitization of prisons reconfigures proximity, the correlative dynamic between staff and incarcerated persons, by transforming how closeness is experienced, enacted, and bounded. Drawing on ethnographic research in Belgian prisons, it analyses how digital infrastructures such as in-cell phones, tablets, and prison platforms reshape the interactional fabric of detention. The contribution conceptualises proximity across three dimensions - spatial, relational, and experiential - and demonstrates how each is altered by the rise of digital tools. While digitization enhances efficiency and autonomy, it simultaneously erodes the informal, embodied, and affective exchanges that underpin dynamic security and humane prison life. Officers' discretion is redefined as their work shifts from "street-level" to "screen-level" bureaucracy, producing what we term proximity without presence. We further highlight the emergence of new inequalities in digital access and competence among both staff and incarcerated persons. It concludes with policy recommendations for integrating technology in ways that preserve relational knowledge, face-to-face contact, and the legitimacy of prison authority. Ultimately, digitization does not simply modernise imprisonment: it rewrites its relational core.

Keywords: Proximity, Digitization, Staff-prisoner relationships

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Introduction

This contribution starts from the premise that the intertwinement of proximity and digitization is central to current and future humane detention. It demonstrates how digitization of the prison fabric reconfigures proximity, not merely in terms of physical presence, but, above all, on how closeness is experienced, enacted, and bounded. Our analysis is grounded in ethnographic research in Belgian prisons (Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; 2021; Beyens & Geerts, 2024; 2025; Pardon et al., 2025; Pardon, 2025). We critically reflect on how digitalisation is transforming the interactional core of prison work, and explore the opportunities and risks this entails for future policy and practice. To build our argument, we first look at the role of *proximity* in everyday prison life, before turning to how digitization is reshaping these relational dynamics. Prison life is shaped by clear power differences: rules, routines, and security measures determine who can go where, who can talk to whom, and who has access to which spaces (Goffman, 1961; Wooldredge & Steiner, 2016; Liebling, 2022). But these structures tell only part of the story. Everyday life inside is also about how people actually meet and respond to one another. Jefferson and Gaborit (2015) describe this as proximity: the way staff and incarcerated individuals see, hear, acknowledge, and attune to each other. Proximity is not just about physical nearness, but about a sense of connection that is felt in the body and emotions. Proximity plays a crucial role in both safety and authority in prison (Liebling et al., 1999; Liebling, 2011).

At the same time, prisons are rapidly becoming more digital, changing the manifestations of proximity. In-cell phones, self-service kiosks, tablets, and integrated digital platforms change how people behind bars communicate, organise daily life, and even how officers do their work (Robberechts, 2021; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; Mertens et al., 2021; Beyens & Geerts, 2024; 2025). These tools are usually introduced under the banner of efficiency, cost-saving, and autonomy, and are presented as signs of modernisation (Hofinger & Pfliegerl, 2024). But this shift raises new questions: how do such technologies alter everyday interactions between staff and incarcerated persons? And what does this mean for the sense of proximity that lies at the heart of prison life?

Proximity and Digitization in the Carceral Environment

In prisons, *proximity* operates across three interconnected dimensions: spatial, relational, and experiential (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015).

Spatial proximity refers to the design and organisation of prison buildings. Doors, locks, and corridors do more than secure the facility: they physically and symbolically separate staff from incarcerated persons. Such separation can create distance, reinforcing an “us and them” mentality and limiting opportunities for informal contact (Johnsen et al., 2023).

Relational proximity goes beyond physical distance. It reflects the quality of interactions between staff and incarcerated persons, the frequency, intensity, and tone of daily engagement (Crewe et al., 2014; Mesko & Hacin, 2019). Research shows that in the shared, domestic-like environment of prisons, it is difficult to maintain a strict divide between staff and incarcerated persons over time (Crawley & Crawley, 2008). Together, spatial closeness and the shared routines of prison life create conditions where human connections emerge, even in an environment designed for separation and control. This dynamic has direct implications for how order, safety, and rehabilitation are managed: proximity can either reinforce barriers or open up space for constructive interaction.



Prison design has a direct impact on how staff and incarcerated people interact. Layouts that encourage openness and visibility can support more informal, dialogue-based contact. Yet this potential is increasingly affected by surveillance technologies. Strategically placed cameras and other monitoring tools often reduce the perceived need for staff presence, replacing human interaction with technological oversight (Evans et al., 2023). As a result, opportunities for relational engagement can be displaced, making staff appear less central in certain areas of prison life. This highlights how the *spatial organisation* of prisons shapes patterns of coexistence between staff and incarcerated persons, and how these relationships are experienced. Here, the third dimension, experiential proximity, comes into play. Confinement influences the emotional and psychological lives of both groups, often creating shared feelings of frustration, limitation, or hardship (Jefferson, Turner & Jensen, 2019; Mears et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the three dimensions of proximity - spatial, relational, and experiential - work together to create the atmosphere of a prison. So, how spaces are designed determines what kind of interactions may take place, which in turn affect how imprisonment is lived and how power is exercised by staff and experienced by incarcerated persons.

From street to screen level bureaucrats

Prison officers are not simply enforcers of rules; they are frontline professionals who, through daily interactions, make choices, set priorities, and give practical meaning to policy (Lipsky, 1980). Their close contact with incarcerated persons gives them both the opportunity and the responsibility to interpret rules and apply them with discretion. This role is changing with the rise of digital tools. Busch and Henriksen (2018) describe this as a shift toward *screen-level bureaucracy*, where face-to-face encounters are increasingly replaced by digital systems. In prisons, this means many small interactions, once happening at a door, in a corridor, or at a desk, are now managed through online forms and electronic messages. As a result, the discretionary space of officers is narrowing or being reshaped. Decisions that once relied on professional judgment, such as fast-tracking a request, quietly overlooking a minor issue, or offering a word of advice, are now often automated, standardised, and depersonalised (Robberechts & Beyens, 2021).

External connection, internal distance

Research in Belgian prisons shows digital mediation does not eliminate the discretionary space of prison officers, but does reconfigure it. On the one hand, their scope for action is reduced: the ability to intervene in minor requests or subtle signals diminishes. At the same time, power also shifts to incarcerated persons, who can now directly access services without relying on staff as intermediaries.

This process produces deeply ambivalent effects. For staff, the reduction in everyday contact moments erodes relational knowledge, the subtle capacity to detect tensions, frustrations, or emerging problems through observation and informal exchange (Mertens et al., 2021; Beyens & Geerts, 2024). For incarcerated persons, digitised systems may enhance autonomy and privacy, such as making phone calls from within the cell, but they simultaneously intensify individualised isolation (Jewkes, 2002; Knight, 2016; Robberechts & Beyens, 2021, p.293).

This prison is made to stay in your cell. You know? Everything is in your cell: a shower, a phone. Everything is in your cell. In the old days you could go outside to take a shower, you could go outside to make a phone call. But now, you're always in your cell. That is fucked-up. (Interview

2, closed regime; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020)

The very tools that promise empowerment and efficiency thus risk fragmenting the social fabric of prison life. The removal of face-to-face intermediaries may reduce frustrations and accelerate procedures, but can simultaneously erode the relational texture of prison work. As Robberechts and Beyens (2021) demonstrate, officers in a digital context increasingly feel reduced to mere “key holders”, with their role in relational and discretionary practices hollowed out. Their work shifts toward surveillance and control, while the social dimension, crucial for sustaining dynamic security, becomes weakened (Pardon et al., 2025). The paradox is clear: digital systems designed to make prisons more rehabilitative, humane, efficient, and secure may in fact generate relational erosion. By reducing face-to-face contact and introducing standardised communication, they create a condition of “proximity without presence” and presence from a distance: staff and incarcerated persons share the same physical environment yet engage with each other less and less (Pardon, 2025). In this respect, digitisation may free officers from routine paperwork and form-filling, but the time saved is not always reinvested in meaningful interactions (Robberechts, 2020). Instead, time is often absorbed by staff shortages or longer lock-up periods, further weakening the very forms of relational proximity that dynamic security depends on (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016).

Digital infrastructures are rewriting the conditions under which prison staff and incarcerated individuals encounter, recognise, or avoid one another. This is not simply a reduction in physical interactions, but a shift in the nature and quality of proximity itself. In-cell telephony and digital platforms provide incarcerated persons with more direct access to the outside world: they can call family, follow online courses, and communicate more quickly with external services. Such connections may alleviate feelings of isolation and support principles of normalisation and reintegration (Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; Beyens & Geerts, 2024). At the same time, the role of staff as intermediaries is diminished.

In-cell telephones? It's good, I guess. But when they still had to call in the corridor, then you heard, not quite the calls, but you could hear if that person was disgruntled, you could hear if that person had problems. You knew that something was off with that person. Nowadays they have their calls in their cell. And when you open the door, they can be in a frenzied state and you do not know why. Less social control and that dynamic security we talk a lot about is also reduced by all those technical gadgets. You don't see them as much. (Respondent 13; Pardon et al., 2025, p.8).

Where a phone call once took place at a communal corridor phone, a shared moment that allowed staff to pick up on signals, read emotions, or sense tensions, communication now occurs invisibly from within the cell (Mertens et al., 2021; Pardon et al., 2025). Proximity to the outside world expands, while relational proximity inside the prison contracts. For staff, this means a loss of informal knowledge, power and authority; for incarcerated persons an erosion of out-of-cell time. Proximity thus becomes less shared and more parallel.

Digitisation generates a new form of what may be called *presence without recognition* (Pardon, 2025). Staff and incarcerated persons are present within the same physical spaces, yet their interactions are increasingly mediated by screens and systems. While technically close by, digital tools leave



them feeling cut off within prison walls. Where requests once offered a moment of recognition, the recognition is now often replaced by digital notifications or automated processes. This mediated proximity erodes the relational potential of prison life. It is not only a matter of reduced interaction, but of the loss of subtle, affective knowledge that arises from physical co-presence: tone of voice, body language, and non-verbal cues. What emerges instead is a fragmented coexistence in which staff and incarcerated persons cross paths in functional rather than relational ways.

Erosion of relational security

Close proximity can at times be emotionally burdensome for prison staff, involving the constant gauging of tensions, carrying of stories and emotions, and sustaining of relationships in a hostile environment. From this perspective, digitisation can be a form of protection, relieving staff from repetitive interactions and creating greater emotional distance. For some officers, digitalisation translates into reduced stress and a clearer demarcation of their role: less care, more control. Yet it is precisely here that new tensions emerge. When digital tools reduce proximity, building trust and recognition becomes more difficult. Dynamic or relational security, the idea that safety derives not only from rules but also from relationships, loses its foundation. Authority then risks reverting into procedural power and physical infrastructure, rather than relational legitimacy.

New forms of inequality

The reconfiguration of proximity through digitisation also produces new forms of inequality. Incarcerated persons gain greater autonomy via digital tools, yet not all are equally able to engage with them. Digital (il)literacy, financial constraints (e.g. high call costs), and institutional variation in the use of digital devices create unequal access (Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; Mertens et al., 2021). At the same time, staff develop a new dependency on systems that regulate and monitor their work (Robberechts & Beyens, 2021). Asymmetry thus shifts not only between staff and incarcerated persons but also between those who are digitally competent or well-equipped and those who are not. In this context, proximity should not be understood as a fixed condition but as a fragile balance continually redrawn by digitisation. Technology can enhance closeness, for instance, by enabling more private family contact or direct communication with services, but it paradoxically erodes the relational core of prison life to some extent. The result is a prison that is at once more connected and more isolated: digitally open to the outside, yet relationally closing within.

Applied considerations

Prisons are not merely physical institutions but relational ecologies in which closeness and distance are continually produced and redrawn. Our research shows digitisation has an impact on physical and relational proximity. For policy and practice, this means digitisation is not neutral: every technological application transforms the relational core of prison work. The question, therefore, is not whether technology should be introduced, but how it can be embedded without undermining the basic conditions of humane and safe detention.

1. A first consideration is digital applications must be integrated in a regime that combines technological efficiency with structurally guaranteed moments of face-to-face contacts between incarcerated persons and staff. If communication tools digitalise mundane interactions, there must be space created elsewhere for informal encounters between staff and incarcerated persons. This may occur through architectural choices (e.g. common areas) or organisational

practices (e.g., scheduled contact moments, relationally oriented patrols).

2. A second implication is the importance of relational knowledge. Informal observations, how someone behaves in a corridor, at a phone, or during a brief exchange, are often vital for detecting tensions and preventing conflict. Digital systems that remove these moments increase the risk that staff become “blind” to underlying dynamics. Policymakers must therefore invest in alternative forms of training and organisation that preserve or revalue this relational knowledge, even in a digital context.
3. Third, digitisation requires a redefinition of the role of staff. As more tasks are automated, their function risks being reduced to that of key holders. To avoid this, relational skills must remain at the centre of the profession. This means recognising and supporting discretion, empathy, and communication skills as core elements of prison work and training. While digitisation can relieve staff of routine tasks, it may not marginalise their relational role.
4. Finally, attention must be paid to digital inequality (i.e., including technological literacy). Not all incarcerated persons have the same access to, or skills for, using digital systems, and differences between prisons create new forms of inequality. Humane implementation requires mechanisms to compensate for these disparities, for example through guidance, alternative forms of access, or financial measures ensuring that the use of digital functions is not restricted to those with sufficient means.

In sum, digitisation is not a straightforward modernisation but a reconfiguration of the relational texture of prison life. Policymakers and staff must deliberately invest in specific forms of proximity, relational knowledge, and equitable access to prevent digitisation hollowing out the very foundations of humane detention. Without such investment, digital reforms risk becoming counterproductive, undermining both the legitimacy and the security they are intended to strengthen.

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