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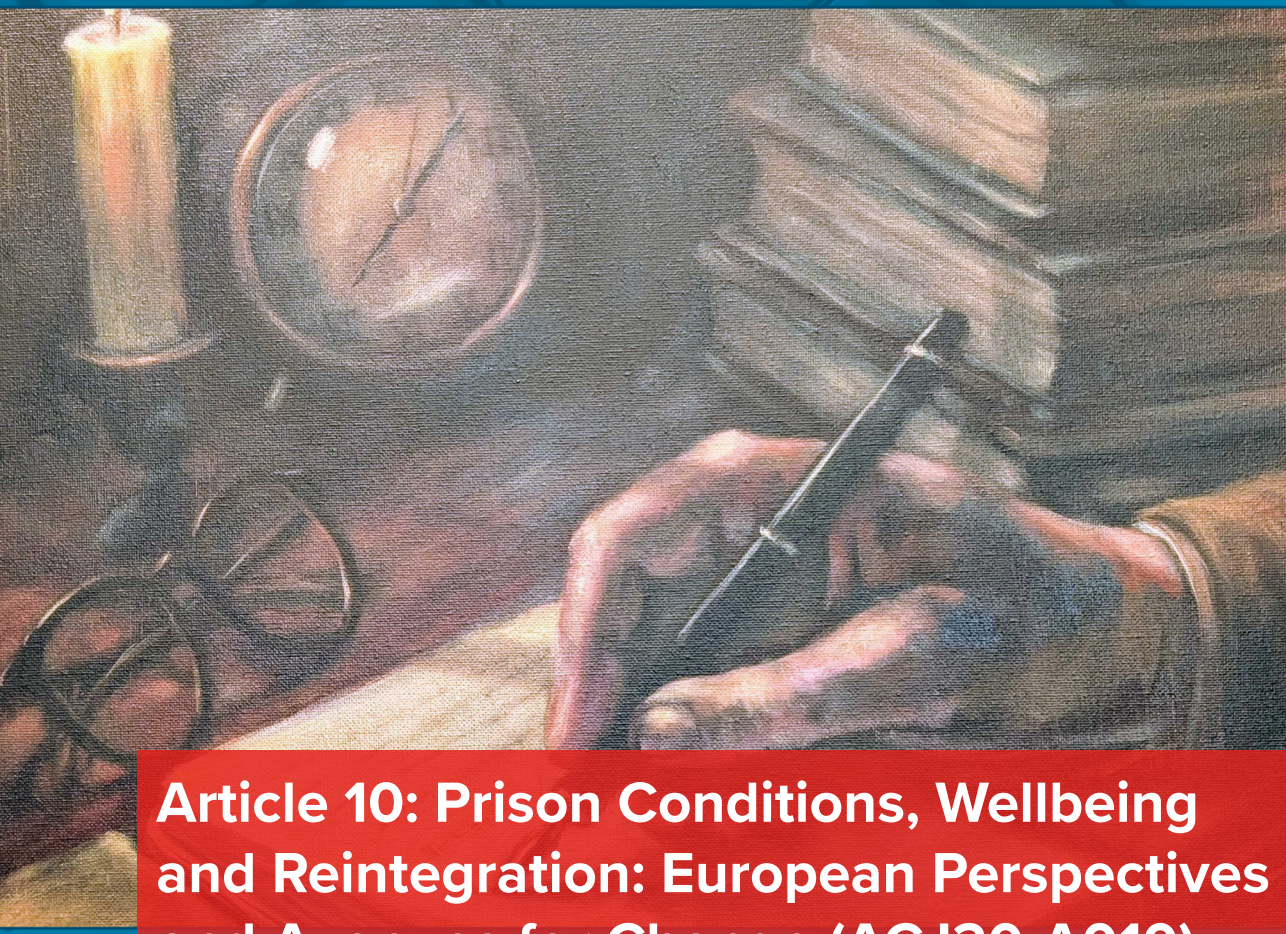

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PRISON CONDITIONS, WELLBEING AND REINTEGRATION: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES AND AVENUES FOR CHANGE

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Abstract

Prisons are widely recognized as stressful environments that negatively affect the wellbeing of incarcerated individuals and increase risks of reoffending compared to non-custodial sanctions. Yet, not all prisons exert the same effects. Research demonstrates that variations in prison conditions are linked to differences in wellbeing and reintegration prospects. The concept of prison climate provides a useful lens to examine how institutional practices, social relations, and material conditions shape these outcomes. In addition, attention to ethical architecture underscores how the physical environment can support or undermine wellbeing. Understanding and addressing differences in prison conditions therefore offers concrete opportunities to reduce carceral harm.

Introduction

Incarceration is associated with an elevated risk of psychological and physical health problems (Favril et al., 2024). The prison environment may heighten stress, anxiety, and depression (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2018; Nurse et al., 2003). These negative effects are not inevitable; they are shaped by the way imprisonment is organized. The relational context, including interactions between staff and incarcerated individuals and the broader social dynamics, is highly influential for wellbeing in detention (Liebling, 2004). Material conditions, such as the design of the living space, the degree of privacy, and access to meaningful activities, also play an important role (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022).

This contribution is organized around several key dimensions that are central to understanding the relationship between prison conditions, wellbeing, and reintegration. The first section introduces the concept of prison climate, as a way of understanding differences between institutions. The second section examines prison conditions that support wellbeing, with attention to international differences. The third section focuses on the consequences of cell sharing, highlighting potential risks and important safeguards. The fourth section addresses ethical prison architecture, exploring how design influences the lived experience of incarceration. The final section discusses how prison conditions can support reintegration. Together, these topics not only introduce the reader to relevant evidence on the importance of prison conditions but also offer opportunities for improvement.

From Deprivation to Prison Climate: Shifting Perspectives on Wellbeing in Prison

Research on wellbeing in prison reflects different but complementary strands. One, rooted in the importation perspective, emphasizes that many incarcerated individuals enter prison with complex psychological problems and histories of trauma and social exclusion (Armour, 2012). Another line of research underscores the role of the prison environment itself in shaping experiences. Institutional conditions can contribute to the emergence and intensification of psychological distress (Huey & McNulty, 2005; Van Ginneken et al., 2019), but mental health problems may also improve over the course of imprisonment (Dirkzwager & Nieuwbeerta, 2018; Gabrysch et al., 2020). Together, these perspectives highlight both individual vulnerabilities and the structural and contextual factors that affect wellbeing in prison.

The classic deprivation perspective (following the work of Sykes, 1958) acknowledged that the prison environment shapes how people adapt to imprisonment. Yet research based on this perspective focused for a long time on the commonalities of the prison experience, with individual differences making imprisonment more or less burdensome. Less attention was paid to the fact that prisons and units can differ substantially in the extent to which they are experienced as degrading or tolerable, and therefore in the extent to which they affect wellbeing. Recent research demonstrates that this institutional variation matters (Van Ginneken & Crewe, 2025; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020).

The concept of prison climate offers a valuable framework for understanding how imprisonment is experienced. It encompasses several material and social dimensions (Bosma, Van Ginneken, Palmen, et al., 2020; Liebling, 2004; Van Ginneken et al., 2018). A key aspect concerns the way in which staff interact with incarcerated individuals, and to what extent such interactions are perceived as fair, predictable, and humane. Another central dimension is autonomy: the extent to which individuals have opportunities to make their own choices and move around freely. Also important is safety from

abuse, whether by staff or peers. Access to meaningful activities that support personal development is relevant, as are opportunities to maintain contact with family and loved ones, through visits, telephone, or video calls. In addition to these relational and experiential aspects, the physical and material conditions of imprisonment should be considered, too. These aspects shape the extent to which incarceration is perceived as painful or, by contrast, as bearable.

Research increasingly demonstrates that a positive prison climate is associated with lower levels of psychological distress and self-harm (Favril & van Ginneken, 2023; Van Ginneken & Crewe, 2025), with reduced levels of misconduct (Bosma, Van Ginneken, Sentse, & Palmen, 2020), and with greater chances of successful reintegration into society (Auty & Liebling, 2020; cf. Van Ginneken & Palmen, 2023). Improving the prison environment is therefore not only a matter of humanity but also of public health and safety.

An important methodological development is the growing use of multilevel analyses and cross-national comparative research. These approaches make it increasingly possible to distinguish between effects at the individual level and those stemming from the broader institutional context. Studies have shown that a shared prison climate exists at the unit-level and prison-level in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and that this shared climate – over and above individual perceptions – is related to wellbeing and behavior (Van Ginneken & Crewe, 2025; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). In other words, the prison (unit) in which a sentence is served matters, even when individual characteristics are taken into account.

Prison Conditions that Support Wellbeing

A clear example of how national and institutional policies translate into the everyday experience of imprisonment is provided by recent comparative research based on survey data from incarcerated individuals in England & Wales and Norway (Van Ginneken & Crewe, 2025). In this large-scale survey, a total of 1,101 individuals were questioned across eight prisons in England and six in Norway. The study focuses on how punishment and degradation are experienced in prison, and how these experiences are related to self-harm. Punishment and degradation reflect the suffering imposed as part of the prison environment; this was measured using a series of survey items (e.g., 'My experience in this prison is painful'). This scale shows strong correlations with several other measures, including those used in earlier research on prison climate and the moral quality of prison life.

An important finding is that, on average, incarcerated individuals in Norway report substantially lower levels of experienced suffering than their counterparts in England & Wales. This difference persists even within groups that are comparable in terms of demographic characteristics and sentence length. At the same time, considerable variation is also observed within both countries, between prisons and even between units. The location of imprisonment thus matters both across and within national contexts. The study further demonstrates that higher levels of experienced suffering are associated with increased self-harm. Incarcerated individuals who perceive their prison environment as particularly degrading are more likely to report self-harming behavior, independent of any prior history of self-harm. This finding has important implications: self-harm is a strong predictor of subsequent suicide attempts and an indicator of severe psychological distress (Griep & MacKinnon, 2022).

These differences can be understood in light of contrasting penal policies. Norwegian prison policy is strongly guided by the principle of normalisation, which holds that life in prison should resemble life outside the walls as closely as possible (Crewe et al., 2022; Van de Rijt et al., 2022). This principle is reflected in an emphasis on dignity, autonomy, and relatively open regimes. In contrast, prisons in England & Wales are more strongly characterized by closed regimes, limited autonomy, and an institutional culture in which risk management and control are central. England & Wales also face acute challenges such as overcrowding, with two or more individuals frequently sharing a cell. Official statistics document high numbers of violent incidents and suicides (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

The Consequences of Cell Sharing

Increasing the use of shared cells is often seen as an efficient solution to pressure on prison capacity. The realities of overcrowding often mean that people are sharing cells not designed for that purpose. A growing body of scientific evidence calls for considerable caution: shared cells bring structural risks in terms of safety, health, wellbeing, and the overall prison climate (Muirhead et al., 2021; Schliehe & Crewe, 2022; Van Ginneken, 2022).

A fundamental problem is the lack of oversight of what takes place inside the cell. During long periods of confinement in the evening and at night – often from late afternoon until the next morning – there is little or no supervision of interactions between cellmates. Beyond safety concerns, cell sharing also has clear psychological implications. The loss of privacy and personal space is widely recognized as a major disadvantage. Even everyday behaviors such as snoring, hygiene, toilet use, or religious practices can lead to irritation or conflict (Schliehe & Crewe, 2022). Such tensions may escalate into verbal or physical confrontations. Research has shown that poor relationships between cellmates are associated with a higher likelihood of rule violations, including violence, theft, vandalism, and the possession of contraband (Van Ginneken, 2022).

Where shared cells are used, cell allocation requires great care. Experience demonstrates that safety and order on the unit depend to a large extent on the skills and attentiveness of prison staff. Staff play a central role in observing, mediating, explaining, and involving incarcerated individuals in the choice of a cellmate. Such "matching" is labor-intensive but essential to mitigate risks (Muirhead et al., 2020). The preferences of incarcerated individuals themselves are a key factor. Both the quality of the relationship with a cellmate and the preference for single- or multiple-occupancy cells are strong predictors of wellbeing, safety, and behavior (Van Ginneken, 2022). Those who report a poor relationship with their cellmate more often report rule-breaking, while those made to share a cell against their preference report lower autonomy, lower safety, and poorer relationships with staff. Careful allocation is only possible if three conditions are met: adequate staffing, sufficient time, and sufficient cell capacity, including the structural availability of single cells. Precisely these conditions, however, are under pressure in times of overcrowding.

Ethical Prison Architecture

The social experience of imprisonment is central to prison climate. Yet, the role of the built environment has thus far received less attention (but see Karthaus et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2019; Urrutia-Moldes, 2022). This brings into focus the concept of *ethical prison architecture*. Architecture is never neutral: buildings embody values and shape the way people experience their surroundings. In prisons, design choices can support or undermine fundamental aspects of humanity and autonomy.

Key design features include the degree of privacy, natural light, freedom of movement, access to outdoor space, and opportunities for social interaction. Prisons in which the built environment contributes to a climate of safety and respect – through open sightlines, inviting communal areas, and more domestic forms of design – are associated with lower levels of stress and stronger feelings of dignity among incarcerated individuals (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022). Conversely, cold, anonymous, or repressive environments intensify experiences of degradation and alienation.

Solitary confinement cells also warrant attention. There is a consensus that segregation, especially long-term segregation, is harmful for health and wellbeing (Luigi et al., 2020; Reiter et al., 2020). The negative impact of solitary confinement may be mitigated, to some extent, by respectful treatment by staff (Wright et al., 2023). The design of cells can further minimize harm, while still meeting the occasional need for a low-stimulus environment. Such safety cells should contain a window with a view, a toilet, washbasin, a mattress, (soft) furniture, decoration, temperature and lighting control, a radio, tv or tablet, and a phone. These features can be integrated in such a way that they pose little risk to self-harm.

Prison Conditions that Support Reintegration

The question of whether, and how, imprisonment and prison conditions contribute to reintegration is complicated, considering that imprisonment and prison conditions (such as security level) are usually correlated to individual risk factors for reoffending. Overall, the evidence is compelling that imprisonment increases the likelihood of reoffending, or at the very least does not reduce it (Al Weswasi et al., 2023; Loeffler & Nagin, 2022). Based on Dutch data, Wermink and colleagues have demonstrated that short prison sentences have more detrimental effects compared to noncustodial sentences (Wermink et al., 2024). This can likely be explained by the disruptive impact of incarceration on key life domains such as employment, housing, and relationships.

However, there are also indications that imprisonment can, in some cases, have more positive outcomes depending on the conditions. Research from Norway suggests that this may be linked to the country's strong commitment to normalisation and rehabilitation. A study by Bhuller and colleagues (2019) showed that imprisonment was associated with a reduced risk of recidivism for individuals who had been unemployed prior to detention, who participated in training during their sentence, and who secured employment upon release. Further evidence comes from a quasi-experimental study in Italy (Mastrobuoni & Terlizzese, 2022). Due to overcrowding, individuals were randomly transferred from closed to open prisons. Those who spent a year in the open regime showed a 6% lower risk of recidivism.

Conclusion

In sum, while prisons have traditionally been regarded as a uniformly stressful context (as indeed they are), more recent research highlights important differences between prisons and between units. The concept of prison climate provides a framework for making these differences visible and for studying the relationship between prison conditions, wellbeing, and reintegration prospects. This contribution discussed how prison climate and policy choices – through normalisation, autonomy, and preparation for release – directly relate to wellbeing and shape opportunities for reintegration. While imprisonment is often detrimental for wellbeing and personal development, less restrictive prison conditions in combination with meaningful activities and training opportunities can stimulate

personal development. This highlights that investment in humane incarceration is not only an ethical imperative but also contributes to public safety. Finally, ethical prison architecture requires a fundamental reflection on the aims of imprisonment. If the objective is to prevent further harm of incarceration and to enable people to return to society with hope, prison environments must allow space for autonomy, personal development, and the preservation of social roles. Architecture is therefore not an ancillary matter, but a core element of prison climate, and thus of the conditions for wellbeing and reintegration.

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