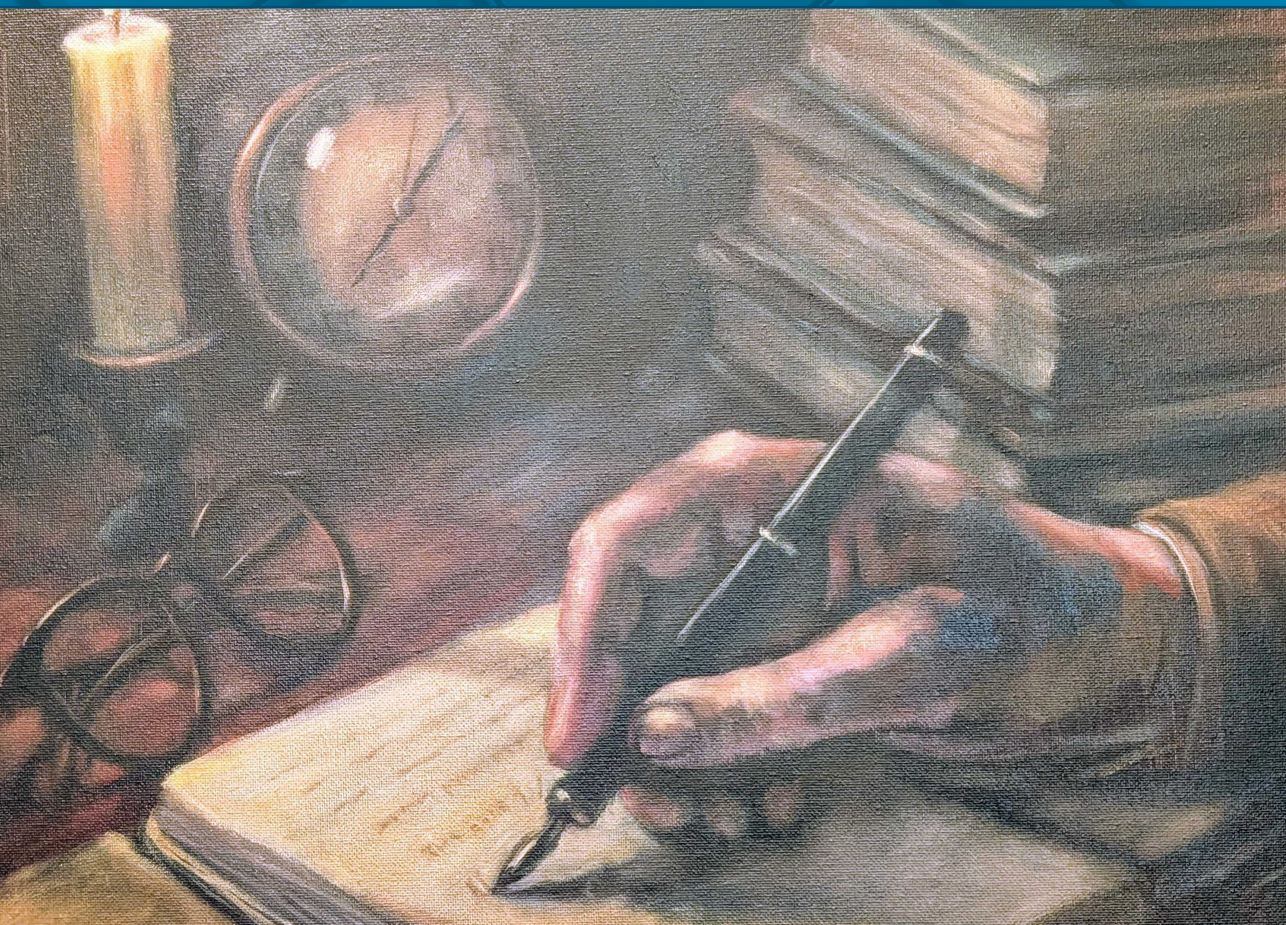


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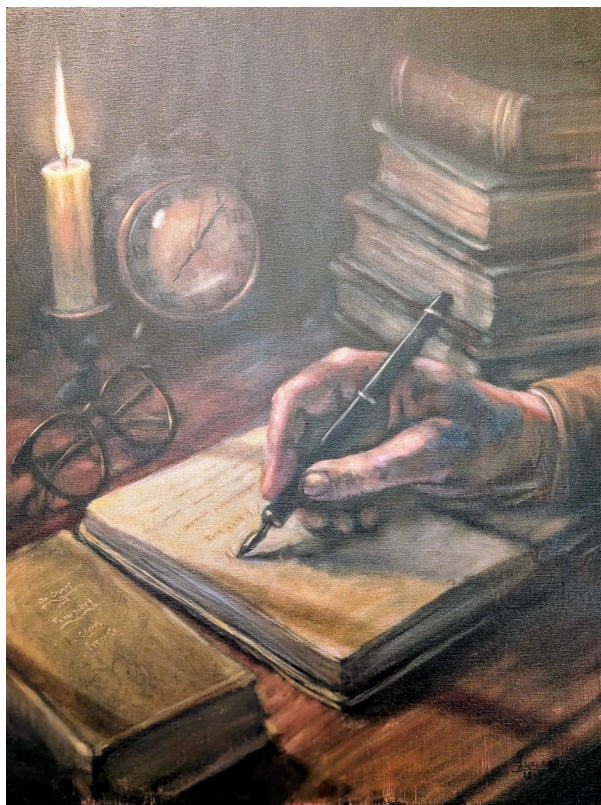
Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association



**Scholarly Reflections on Core
Considerations for Correctional Practice**

Edition #20 - 2026

www.icpa.org



Cover Image courtesy of artist Jared Riley.

Inspiration: This work depicts the quiet, often solitary process through which scholars reflect on the structures and human impact of incarceration. The limited light may underscore the carceral experience scholars must illuminate through careful study.

Instagram: Scourge is Out

Website: RealTimeRitualArts.com

Jared is an alumni of Arizona State University's {Ink}arcerated program. Learn more at:
<https://ccj.asu.edu/ccs/inkarcerated>

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Scholarly Reflections on Core Considerations for Correctional Practice

Frank J. Porporino, Ph.D., Editor ICPA Advancing Corrections

Some ten years ago, in the Foreword to the first Edition of our *Advancing Corrections Journal (ACJ)*, I introduced the journal as “a new initiative for ICPA that is consistent with its avowed objective of embracing ‘evidence’ to support change – to help lead change in corrections more based on data and facts rather than ideology and opinion.” The simple idea was to produce a scholarly, peer-reviewed publication that could speak to practitioners and help explain the place of ‘evidence’ in addressing some of the most important current and emerging issues in the field. The Theme for the first Edition of *ACJ* indeed forecasted what the journal would try to be all about ... supporting the “*Shaping of Practice Through Evidence.*”



Of course, influencing and shaping practice through evidence is far from easy. It often seems like the field of corrections moves a few steps forward but then one or two (or more) backwards. What we know, the evidence we accumulate, has difficulty becoming ‘what we do’, if it isn’t understood and appreciated by practitioners, managers, policymakers and other correctional professionals. For evidence to have ultimate impact, the way evidence can inform practice and improve outcomes has to be explained concretely, neatly, and logically summarized, repeated, and then repeated again. What is more, if a correctional department or system chooses to embrace a particular form of evidence and adopt it into practice, the implementation process is also rife with difficulty. This process—even with the best intentions—can stagnate or halt reform in correctional environments.

In the last decade, *ACJ* explored the knowledge base in a number of key areas of practice. Key themes have included: *Welcoming Disruptions to the Status Quo* (Edition # 2); *Giving Focus to Community Corrections* (Edition # 7); *Investing in Staff* (Edition # 8); *Understanding, Assessing, Managing and Reducing Risk* (Edition # 10); *Innovation in Correctional Healthcare* (Edition # 12); *What Else Works* (Editions # 13 & 14); *Reforming Corrections Through Technology* (Edition # 16); *What is Working With Women* (Edition # 18); and *Excellence in Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice* (Edition # 19). For each Theme, the journal highlighted some state-of-the-art research reviews, good examples of recent practice-relevant research, and numerous descriptions of international best practice and innovation. The journal evolved and matured. *Advancing Corrections* now attracts many more academic responses to our Call for Papers and retains a strong international focus evidenced through the many contributions from around the world. More and more, correctional agencies are choosing *ACJ* to share both their research findings and what they see as remaining challenges. In interesting reciprocal fashion, *ACJ* has helped ICPA grow significantly in influence over the last decade, and vice versa. Through ICPA and *ACJ*, a welcoming home now exists for thousands of correctional professionals worldwide as they keep searching for ways to “connect, learn, share and get re-invigorated.”

For this milestone 20th Edition of *ACJ*, no single theme seemed appropriate. Instead, we wanted

to go wider and deeper and capture the wisdom of some of the most knowledgeable and respected scholars in the field. We thought it worthwhile to collect evidence-informed views from these thought-leaders regarding some of the key challenges in corrections. Rather than asking them to address a specific topic or set of topics, we left it open ended. We were curious to see what kind of 'current and emerging' issues would come to the forefront from the perspective of these scholars. The resulting set of commentaries we hope will serve as an important reference collection for guiding efforts in *Shaping Practice Through Evidence*.

The 28 commentaries in the Edition hone in on a variety of practice issues, some addressing obvious and long-standing challenges, others raising relatively new and not yet broadly recognized ones; some discussing what may be opportunities if properly managed, and others pointing to risks worth avoiding.

A number of our scholars kept referring to a fundamental shift in focus as perhaps the most essential redirection for the field. That is, they called for a shift away from the singular emphasis on 'fixing' justice-involved individuals and towards a more foundational aim to 'fix' our corrections environments. Several scholar/authors pointed to the 'uncomfortable' truth that our prison environments are, for the most part, not at all equipped or designed to be 'rehabilitative' (Day). They can be inhumane, unfair and unjust, and actually anti-rehabilitative in many ways. At the extreme, they can be quite 'criminogenic' and spill even more crime into our communities rather than preventing it (Luyt). Rather than organized and managed to support positive change for those who live there and a meaningful avocation for those who work there, "in reality they are punishing places garnished with isolated bubbles of ad hoc positive activity" (Polaschek).

One argument is that the preoccupation with 'security' and 'safety' in the contemporary prison creates both moral and ethical blindness, where prison staff and managers become easily "insensitive to the humans at the heart of their practice" (Warr). The continued acceptance of some practices that can clearly do harm, like solitary confinement, is a good example of this kind of blindness and organizational irrationality (Rudes). Another is how correctional services tend to focus almost exclusively on the needs of the people we incarcerate, ignoring the needs and concerns of family members and other loved ones, even though family member wellbeing can have dramatic impact on the wellbeing of those we incarcerate (Comfort & Harris).

But all is not gloom and doom. We also know quite a bit about what 'good' prison environments look like and what can make them healthy and positive places to live and work (Crewe; Liebling). Researchers are emphasizing that correctional services should be about more than the interventions we deliver. What also matters is how "prison climate and policy choices – through normalization, autonomy, and preparation for release – directly relate to wellbeing and shape opportunities for reintegration" (van Ginneken). At the heart of the good prison is also the recognition that prison work is not only difficult but can be a serious threat to the health and personal well-being of those who work there (Frost & Nahikian; Ricciardelli). Supporting and elevating the professional identity of prison officers and nurturing their emotional and mental health is what will help prisons remain as safe, decent, and fair places to live and work (Kvam). Beyond the 'pains of imprisonment', there has to be more understanding of the very significant 'pains of employment' within correctional settings, the emotional toll of the work and the 'moral

labour' that has to be endured. Honest and realistic training efforts are needed to prepare staff in confronting those pains as they continue to be "exposed to injustice in their enactment of justice" (*Ricciardelli*).

Several of our scholars went further in challenging not just the culture but the underlying physical and psychological 'feel' of the traditional prison environment. A compelling argument suggests that humane, evidence-informed design should pay much more attention to the impact of both the 'soundscape' (*Herrity*) and the 'greenspace' (*Moran*) of those environments. It is increasingly recognized that "prisons are more than sites of confinement; they are multi-sensory landscapes that actively shape behavior, health and experience" (*Turner*). Correctional agencies should readily engage both incarcerated people and staff to arrive at "design choices that balance safety and security with the embodied realities of living and working in these environments" (*Turner*).

Our understanding of what a 'good' prison should be all about comes mostly from research conducted in a Western context where there is more or less adequate resourcing and relatively little deprivation compared to the reality in many low-income, developing nations. From an African perspective, however, we are reminded that "any service, no matter what the budget, the fiscal constraints, or the challenges, can do more with less" (*Ahimbisibwe & Ricciardelli*). What may matter most is giving purpose, to both prisoners and staff, treating each other with respect, and offering whatever might be possible as opportunities for self-improvement.

Narrowing in on how the prison experience can be particularly traumatic if it fails to consider the special needs (concerns & preferences) of particular vulnerable groups, two of our commentaries address the complex issue of managing the growing transgender population in custody (*Jenness et al.; Maycock*). There are no easy solutions but trying to avoid or pretend there is no problem is clearly a very basic human rights violation.

The centrality of trauma in the lives of justice involved women has now been well established. Acknowledging the need for tailored, trauma-responsive interventions and person-centered models of care is now considered mainstream correctional wisdom, no longer just an afterthought. Quite interestingly, however, what is now being realized is that this framework is capable of transforming correctional policy and practice for *all* justice-involved individuals. It can apply equally to both women and men in humanizing correctional services (*Salisbury*).

Thinking of what the future will look like for correctional services inevitably raises the issue of the opportunities but also the risks inherent in embracing the new 'digital'. Two of our commentaries delve into the concerns around the increasing 'digitalization' of the correctional environment. We are cautioned to reflect on how digitalization can transform important 'relational dynamics' within prison, not necessarily with only positive outcomes (*Pardon & Beyens*). However, as another expert commentary points out, the potential harms of unchecked expansion of digital can be avoided with an ethically informed and rights-based approach focused on "enabling human flourishing, reducing inequality, and strengthening communities" (*Knight & Ross*).

Correctional services are not just about prisons. If prisons fail to contribute in some way to some ultimate 'rehabilitation' and 'reintegration' of justice involved individuals, they are not doing their work, not serving the public interest. But community supervision and support, whether post-release from prison or on probation, plays an equally important, if not more important role in this rehabilitation endeavor. One of our commentaries gives us an easily digested summary of what is meant by 'What Works' in either institutional or community corrections (*Taxman*). We know that following a set of well-researched 'What Works' practices and principles can give us predictively better outcomes (if there is fidelity to those practices and principles). But in another commentary, we are asked to reflect on whether we should focus so exclusively on reducing risk and measuring success of our efforts only in terms of recidivism. An alternative might be to adopt a 'better than arrival', well-being paradigm that "broadens the definition of correctional success, invites new partners into the work (including universities), and creates opportunities for visible, incremental improvement in people's lives" (*Wright*). This well-being focused paradigm resonates as well with the stark reality in many of our communities of "persistent barriers in employment, housing, health, and family life for Black men, Black women, and other marginalized groups" (*Williams*). These inequities may require a more fundamental correctional and community responses focused on "building collaborative, culturally responsive, and structurally transformative reentry systems." And perhaps at the core of our approach to community supervision should be the notion of *hope*, not just as a psychological construct, but as a "central concept that shapes how probation is experienced, delivered, and understood" (*Phillips et al.*). Incorporating the views and insights of individuals with 'experiential knowledge' into program design and policy development would certainly also help (*Ross*).

Building on the idea that there are phases to ultimate desistance from offending, *Fergus McNeill* reviews some of the evidence pointing to a necessary third phase, *securing acceptance and belonging within a community*. And here is a significant rub for correctional services; the fact that we have limited control in how well this can happen; in how well we can "affect the social contexts where people find – or fail to find – acceptance and belonging."

The challenge of *Shaping Practice Through Evidence* will endure but there is good reason to persist. I thought it fitting to end this short Foreword on a positive note. One of the most highly respected criminologists in America argued some 20 years ago that rehabilitation should be the 'guiding paradigm for corrections' (*Cullen, 2007*)¹. In one of the articles in this Edition, *Cullen & Jonson* reiterate this position and present convincing evidence that belief in rehabilitation continues as a "habit of the heart," even in the country with one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. They conclude this is a "a significant cultural resource for practitioners and policy reformers who can use public opinion to justify offender treatment as democracy at work." We can quibble about whether 'rehabilitation' is the right term to use, but the public knows what it means. Correctional work is expected to assist justice involved individuals to turn their lives around...to heal, learn, manage their demon(s) and eventually contribute positively to their communities. Trying to shape correctional practice to achieve better 'rehabilitative' outcomes can be incredibly difficult, often frustrating and at times rather discouraging. We need to remind ourselves we are making this effort not just for the people who get entangled in our justice systems, but for the staff who do the work and for our communities who expect us to

¹ Cullen, F. T. (2007). Make rehabilitation corrections' guiding paradigm. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 6, 717-728.

make a difference. We are obliged to keep doing better because our communities expect us to.

I close this Foreword by giving a very special thank you to my three Co-Editors for this 20th Anniversary Edition; Rosemary Ricciardelli; Danielle S. Rudes and Kevin Wright. They offered their very comforting support in conceiving and promoting this Edition of *ACJ*. Despite their own very busy 'scholarly' lives, they were fully engaged in helping review manuscripts and offering feedback. Going above and beyond, all three also provided their own scholarly contributions to this Edition. This Edition of *ACJ* deserved a special cover, and I finally want to thank our artist **Jared Riley** for sharing his captivating image.

It has been a sincere privilege for me to be involved in Editing 20 Editions of *ACJ*, and this Edition in particular. It is unlikely that I will be around for another 20 years, but I am confident that the journal will continue for even longer.

Your comments on this special Edition of *ACJ* or on the journal more generally are welcomed. Please give us evidence that you are out there reading and learning from this publication.

My warmest regards.

Frank J. Porporino, Ph.D.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Rosemary Ricciardelli, Ph.D; Danielle S. Rudes, Ph.D. and Kevin Wright, Ph.D.

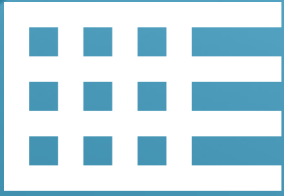


As guest editors of the 20th anniversary special and celebratory issue of the journal *Advancing Corrections*, we are grateful to the many contributors despite the relatively tight timeline – thank you. Our goal was, in a way, a response to the criticism of academic work as: i) not applicable in practice; ii) not resonating with the very people under study (i.e., people failing to see themselves in studies on others or themselves), and iii) less than useful or implementable. Thus, when approached to edit this issue, we felt *Advancing Corrections* was the optimal venue for scholars to share with practitioners, and each other, how their work has evidence-informed and/or promising implications for correctional work, practice, and services. Our issues move through the arms of criminal justice overseeing people who are or have experienced justice-involvement, with a focus on community and institutional correctional services, staff and those incarcerated or on parole/probation alike, and tangential realities as well as collateral consequences (i.e., families). Overall, our goal was to provide evidence intended to support positive growth or improvements in correctional practices around the world. Thus, our theme: “*Scholarly Reflections on Core Consideration for Correctional Practice.*”

In the rather short, direct, policy or practice-oriented articles included in the collection, each was to be grounded in experiential evidence combined with ideas to support what may work in diverse correctional services in the world. Although we recognize not all are applicable internationally, we do feel there is much to be gained by seeing where different systems and services are currently and learning what is potentially possible in a fiscally constrained correctional world, where recruitment and retention are universal challenges, and core correctional values remain rehabilitation (however defined). Although no article may be transformative for correctional services independently, we hope there are vibrant take-home messages in the issue that can help transform different services or even open eyes to both possibilities and potential. Our intention always being to reflect on what we have learned in research in a way that makes sense to generate positive change and humane outcomes.

Further, we would like to thank Jared Riley for the cover art. Jared perfectly captured scholarly reflection, portraying intellectual work carried out under confinement, as the faint shadows of prison bars fall across the desk.

We hope the issue sparks conversation and change. We are grateful to the International Corrections and Prisons Association for this opportunity.



ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association

PRISON CONDITIONS



CONCEPTUALISING THE USE OF AUTHORITY IN PRISONS

**Ben Crewe, Institute of Criminology,
University of Cambridge, UK**

Abstract

The use of authority is at the heart of prison life and quality, yet little research has explored the different ways in which authority can be deployed in prisons. Based on two axes, 'heavy-light', and 'absent-present', this article offers a conceptual framework for understanding this matter, broadening the definition of 'respect' in prison contexts and emphasising the importance of staff professionalism in determining prison quality and legitimacy.

Keywords: prisons; authority; staff professionalism; heavy/light; absent/present

Introduction

Around fifteen years ago, my colleagues Alison Liebling, Susie Hulley, Clare McLean and I undertook a comparative study of public and private sector prisons in the England & Wales prison system (for further details, see Crewe, Liebling & Hulley 2011; Crewe, Liebling & Hulley 2014). The key moment in our analysis came out of an informal team discussion about the different 'feel' of prisons within the two sectors. We asked ourselves: 'If you were deposited, blindfolded, in any of the seven institutions in our study, would you know, once the blindfold was removed, whether the prison was publicly or privately managed?' All of us felt we would, very quickly, because of a certain 'lightness' in the social and material climate of private sector prisons, by which we meant something literal – brighter, more open units – but also more relational: a sense of a less oppressive nature of staff-prisoner relationships in privately run institutions.

As well as undertaking interviews with staff and prisoners, we administered Measuring the Quality of Prison Life surveys (see Liebling & Arnold 2004) to both groups in seven prisons overall. Of the five private prisons in the study, two were evaluated particularly positively by prisoners, but two were rated very poorly. Our puzzle, then, was how all of the private establishments were characterized by 'lightness', but there was very considerable variation in quality between them. In what follows, I seek to explain these findings, and, in doing so, set out a framework for conceptualizing the use of authority in prisons with practical implications for practitioners, not least in providing a framework to help them visualize different models of authority and understand their different effects.

Literature review

It is now something of a truism that staff-prisoner relationships sit at the heart of prison life. A wide range of studies have described and demonstrated how the nature of imprisonment is shaped to a very significant degree by how prison officers exercise their power, use their discretion, and engage with the people they oversee. As Alison Liebling has shown, whether a prison officer greets a prisoner with courtesy, or is willing to give him or her a pillow when asked to do so, can be an act of existential significance (Liebling 2011; Liebling & Arnold 2004). The broader cultures among prison officers vary considerably, even within prison systems and among prisons with the same function.

A key text here is Sparks, Bottoms, and Hey's (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Based on an analysis of two high-security prisons in England & Wales, Sparks et al. (1996) described two different models of order, rooted in differences in staff cultures and practices. HMP Long Lartin operated a relatively relaxed and open regime, and granted prisoners more autonomy, which produced an environment where some prisoners felt unsafe. HMP Albany was more rigid and controlled, which generated some resentment and aggravation, that was offset to some degree by how HMP Albany delivered a fairly stable and consistent regime. Each prison, then, could claim to be legitimate on different grounds.

Part of the value of Sparks et al.'s (1996) account was how they fleshed out two quite different ways prison officers could achieve order, one via a more social or relational model, and another more rule-governed and 'situational' model. Little other work has engaged in a similar attempt to conceptualize how prisons differ in their use of authority, and why such differences matter (though see Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2005 for a similar kind of analysis of two prisons holding women in California).

Light-heavy, absent-present

If prisons that were 'light' could vary so much in quality, what determined whether they were good or bad? In all of the private establishments in our study, prisoners tended to describe custodial officers as generally 'nice people'. Often contrasting them with officers in the public sector, they said private sector staff were less likely to look down on them or to deliberately make their lives harder. Public sector staff had a more cynical and punitive orientation, more often used disparaging language, and were less likely to agree (in our staff survey) most prisoners were 'decent people' or could be rehabilitated.

Yet in the four-site comparison at the core of our study, prisoners in the public sector prisons reported more favorably on most aspects of staff-prisoner relationships, including matters such as fairness and respect. Although private sector staff were regarded as friendly and courteous, prisoners complained they lacked important forms of knowledge and jailcraft. They were decent and compassionate, and tried their hardest, but they could be 'ineffective' (i.e., unable to answer prisoners' questions or resolve their complaints). This was less the result of a willingness to be helpful and more a lack of professional competence and confidence. Put another way, 'lightness' – if defined as a positive orientation towards people in prison – was necessary but insufficient.

Likewise, certain forms of 'lightness' could be detrimental to prisoner safety and wellbeing. In the public sector prisons in our study, prisoners often commented officers could be a bit 'heavy' and overbearing in how they used their authority (e.g., 'There are some officers that throw their weight around because they're in a uniform'; 'it's a bullying culture'). However, they tended to feel confident, in the event of violent incidents on the living units, officers would deal with the situation quickly and effectively. Furthermore, although the over-use of authority could be antagonizing and provocative, prisoners appreciated an environment that, through 'supportive limit-setting' (Wachtel & McCold, 2001), protected them from their own weakness of will (i.e. with regard to drugs and violence). They 'knew where they stood', and they were generally confident officers could use their authority if needed. As one prisoner explained, 'they are not too quick to use their authority, but they will: there is no lack of authority within the staff body'.

By contrast, in some of the private prisons, prisoners described an under-regulated environment where they could feel highly unsafe. To some degree, this was because officers were naïve, permissive, or trying too hard to be friendly:

They don't want to upset anybody, which is in my book all wrong, because *they're* supposed to be the ones in power.

It's all first names and they're trying to be your friend and they're chatting [...] I think there's a lot of confusion for inmates. A lot of them think they can get away with a bit more because they're more friendly, the staff, so [prisoners are] not as well behaved, it is a bit confusing.

In other respects, they described a lack of professional capacity or 'jailcraft', often linked to levels of staff experience. Many officers were slightly nervous about using their authority, or had not been in the job for long enough to use it with a sufficient level of skill and confidence. One consequence was that they could be very inconsistent in how they exercised their power:

Sometimes they're strict on things they shouldn't be and slack for things they should be stricter on.

A lot of the staff are very young. Their inexperience shows, just in their social skills, the way they communicate with inmates: either not enough or coming at you too hard. [...] Not enough authority to be accepted and then overboard with aggression.

As the quotations illustrate, prisoners did not want officers to be unduly lenient, (i.e. to overlook rule infractions), to establish loose or inconsistent boundaries, or to fail to occupy their role as power-holders. Certainly, they did not want to be in a situation where deficits in authority might be filled by their peers:

It is mayhem sometimes. [...] They have not got a lot of control. Certain wings, the officers are not running the wings, the lads are. [...] It's not good is it? There is no authority really.

Moreover, under-policed and unpredictable environments exposed them to various forms of risk, through the power ceded to other prisoners or by enabling behaviors prisoners wanted to avoid but could be easily drawn into:

There's no structure. There's no rules. It's a free-for-all and staff barely exist. [...] I'm involved in more criminal activity in here than I was on the out. That's not good, is it? I don't think that's what prison should be for.

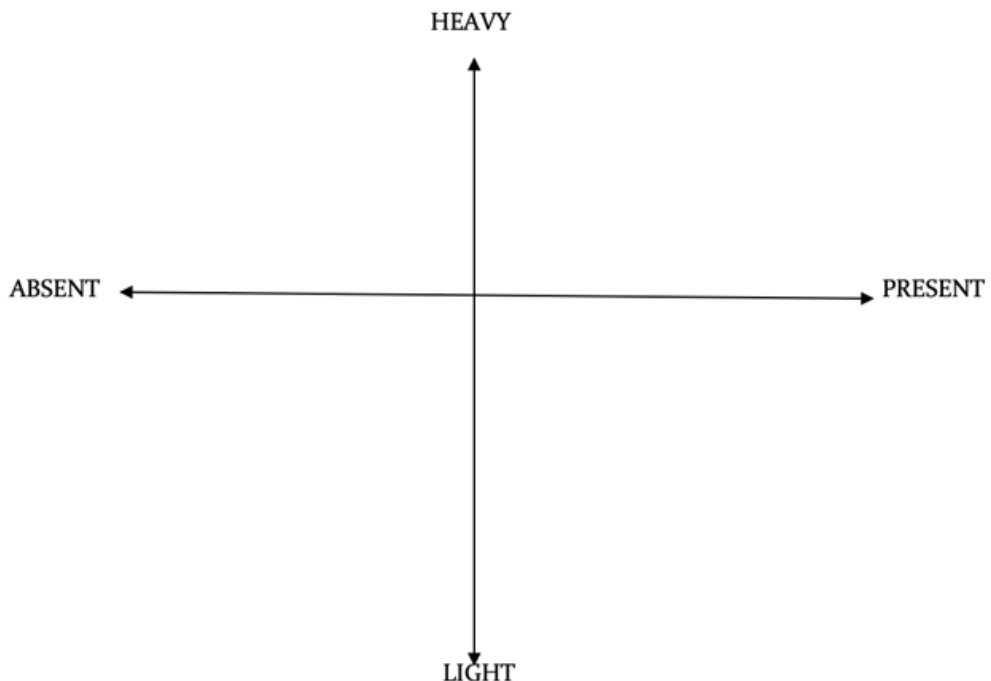


Figure 1: Heavy-light, absent-present



Our conclusion was lightness as well as heaviness could be undesirable: 'light' can mean relaxed, friendly, and co-operative, but can also mean deficient or inadequate. To distinguish between these different modes, and to describe which forms were more or less legitimate, we combined an axis running from 'heavy' to 'light' with another running from 'absent' to 'present' (see Figure 1).

Absence and presence refer to the availability and visibility of prison staff, particularly uniformed staff, the depth and quality of their engagement with prisoners, their willingness and ability to supervise and police prisoner activity, their competence in using authority, and the degree they recognize and address prisoners as moral agents.

When we undertook our study, we felt confident in placing most public sector prisons in England & Wales in the 'heavy-present' quadrant, and most private sector prisons in the 'light-absent' quadrant. According to our analysis undertaken since that time (see Crewe & Liebling 2023), prisoners generally prefer to be in 'heavy-present' prisons than 'light-absent' prisons. However, the preference depends on where exactly in each quadrant a prison sits. Those we would place closer to the corners are much less legitimate than those closer to the axes, and are damaging in different ways (i.e., very light-absent prisons have environments that feel highly insecure and dangerous, while those that are very heavy-present feel highly inhumane and oppressive).

The two remaining quadrants represent contrasting cases of institutional legitimacy. 'Heavy-absent' prisons – exemplified by the super-max – are especially illegitimate because they rely on extreme forms of situational control, without the humanity or relational security provided by staff-prisoner engagement. The environment is highly controlled, and the absence of meaningful interaction (anchored in a perception that prisoners are irredeemably immoral objects) leaves prisoners entombed in a state of relational deprivation and existential distress. Alternatively, in less severe cases (see Liebling, Arnold & Straub 2012), within a highly restrictive context, staff-prisoner relationships are distant and mistrustful, and the withdrawal of staff leaves space for exploitation and predation among prisoners. The oppressiveness of weight is combined with the insecurity of absence.

In contrast, 'light-present' represent the most legitimate quadrant in our conceptual framework. In such institutions, prison officers are vigilant and willing to use their authority, but do so judiciously. Power flows unobtrusively, through 'knowing your prisoners', and care and control are fused through relationships of quiet authority, in which prisoners are 'recognized' as complex and worthy moral beings. Such prisons tend to be small and generously-staffed with a clear purpose or philosophy that draws prisoners and staff into a shared sense of mission. But they are rare.

Implications for practice

Although our original analysis was based on a study of public and private sector prisons, our work has broad applicability for thinking about the different ways prison staff authority can be used and experienced. It also helps us understand, and draw out the implications of, what subsequently happened to prisons in England & Wales. Here, a substantial cut in resources resulted in many experienced uniformed staff members taking up offers of early retirement, and in staffing levels generally falling. As a result, public sector prisons are increasingly 'light', leading to higher levels of violence both between prisoners and against staff, and to an ongoing spiral of staff turnover, as recently recruited officers leave the job at almost the rate they are being recruited into it, reflecting an

international challenge for prison service provision.

An additional number of lessons follow. First, good outcomes cannot be assumed based on attitudes alone. That is, it is possible for prison staff to have benign intentions, but for naivety or deficiencies in knowledge, competence and confidence to prevent positive attitudes from being converted into positive prison climates. Recruiting prison officers based on their humane or rehabilitative orientations is therefore risky if this is not accompanied by suitable training and mentoring in the effective use of authority. High levels of professionalism can insulate prisoners from negative attitudes held by uniformed staff, at least to some extent.

Second, prisoners value friendliness and 'niceness', but not if these aspects of conduct are perceived to be phony or based on fear, or if they come at the expense of a willingness to impose boundaries and exert authority where appropriate. 'Respect' is defined as courtesy (being spoken to nicely, or called by one's preferred name) *and* having one's emotional, practical, and interpersonal needs taken seriously (Sennett 1993), both by uniformed staff and the wider institutional bureaucracy (Hulley, Liebling & Crewe 2012).

Third, the effective use of authority is related to levels of experience. Beyond a certain point, officers can become jaded and cynical, while some officers who appear a little unsympathetic to prisoners are doing important work in maintaining a smooth-running regime, or in providing forms of care 'on the sly', through boundary-setting, watchfulness, a supportive arm around the shoulder, and the kind of consistent regime delivery that can meet needs and provide ontological security. This kind of 'traditional-professional' culture is adjacent to much more damaging forms of cynicism and resistance, and has much more positive effects. Meanwhile, officers who are new to the job can struggle to deploy their power in appropriate ways, and need time on the job to learn 'jailcraft.'

Aside from these more practical implications, the conceptual framework used here offers a way for prison practitioners to think about the nature of their system or institution, and how it would need to change to meet standards of legitimacy. In my experience of teaching senior prison personnel over many years, this contribution – a kind of mental map, or a basis for reflection – has been more productive than any other policy recommendation I have made.

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UNCOMFORTABLE HONESTY AND SOME HOME TRUTHS: WHERE TO GO NOW FOR PRISON REHABILITATION?

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Abstract

Recent reviews and inquiries have concluded contemporary prisons are ill-equipped to rehabilitate. These highlight just how often the conditions under which meaningful rehabilitative experiences can be provided are absent, drawing attention to the pervasive criminogenic impacts of prison conditions, cultures, and regimes. In this article I argue we should welcome these critiques, as well as do more to celebrate our successes. They serve to highlight the importance of the prison environment to rehabilitative success, as well as the need to collect better evidence about the necessary and sufficient conditions for change to take place.

Keywords: rehabilitation, prison, regimes, cultures, environments

Introduction

Some of the most pressing problems correctional agencies face in their efforts to rehabilitate have come to the fore in the most recent annual report of the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales. The Chief Inspector argued the widespread use of illicit substances makes “the possibility of rehabilitation unlikely” (Taylor, 2025 p.3), considering evidence that nearly one in three random prison drug tests had produced a positive result. It was clear to the Chief Inspector that illicit substance use destabilised prisons, resulted in increased violence, and occurred in response to regimes that were described as “impoverished”. Education and work were, for example, judged to be ‘not good enough’ in three in every four of the thirty-eight inspected prisons, with more than two thirds found to be ‘poor’ or ‘not sufficiently good’ in terms of providing purposeful activity. Many of those who were interviewed reported they could simply not access the courses that were required as part of their sentence plans. The Chief Inspector further noted deficiencies in the quality of service provided, arguing there was ‘too little’ interaction between prison staff and those in custody, and many people struggled to receive assistance with even basic requests.

The Taylor (2025) report offers what can only be described as a confronting assessment of the current state of the prison service in England and Wales. It describes a system that appears ill-equipped to offer meaningful rehabilitative experiences and might even cause some to question the extent it is even serious about trying. The report has the potential to fuel cynicism about whether prison rehabilitation is even possible, let alone desirable – perhaps even offering encouragement to those who believe prisons should, first and foremost, exist to mete out harsh punishment and provide strong deterrence.

Reflections

In this article I want to share some personal reflections about the ‘uncomfortable honesty’ of the Chief Inspector in describing the current standing of rehabilitation in our prisons. The first of these is how strongly they resonate with my experience of prisons across Australasia, where I live and work. I was immediately reminded, for example, of a recent government review of the adult custodial correctional system in the State of Victoria in Australia (Victorian Government, 2022). This identified some similar challenges to those faced in England and Wales whilst also drawing attention to the negative culture that exists in too many prisons. It described, for example, a workforce that was divided – with some “genuinely committed to doing good case work” but others who were “resistant to or unwilling to meaningfully engage with people in custody” and “intent on dehumanising and exerting power and displaced control over people in custody” (p. 33). Numerous references were made in this report (based on consultations with over 1,500 individuals) to practices such as the excessive use of force and inappropriate strip searching which, when coupled with concerns about the transparency and fairness of prison disciplinary hearings, were identified as undermining trust and confidence in the Victorian correctional system. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Chief Ombudsman has also been critical of prison conditions, which were described as “frankly desolate and barren” (Boshier, 2022 p. 8) and how “time and again... [the Ombudsman] ... we find similar issues in prisons – long lock-up hours, lack of constructive activity, lack of access to clean bedding and clothes, lack of appropriate cultural provision, and a concerning use of force, seclusion, and restraint” (p. 9). My first reflection then is that England and Wales are certainly not alone in struggling to provide prison conditions in which rehabilitation is likely to occur.

I then started to wonder how correctional researchers, staff, and agencies might best respond to reports that highlight the shortcomings and failings of our prisons. I was reminded of the work of Stanley et al. (2024) who suggest that the most common response of government in response to critique is what they term intentional 'ignorance making', whereby their representatives actively seek to minimise and neutralise complaints, deflect criticism, and re-assert the legitimacy and goodness of the State. Stanley and colleagues illustrate how this can be achieved following investigations into abuse in State care through the use of a range of different strategies, including: i) the State claiming a lack knowledge of harms that have occurred; ii) offering only a narrow acknowledgement of survivors' identities and needs; iii) blaming others for causing harm; iv) engaging in bureaucratic and legal debates to deflect responsibility; v) presenting the problem in terms of the failings of individuals, rather than of systems; vi) confining abuse narratives to the past; vii) asserting new norms of partnership to suggest that problems have been resolved; and viii) imagining a decolonial future where harm does not occur. They argue this serves only to subvert open and honest conversation about the harms that have occurred, overlooks the needs of those who are affected, and avoids active discussion about whose duty it is to meet those needs, how things might be set right, and how to best reduce the chance of more harm occurring. In the context of prison rehabilitation my observation here is we also often fail to welcome 'uncomfortable honesty' about our shortcomings and, at times, respond by ignoring or disputing the conclusions, or perhaps even scapegoat those who are not really responsible for the conditions in which people in prison live and work. In fact, we work in a sector I would characterise as, at best, 'risk-averse' and, at worse, as enacting a culture of blame and/or a culture of silence when things go wrong that undermines accountability and, more generally, damages trust in our public institutions (see Butcher et al., under review).

One of the biggest problems with 'home truths', however, is that the pathway for improvement is rarely set out or obvious. There is also a very real risk the good work that happens every day in prisons around the world is simply discounted; we overlook the substantial progress that has been made in professionalising program delivery (Ramezani et al., 2022) and, importantly, forget to acknowledge just how much of a positive difference rehabilitation providers can and do make in the lives of so many. With some notable exceptions (see, for example, <https://www.hiddenheroes.uk>), it is fair to say we do not spend nearly enough time acknowledging these efforts, documenting our successes, and even learning from what has worked well. This is one area that the rehabilitation sector can clearly improve upon and would help to remind stakeholders just how ill-advised it would be to abandon rehabilitative policy and practice.

A reasonable starting point for improvement is nonetheless to acknowledge the failings of our current prison systems. There is a need here for greater honesty about the size of the task ahead which will inevitably involve acknowledging the criminogenic effects of custody - how any period of imprisonment will often only increase the risk of post-release failure (e.g., Cid, 2009). We might also engage much more critically with debates about the strength of the currently existing research evidence to show the impact of rehabilitation treatment programs on post-release success. I am thinking here about a series of recent meta-analyses (the so called 'gold standard' of evidence-based practice, see Berlin & Golub, 2014) that have examined the impact of the core Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles on post-release outcomes. These have each concluded the current evidence-base for RNR is often either largely absent or methodologically flawed, whether this relates to prisons (Beaudry et al., 2021; Fazel et al., 2024), community corrections (Duan et al., 2022), or juvenile

settings (Bijlsma et al., 2022). While some of these meta-analyses have themselves been subject to methodological critique (e.g., Bonta & Gendreau, 2024), what transpires – at least from my reading of these studies – is the evidence is by no means as clear or as persuasive as we once thought or would like to have believed (see Day & Howells, 2002).

Well-designed criminogenic treatment programs that are delivered with high levels of integrity clearly do still have the potential to make a key contribution but are probably best viewed these days as a necessary but not sufficient condition for rehabilitative success. It is becoming increasingly apparent we need 'whole of prison' responses for rehabilitative change to occur. This is considering evidence showing how other types of programming, such as prison industries and education, will also often contribute (see Cordle & Gayle, 2025) and, to return to the observations of the Chief Inspector, prison regimes and cultures do matter when it comes to post-release success.

While we still lack the evidence needed to drive investment into those regimes, policies and operating procedures, activities, and staff training programs that can be expected to deliver optimal rehabilitation outcomes, work is underway in these areas (see Galouzis et al., 2022; 2023). van Ginneken and Palmen (2023), for example, have employed multi-level analysis methods to show how differences in the shared experiences of imprisonment are relate to rehabilitative change. They were able to show empirically how positive experiences of autonomy, peer relationships, and meaningful activities – but not prison conditions per se - were each consistently associated with lower reconviction rates in the Netherlands, with good staff-prisoner relationships (including experiences of procedural justice) also identified as important. Galouzis et al. (under review) have also recently reported Australian data showing exposure to different types of prison environment over the course of a sentence, along with stability in location (fewer movements and transfers) both make a substantive contribution to post-release success. This work nonetheless only highlights how little we currently know about the rehabilitative impacts of everyday prison management practices, such as security classification, the mixing of remand and sentenced people, the use of protection and segregation, responses to prison violence, and even the role that both families and prison officers must play. We also know far too little about the contribution of rewards and privileges systems to rehabilitative progress (Elbers et al., 2022) or even how to reliably measure positive change across the course of a sentence (Day et al., 2022). We do then need to collect data that demonstrates prison rehabilitation is possible and entirely feasible if we are to allay the concerns of both critics and cynics.

Where to now?

Correctional professionals will naturally ask 'what it is they can do now to optimise the rehabilitative potential of the prisons in which they work?' In addition to continuing to advocate for and support the implementation of high quality intensive criminogenic programs for eligible participants, the various inquiries and inspections that have been conducted consistently identify the need to provide more rehabilitative prison environments – whether this means strengthening the regime, improving the climate or culture of a prison, and/or providing basic services and better infrastructure.

We can all respond by doing what we can to put these conditions in place. This will inevitably involve reducing both the supply and the demand for illicit substances and by reducing violence (the key areas identified by the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales) and creating custodial environments that treat people "with dignity, respect, and prioritises rehabilitation and return to

community life" (Victorian Government, 2023 p. 563). This might also mean focussing our attention on improving procedural legitimacy to strengthen trust in the rehabilitative agenda (see Mann et al., 2019) and to eradicate when Narey (2019) referred to as a 'shameful culture of contempt' for the incarcerated and a 'tolerance for brutality'. Recognition of the importance of voice – or the degree to which people in prison are allowed to present their evidence, state their case, and explain their views – to better decision making is likely to be critical in this respect, as are efforts to ensure all staff understand the role that they have to play in 'assisting desistance' (De Vel Palumbo et al., 2023).

Concluding comments

In reflecting on some of the uncomfortable honesty and home truths contained in recent assessments of the rehabilitative quality of our current prison systems, there is a need to think more broadly about what a high-quality rehabilitative prison might look like. This can help to identify the prison programs and conditions required to rehabilitate. There is a need to set clear benchmarks to guide external assessment, reflection, and planning such that Cullen's (2007) vision of 'rehabilitation as the guiding paradigm for corrections' can finally be realised. To achieve this, we will need greater honesty about the limitations of our current rehabilitative efforts (to acknowledge our shortcomings and mistakes and celebrate our successes) whilst also continuing to collect the evidence to show when, where, and how rehabilitative change takes place. In this way we can at least try to earn the confidence of all stakeholders and to be seen as legitimate and authentic in our efforts to rehabilitate. A firm commitment from everyone is required in circumstances where the odds are stacked against us.

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SENSING SECURITY, SENSING SAFETY

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Abstract

Security and safety are as central to prison management as their meanings are taken-for-granted. Frequently used interchangeably, their meaning elided, I explore how thinking sensorially disrupts assumptions about security and safety practices. Drawing on various pieces of prisons research, most heavily 'Sound, Order and Survival' (2024) I use three examples: locked doors indicate security, but are they experienced as safe? What of those who experience the sensory differently? Do alarms aid security as we suppose? What becomes clear when applying a sensory perspective, is the extent to which the elision of security and safety obscures understanding. This obfuscation constitutes a regime of truth which occludes processes which ostensibly seek to induce and sustain both security and safety, despite these being distinct and sometimes conflicting objectives which can work to undermine the realisation of either. How does this disrupt assumptions about practice and ask how this might influence application in the future?

Keywords: Security, Safety, Senses, Sensory Criminology, Prison



Introduction

Security, and safety, with which it is so often aligned to the point of elision, are taken-for-granted terms in the context of the prison. Charged with “protecting the public” by ensuring those in custody remain there, security is the pre-eminent concern of prison management. In other contexts, there is an intrinsic acknowledgement that “security is not and can never be an absolute state. Rather it is a relational concept whose invisibility must be continually tested against threats as yet unknown” (Zedner, 2003: p.153). In carceral spaces, where power relations are stark and movement thoroughly constrained, security takes on a particular bent to reflect its applications (Button, 2021); the processes and practices that fulfil the prison’s statement of purpose. This rather makes clarity imperative, and yet, while we have a clear idea of what it is not (a high number of recorded violent incidents, attempted escapes, incidents at height) our understanding of what constitutes security is fundamentally impeded by its continual framing in terms of safety, and vice versa (e.g., HMPPS, 2024).

Research in a local prison exploring the significance of the soundscape revealed the extent to which meanings of ‘order’ were collapsed into other categories of social behaviour, particularly power and security (Herrity, 2024). The sensory offered a means of adding texture and distinction to how these facets of prison life are understood and experienced. The same is true for security and safety, not only separate facets of prison life but also, sometimes, working in opposition, contradiction, and tension with one another. I use three examples, drawing on various pieces of prisons research, mostly focused on sound, to illustrate this point. Foregrounding the senses, I argue reveals texture and definition to these concepts, de-articulating them from one another and disrupting assumptions about what they mean, and how that works in practice.

Happiness is door-shaped?

The locked door is an image bound with an array of sensory signifiers that encapsulate the prison imaginary. It is no coincidence that “happiness is door-shaped” is an oft-uttered prison officer statement. Officer Rose explained this as referring to:

when I ring that bell for that last time, get everybody behind their doors, everybody comes in and signs for their numbers, it makes you feel good ... Nobody’s been hurt, staff or prisoners, we’ve got the right number of people we’re supposed to have, job done.

Those in custody, then, are both safe and secure. The dreaded count has been performed, numbers have been rolled, and all are where they are supposed to be. As Seamus – a man I spent time talking with in the vulnerable prisoners’ unit - explained to me though, this is by no means a comfort to all those in custody:

Banging, crying, screaming keeps us awake – they can’t do their bang up you see. They should leave the doors open, and they’d be okay, it’s all those hours locked up by themselves, they can’t take it, does their head in, then none of us sleep. Keeps us awake all night. Big problem.

These examples at once illustrate the distinction between staff and prisoner perspectives and amplify that between safety and security. Here, the successful operation of practices designed to ensure the prison runs smoothly and those in custody kept precisely where the prison determines they should be, works in tension with those individuals who find time behind the door interminable. This echoes Valverde’s call to “excavate contestable assumptions about space and time...embedded in contemporary security arrangements” (Armstrong, 2014: p.392 on Valverde, 2012). For those “crying”

and “screaming” in distress, time behind the door stretches before them in vertiginous multitudes. The ontological insecurity of being so tightly imprisoned corrodes their wellbeing and, consequently, threatens their physical safety. The count has been successful, all are locked in – “nobody’s been hurt, we’ve got the right number of people we’re supposed to have” but what of those individual threats to safety “as yet unknown” (Zedner, 2003). Thinking about security and safety in this way raises questions about whether practices designed to sustain them operate in different spatial and temporal dimensions. Security measures are pre-emptive, those for safety responsive. Security works at the national or institutional level, safety, more frequently to mitigate damage incurred by the individual.

There are numerous ways in which time behind the door can work to undermine security practices in addition to self-harm. “Window warriors” found plenty of opportunity to shout and bully occupants of other cells, a habit more common amongst younger prisoners. In an environment where so much of life is conducted beyond the limited, or occluded peripheries of vision, sound and the activities it signifies offers an array of opportunities for ‘sousveillance’ for those sufficiently adept to interpret them (Herrity, 2020). ‘Sousveillance’ refers to practices of surveillance from below. Those held in custody frequently possess sophisticated attunement to activity around the prison, the knowledge of which can work to undermine its stability. At HMP Midtown, Stretch informed me he could “feel” vibrations of violence through the walls of his cell, and gained additional information from observing staff habits as well as listening to radio announcements. His safety and survival were therefore bound up with acquisition of elicited information that, at least theoretically, conversely undermined prison security.

“I have been forgotten”

While visiting a category ‘C’ prison (often referred to as “training” prisons in the jurisdiction of England and Wales) I talked with Ted, a prisoner who was profoundly deaf, about his experiences inside. His first sentence, he spoke (through the less-than-ideal medium of an interpreter) of the difficulty discerning what was going on when locked behind the door, because he could not hear shouts or doors unlocking. He had been forgotten despite clear signage indicating he could not hear, missing meals and exercise. As a consequence, he would try his door repeatedly, using his TV as an indicator of when unlock might occur. For this man, systems designed to underscore security – timed unlock and a fixed regime – worked to profoundly undermine his sense of safety. He had no confidence his basic needs would be met, and simple accommodations for his deafness were routinely ignored – either because he was not unlocked or received no indication that he had been. For Ted, a commonplace example of institutional thoughtlessness had profound implications on his feelings of being safe.

As the work of Kelly-Corless on d/Deaf people in prison (e.g., 2017) illustrates, security practices (e.g., timed unlock, regime organisation) can have profoundly different implications for the sensorially impaired. This works both in terms of safety for individuals and, potentially, security. Systematic failure to adequately adjust for the needs of the sensorially impaired can render prisoners and the prison vulnerable (e.g., by inappropriately using other prisoners for interpreting or to provide care and support). Sensory overwhelm and overstimulation are facets of a host of differences present in considerably greater numbers amongst those held in prison than the general population. Sound sensitivity is broadly associated with these conditions – neurodivergence, trauma, posttraumatic stress - and can have drastic implications for outcomes (Anwar et al., 2025, Stickney et al., 2023).

Prisons are sensorially distinct places, often particularly noisy for considerable portions of the day. This can present a profound challenge for those in whom loud and/or unexpected noise can induce feelings of distress, aggravation, disorientation, and discomfort (Herrity, 2024). Security practices work at national, regional, and institutional levels in ways which obfuscate the challenges to shoring up personal safety, to which those individuals identifying outside the narrow parameters of “young, white, able-bodied, hearing males” are subject (Kelly-Corless & McCarthy, 2025). Banging gates, mass-movement, shouting, radios, unpleasant textures and smells, unwanted or unexpected touch can all induce sufficient discomfort and/or distress to prompt undesirable response. As someone identifying as autistic held at HMP Midtown explained:

'Sound, you say sound? Only the keys and banging, they're difficult to cope with. They draw, they draw ... hang heavy on my shoulders. When I hear the keys coming it makes me anxious. It makes me really anxious. If they could put me somewhere quiet, away from the noises?'

Attending to the soundscape allows for a consideration of different levels of experience simultaneously. Listening to security practices enables us to hear both institutionally established routines - banging of gates and jangling of keys - and how these effect individuals in profoundly different and sometimes deleterious ways, hanging 'heavy on' their 'shoulders'.

"It's designed to put you on the floor"

In prison the purpose of security alarms is straight-forward and self-explanatory though their effect arguably less so. Institutionally emanating sensory signifiers were often viewed as additional dimensions of punishment by those with whom I spoke. Both prison staff and those held there spoke of the need to extract the prison smell and sonic afterlife from their heads and clothing. The soundscape was consistently identified both as a site for contestations of power (e.g., loud music), and source of additional sanction, though it was sometimes difficult to extricate intention from the limits of practical consciousness. Banging gates and the use of hand dryers in the wing staff toilets at unsociable hours were sometimes viewed as deliberate provocations, designed to disturb the quality of precious, fragile sleep. Sleep, of course, can prove instrumental to health and wellbeing in institutional settings where you 'Wake up sore, you wake up angry' (O'Mara & Bonser, 2025). The piercing security alarm, which sounded frequently when I arrived at HMP Midtown but was used less often as time went by, was a specific source of ill-feeling. Different prisoners held the opinion the security alarm had been designed to incapacitate them. It did not seem to occur that this would also, presumably, be true for everyone who worked there. *'You know that's made to put you on the floor?'* (Lugs). 'Sonic warfare' is increasingly recognised as comprising a suite of technologies to impose dread, uncertainty, and confusion in opponents. In the prison, where those living and working in its spaces had little ability to curate their sensory environment, the regular, piercing indication that somewhere, something was 'kicking off' was an unwelcome intrusion on the person and day. The implications for erosion of perception of legitimacy as well as conflict between safety and security require little expansion here.

However, what was interesting at Midtown was the extent of a focus on the impact of the security alarm revealed it was negatively affecting wellbeing and was implicated in erosion of the sustenance of a sense of stability. The very thing the alarm was designed to do. In the context of Midtown at least – an unusually small, local prison, the significance of which should not be understated – the alarm was increasingly recognised as heightening a sense of precarity. In a prison space small

enough to ensure other means of signalling the need for additional staff back-up, the disruption and signalling 'trouble' the alarm represented outweighed its usefulness. Diane, a relatively recent addition to the resettlement team, identified the decline in use as a direct and systematic result of a change in leadership. This heralded a notably stable period for the prison which endured for much of my year-long research but was profoundly impacted by a variety of external pressures, amongst them the nationally enforced tobacco ban. Centring the sensory, specifically sound, as a means of scrutinising this relatively simplistic, but deeply ingrained, security measure revealed the intrinsically contradictory impact of this taken-for-granted aspect of prison life. Doing so uncovered the extent to which this could be viewed as deliberately damaging, but also how security measures themselves demand persistent analytical enquiry to guard against counter-productivity. Many factors came together to ensure a period of relative stability at HMP Midtown, and it would be a gross over-simplification to suggest the broad cessation of security alarms was more than a symptom. Nevertheless, in the case of HMP Midtown, at this specific point in time, the use of security alarms was surprisingly counter-intuitive.

Prison life is characterised by the predictably messy, multifarious complexities of humanity lived in the round. Added to this are the convolutions and contradictions presented by both constraining a group of people with complex needs and meeting them, of "looking after them with humanity". I have spoken at length about the murkiness and co-governance of a prison humming with the everyday give-and-take that characterises a "good" day. Absolute security, whatever that means, would be as undesirably oppressive as unrealistically attainable – a "chimera" (Zedner, 2003). What becomes clear when applying a sensory perspective though, is the extent to which the elision of security and safety obscures understanding. This obfuscation constitutes a regime of truth which occludes processes which ostensibly seek to induce and sustain both security and safety, despite these being distinct and sometimes conflicting objectives which can work to undermine the realisation of either. What I have aimed to do in this piece is offer a provocation to disrupt assumptions about how these concepts are operationalised, what acknowledging the competing and sometimes conflicting reality of how they are experienced does for our understanding and how we might apply this in future practice.

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WHAT HAVE I LEARNED ABOUT CORRECTIONAL PRACTICE AFTER A PROFESSIONAL LIFETIME IN PRISONS RESEARCH?

**Alison Liebling, Institute of Criminology,
University of Cambridge, UK**

Abstract

In 2019, feeling somewhat burned out and demoralised by what I was seeing in prisons, I applied for a 3-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship and took a break. I wanted write a book synthesising my 'life's work' in prisons, trying to find the narrative: what had I learned about prisons in all this time spent researching them (30 years)? Was there a way of articulating what went on in the best prisons, in the equilibrium, the ordinary human place where moments of expansion or self-redefinition occurred? Would a full description of this kind of work help to grow more of it? Finally, 5 years later, the book is complete. I have called it *Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places*. It will be published by Oxford University Press in 2026. Writing it took me in some unexpected directions. In this article I introduce some of its key themes and try to reflect on some of its practical implications.

Keywords: Humanity, Moral climates, Prison staff, Human survival, Personal growth

Introduction - The current scene: a lack of moral and political imagination?

Around 11 million people are held in prisons throughout the world, either as pre-trial detainees or as sentenced prisoners (World Prison Brief, 2024). The overall trend is upwards. The world prison population has grown by 27% since the year 2000. Prisons have become big business as the private sector offers apparently affordable and speedy solutions to the expansion problem, and experiments with technology and other innovations. Prison population size is, as we know, largely a political choice.

In England and Wales, the imprisonment rate is just over the world mean at 145 per 100,000 population (up from 124 per 100,000 in 2000), producing a prison population of around 88,000. This figure brings with it substantial overcrowding (24% overall) despite the opening of several large new prisons and an increase in the size and complexity of existing sites. Construction has begun in the grounds of Highpoint prison in Suffolk, near Cambridge, making it the largest prison in the UK. It will hold over 2,000 prisoners once the new accommodation opens in summer 2027. How did prisons get so large, when our most respected and consensus-building analysis of prisons and their troubles clearly stated that prisons “should not normally hold more than 400 prisoners” (Woolf & Tumim, 1991)? Large prisons are hard to operate, navigate, and permeate socially.

Managing overcrowding (and other troubles, like increasing violence) is currently distracting senior officials in England and Wales from addressing fundamental questions about what prisons are for, whether they are achieving their stated aims, and what ‘good enough’ prisons might look like. The Prisons Inspectorate have declared serious concerns about the quality of regimes in most prisons as they fall below standard expectations on respect, safety, purposeful activity, and resettlement (HMIP 2025). The Chief Inspector sent four Urgent Notification letters to the Secretary of State for Justice in 2024 to 2025. He found ‘appalling outcomes’ at Wandsworth, Manchester, Winchester and Rochester (the first category C prison where this protocol has been invoked). There is a crisis of prison staff recruitment, retention, and well-being, partly caused by deteriorating regime and workforce conditions. Lower staffing levels and inexperience have led to a retreat from prison landings, or a reluctance by officers to use their authority, altering the balance of power in favour of influential prisoners. Homicides have become ‘a thing’: around 7 or 8 per year in recent years¹. This is unprecedented.

My research colleagues and I at the Prisons Research Centre in Cambridge carried out what we call an ‘MQPL +’ at Rochester in 2016 (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life-Plus). This is a team-based moral and cultural diagnosis of a prison based on observation, interviews, and a moral quality of life survey with staff and prisoners. It is a methodology we developed over many years, which produces a reliable account of a prison’s functioning and treatment of prisoners. We have carried out over 40 such exercises over the last 15 years, most at the request of the Prison Service in order to inform improvement agendas. Eight of us were present and immersed in the prison for most of a week². The results, and the experience, were dismal. People said things like:

‘I would argue that no one runs the prison. It just exists.’ (Prisoner)

‘They’ve beaten me. This prison has beaten me. I’ve been Rochester-ed.’ (Prisoner)

1 Erratum: please note that the print version of this article incorrectly shows this figure as a percentage.

2 Alison Lieblich, Ben Crewe, Ezgi Taboglu, Martha Morey, Amy Ludlow, Aiden Cope, Bethany Schmidt, & Borah Kant.

'The prison is what it is ... There are no strengths, really.' (Officer)

Staff were disaffected and openly admitted to doing the bare minimum in their day (we observed several staff sitting in offices, behind closed doors). They were not interested in rehabilitation or meaningful engagement, nor were they aware of the impact they had on prisoners when they used a dismissive tone, were inconsistent, or failed to follow through with requests or promises. The prison was disorganised and uninspiring in a slow-paced kind of way, and drug use was rife. The MQPL scores were very low (14/17 dimensions were scored below a 'neutral' three out of five). The dimension 'humanity' was scored at 2.74, meaning that few prisoners agreed that they were being treated with humanity. This is below a threshold we would argue should represent a bare minimum standard (Auty and Liebling 2024). Senior managers were a bit helpless.

Researching a bleak prison that still had the ancient sign, 'Rochester Borstal', etched on a door was heart breaking, like so much of what we saw from around 2015. We were measuring moral decline. Why did it take another ten years before this problem became 'urgent'? We have an outstanding prisons inspectorate, a research literate prison service, and a history of relationship-based, values-driven innovation in approaches to prisons work, including the once lauded Borstal system. Prisons have never been problem-free places, but something has got substantially worse. Austerity has brought all the risks of 'the new penology' to the fore. An over-bureaucratised, de-professionalised, risk-averse, politically-vulnerable prison system cannot act constructively, or in the public interest. As Simon and Feeley warned several decades ago, the new penology has 'trouble with the concept of humanity' (1995: p. 173).

One of the things that drew me into prisons research was the life, energy and humanity I found in unexpected places (therapeutic communities, small units, lifer units, workshops, gyms, and so on), as skilled prison staff and specialists worked with hard-to-reach populations to help provide support, and sometimes turn lives around. Prisons were very varied in their moral climates and practices, but they were not unbearable or cruel, on the whole. Some were inspired. What prison staff achieved at their best seemed like a masterpiece to me. A combination of ingredients appeared in these prisons – vision, compassion, courage, vocation ... the creation of spaces where human capacities could be nurtured. These prisons were led by outstanding Governors. Perhaps what I saw, in those early days, was something like 'moral giftedness' (Briggs, 2000: p. 13). I have tried, in the book I will introduce below, to describe what these prisons are like, what underpins them, and how hard people in them have to work in order to find stability and create purpose:

Underlying the masterpiece there is muddle and adjustment, compromise and tension, trial and error, but there is also an 'infrastructure' in which people feel they have value (Liebling, forthcoming).

Three years after our study of Rochester prison, our longstanding rolling research contracts with HMPPS, which included a requirement to carry out at least three MQPL + exercises per year, mainly in 'prisons of operational concern', ended. COVID put a stop to all prisons research. Regimes were curtailed. The timing was fortuitous, in a bleak kind of way. Feeling somewhat burned out and demoralised by what I was seeing, I applied for a three-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship and took a break. I wanted to write a book synthesising my 'life's work' in prisons, trying to find the narrative: what had I learned about prisons in all this time spent researching them (30 years)? Was

there a way of articulating what went on in the best prisons, in the equilibrium, the ordinary human place where moments of expansion or self-redefinition occurred? Would a full description of this kind of work help to grow more of it? Finally, five years later, the book is complete. I have called it *Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places*. It will be published by Oxford University Press in 2026. Writing it took me in some unexpected directions.

Ordinary virtues, human survival and personal growth

Without humanity, 'a person lives in the dominion of death' (Liebling, forthcoming; and Norrie, 2025: p. 143).

Aristotle's Prison is about what kinds of environments grow the life force rather than extinguish it, and why. It is anchored in data, gathered throughout a professional lifetime in prisons research, and draws on different projects which have all pointed in the same direction: telling us that a) prisons have moral ecologies, and b) prisoners, like all human beings, need the virtues. There is, it seems, a moral reality to the universe. The empirical data from three research projects on suicides in prison, for example, show that we are more likely to 'opt for death' (as Camus put it) in morally depriving environments: in places where we don't matter. This helps us to address the 'truly philosophical problem' of suicide: working out what makes life bearable or meaningful. Human beings do better in environments that support our humanness. There are 'vital needs' of the human soul that operate like hunger (as Simone Weil said). The absence of these ordinary virtues – in and out of prison – endangers our survival.

Survivable prisons *pay attention* to human persons: they are responsive, fair, safe, active, and well-balanced. I describe the moral quality thresholds that survivable prisons need to reach, and the efforts some senior management teams have made to get there. Such climates are difficult to realise. Sometimes they are achieved and then lost again. Increasing imprisonment use has made it harder to sustain this minimum threshold.

What about beyond survival? The rest of my book considers the key differences between disabling and enabling moral climates more generally, drawing on data from the best prisons I have studied, as well as the more usual, depriving majority. When prisoners are treated, and offered skilled help, as experiencing subjects, with possible futures, they are more likely to become fuller selves. Prisoners describe these best places as 'oases', in contrast to the 'deserts' they are more used to (Liebling, forthcoming). In these prisons, 'the wire to the world begins to vibrate' (Rosa, 2022); 'actual life' is found. Beyond survival, a long way from despair, is growth.

Philosophers and theologians (and more recently, some social theorists and prison psychotherapists) have been saying for centuries that human beings flourish in certain social conditions. This book developed from seeing, again and again, the contrast between life-sapping and exceptional, life-generating, prison regimes. In one prison in particular I found a place where humanising moments seemed to be built into the foundations. The prison was by no means perfect (what prison could be?) and these ingredients can be seen elsewhere, but something made it possible to see the differences starkly.

Briefly put, an outstanding prison has a *clear direction of travel*. Staff think carefully about who they

are locking up. This was, in the case I describe, explicitly trained for:

It's like a sort of mindfulness. When that key is in the door, think about the man behind the door. Staff feedback was, when they do this, they have a much better day. It seems so small, but it is transformative (Specialist).

This prison housed two Psychologically-Informed Planned Environments (PIPES) operated as a joint venture between National Health Service and Prison Service staff. The intention of these units also informed practice elsewhere in the establishment, which was unusually relational. A combination of psycho-social expertise and ordinary humanity took the prison environment over a typical threshold, at which point everything that mattered changed. This was not just more of something; the prison entered a completely different state. More of the parts were working. The 'between' became a source of energy.

Observing what I saw in this prison in particular led me back to a literature I thought I had left behind: to novelist George Eliot and the philosophers she translated; to philosopher-theologian Martin Buber, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, and social theorist, Hartmut Rosa. I found a good fit between the data from several prison projects and their ideas.

In many ways, human beings act like the rest of nature, which is full of not-quite-formed potential. Even remote or tiny features of the environment can profoundly affect the movement of this potential, in positive or negative directions. There is an 'implicate order' underlying what is explicit and measurable: this includes intentions, values, meaning, attitudes, speaking tones, beliefs or assumptions about our potential, and understandings about crime, punishment and human nature. These ideas circulate around and act on us in ways we cannot see. But they shape outcomes. So (I am told) the behaviour of a particle (in quantum physics) is determined by the shape of the whole³. Spinoza (who is coming back into fashion) described this 'natural wholeness' in his 17th century *Ethics* (translated by George Eliot in the 1850s). Many practitioners understand this connected-up fact about the world deeply, but don't have a language in which to express it professionally, or an evidence base that supports them. Some are experiencing a feeling of crisis at the move away from relational aspects of their work. Paying more attention to 'the dynamic nature of the whole' may help in prison work not just because relational environments *add* something to existing practice, but because this model reflects reality more accurately than our modern 'component'-based models (that is, the arguably fragmented intervention approach).

Survivable prisons treat prisoners as fully alive. They do not 'contain' but facilitate. They build 'a between': a resonant place whose vibrations we actively respond to, where we are recognised as whole, complex people with inner lives and future potential. Martin Buber described this idea using the language of *I-Thou* relations. In these kinds of environments, because of how they are seen, prisoners are more likely to find something *within themselves* that leads them in the direction of vitality and hope. At the same time, they learn, through being treated attentively (with something Rowan Williams calls 'reverence'), that the world is made up of other persons - of *Thou's*. 'If I am a *Thou*, you must be too'. These experiences, available in special, exceptional places, between peers, or between staff

3 A physicist talking about measurement said, 'I describe it in terms of what it might become next' (Allday, personal communication 2025). This is tricky: applied to human beings this does not imply 'blind faith' in a particular outcome, but it is a helpful conceptual orientation.

and prisoners, can be life changing. People who have had insufficient experience of being treated as a *Thou* but continue to be treated as an *It*, may fail to develop their full potential or see others clearly. I argue in my book that being treated as a *Thou* helps us become a better *I*.

Contrasting prisons with high rates of suicide and distress, lower rates of suicide and distress, and prisons in which meaning and personal growth become possible, suggests (to me) that the life force seems to be affirmed or extinguished by the presence or absence of a particular vision of personhood, structured by this concept of 'the between'. This suggestion is consistent with recent work by Hartmut Rosa (and others) who argue that our relationship to the world requires 'resonance' if it is to be a good one (2019).

Prison officers' relationships with prisoners have another, related purpose. They act like 'good lighting' on a prison wing, making right decisions and fine judgments easier to make. When they are more *I-Thou* than *I-It* - that is, when prisoners are treated as 'experiencing subjects' rather than 'experienced objects' - the day goes better. Without relationships, prison officers operate in a fog. Philosophers have talked about this too: we need be able to read each other's faces if we are to form fair visions of each other. Sometimes prisoners *are* violent. This is a dynamic rather than static state shaped by environmental conditions (as Professor David Cooke recently argued at the ICPA conference, 2025; see also Cooke, 2023). The problem for staff on busy prison wings is making refined and reasonable judgments about risk and potential without closing down possibilities or creating a sense of injustice. This is a fine craft. Penal policy should not be making this fundamental task harder than it already is. The best prison officers develop, and use, considerable practical wisdom⁴. As one prison officer said:

If I did everything by the book out there it would be chaos. You need characters to do this. It only works within relationships. The problem is the trap - of not being consistent and getting favourites. Young staff fall into that trap. It takes time to find the balance. You can play around with the rules but in a genuine way, not as a weak link. You have to get the right result, think deeper than your eight-hour shift. (Officer, fieldwork notes)

Thinking 'deeper than your eight hour shift' requires reflection, the building of professional confidence, the support of managers, and reasonable numbers on a wing.

In overly managerialist, new penological, *I-It* climates the world becomes mute, sterile, and damaging; individuals become devitalized. Many prison services have hardened into a world of *It*. This creates existential problems for those trying to work in the system, as well as those trying to endure it. These dynamics are at work in human lives in and out of prison:

Without sustaining relationships with others, our selves unravel. But we also need order and boundaries. (Liebling, forthcoming).

Implications for practice: What would lead to improvement?

Give us a prison for 10 years, a category B establishment. Let us rewrite the way we run it. Make it thoroughly relational. Give it proper leadership. Train and supervise the staff. Recruit them carefully. Don't make it cheap. Bring in the arts, any kind of creativity, enrichment, proper work, psychosocial therapy, the community. Keep it person-centred. This is soul matter.

4 I hope to take this idea forward in an applied way with my colleagues Joel Harvey and Laura Bowden in the future.

(Retired policy, clinical and commissioning advisor 2025)

The book has been written not as a 'practice-guide' but as an analysis of what prison environments do, what good looks like, why this is the case, and what some troubling threats to good practice seem to be. What follows are first thoughts about the policy and practitioner implications of my account. Some are broad and might be politically out of reach but if we don't talk about them, they are even less likely to be within reach. Other suggestions are more concrete.

One of my conclusions is that just punishment is impossible in unjust prisons. Sentencing practice needs to make meaningful and survivable prison terms likely (that is, more than occasionally possible). Prisoners should have access to moral opportunities in prisons: to meaningful days and relationships with the world. They should not be subjected to forms of imprisonment that treat them as 'dead souls' (Hamm 2019). Nothing short of a radical re-think about the way we currently punish is going to solve the current prisons crisis. Prison staff are voting with their feet – they don't want to do meaningless or dangerous work. We can't expand our way out of this catastrophe: increasing capacity causes as many problems as it resolves.

There are resources out there that might help in that rethinking process: the stage play *Punch*⁵ is stimulating cultural as well as policy change, building knowledge about the role of restorative justice by demonstrating its power. The play is reaching many publics and changing minds about retributive-only models. A thoughtful book by punishment scholar Professor Alan Norrie (*Rethinking Criminal Justice: Punishment, Abolition and Moral Psychology*) proposes that mature responses to offending seek reconciliation, forgiveness and atonement. Criminal justice should be designed 'to reflect our nature as human beings', he suggests, as 'the animal that thinks and loves' (Norrie, 2025). Organisations like the Common Ground Justice Project, Penal Reform Solutions, Untold, Unlocking Potential, The Growth App, Spark Inside, Shift, and many others in the UK, are working energetically to challenge the assumptions that 'the public' (including victims) simply want more punishment or that people who have offended can't have good futures. The public want to feel safe and live in decent communities. The vast majority of those who face prison sentences want to live good or better lives in those communities too. A grass roots/lived experience campaign to humanise and scale back criminal justice is brewing. We should not leave this bigger picture out in working to improve penal systems.

Closer to the ground, one of the fundamental changes required within existing penal systems is prioritising staff professionalism and nurturing or valuing the professional identity of prison officers. Officers are left to navigate most of the key contradictions of imprisonment without guidance. The penal vision needs to be clearer. Prison staff training needs to be longer, broader, and more varied. It needs to equip staff with all the tools they need to do the job with professional confidence. The Unlocked model, with its expert approach to teaching and learning, coaching, mentoring and support, and its careful placement of new entrant staff in prisons in clusters, has 'blazed a trail' over ten years. This experience should be built on (see Fletcher-Wood and Porter 2025). Their catch phrase, 'purpose not power' captures something of the role of *intention* in leading better prison landings. The Prison Service organisation needs to follow through on its promise to 'build back better' via a more professional approach to staff recruitment, training and development. Governors, for their part, should be carefully grown, supported, and matched to prisons. They should stay longer than the

5 A theatre production by James Graham based on the book, *Right from Wrong* by Jacob Dunne (2023).



startling average of two years but be relieved when they struggle. The best Governors seem to me to be always building 'a between'. They like staff and prisoners. They also need mentoring, strong networks, and succession plans.

Some principles a decent penal system should adhere to are transparency (don't hide or obfuscate data), respect (anything that dehumanises people won't work), balance (don't neglect violence but don't be subsumed by it) and a growth-orientation. A prison that is truly person-centred has to prioritise and work with human *potential*. Rehabilitative, intentionally humane prisons, that are also well-organised and consistently managed, tend to have better outcomes in all the areas that practitioners care about. They have less violence, fewer suicides, and lower levels of anger or political charge, which can fuel radicalisation.

Managers should make every possible use of humanising and relationship-building practices: Dialogue, music and songwriting, art, theatre, education, philosophy, horticulture, yoga, meditation: anything that builds a 'between'. One of the most promising developments I have witnessed in recent years has been the willingness of prison services to draw on lived experience organisations with hugely beneficial effects (albeit there are also risks of exploitation). These are inherently *Thou* contributions. The shared understanding in those who work in such organisations structures out disrespect (see Schmidt 2020).

Research can help those planning and managing prisons in all kinds of ways, but only if some kind of infrastructure is built. Mutual understanding grows with time, trust, and exposure to shared struggles. Sometimes the deepest struggles practitioners face are surprisingly intellectual: for example, it helps to make distinctions (e.g., some forms of order provide 'freedom' rather than 'justice'; some of the most intense struggles between staff and managers are rooted in their different time horizons⁶). Our primary task, as a research community, is to get the description right. Studying outstanding practice – prisons in the equilibrium, or prison officers at their best – might get us further than always studying 'problems'. If we do our prisons research carefully enough, we can sometimes find where the line between humanity and inhumanity might be drawn, or where the kind of balance that builds better futures might be found. Feeding this back into a receptive organisation that 'talks back' feels like a purposeful part of our growth as prison scholars.

Finally, we should always consider implementation. The best initiatives I have seen in my prisons research life have been exceptionally well and self-consciously implemented. Often the right policies and ideas already exist. They just never operate as they should. Better outcomes can be found in evaluations if we factor out those prisons that never did what they intended. How to sustain good practice over time, particularly in the face of political ambush, is another open-ended question.

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6 *Prison staff are inherently tradition and experience-oriented, whereas senior managers are increasingly abstract and future-oriented.*

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INMATE SUBCULTURE IN CORRECTIONAL SYSTEMS: THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW SUBCULTURE THEORY FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article explores a new development concerning inmate subculture in the form of the Exportation Theory. The South African correctional system has developed into an exporter of crime into society. There are several contributing factors ranging from poor staff policies, inmate developments, the role of technology, and Constitutional court decisions. Theorising about the new developments is not easy within the limited scope of this contribution. However, scientists and practitioners alike should take notice of the developments and the contribution it makes to best practices, or rather, in this case the absence of best practices. Gangsterism is central to the new theory and the poor role the criminal justice system plays in general, and corrections in particular, necessitates that new approaches should be considered. The article also calls for more research into the phenomenon.

Keywords: Exportation theory, inmate subculture, gangsterism, crime in correctional centres, deprivation theory, importation theory

Introduction

Correctional institutions are closed environments with a heterogeneous moral and emotional climate, causing the formation of different social orders within systems (Slade, Kelbakiani & Tsagareli, 2020). Generally, the social order is formed by the institutional culture, in coexistence with the criminal subculture of the correctional system. Inmates are socialised into the institutional culture (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2001).

Inmates' adaptation to their physical environment has been termed prisonisation (Clemmer, 1940). Naderi (2014) describes it as adapting to the culture and social life of the incarcerated society and dominant inmate subculture. Sentence length is directly related to adoption of the inmate subculture norms and values (Clemmer, 1940).

Inmate subculture refers to unique social structures with distinct norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours that develop amongst inmates in adaptation to correctional environments (LegalClarity, 2025). It encompasses unwritten rules, specialised language, and informal systems that shape relationships and interactions in response to forced limitations, like freedom and others. Origins are historically influenced by two primary factors: deprivation and importation. Researchers (Jiang & Fisher-Giorlando, 2002) find support for both the deprivation and importation models. Cheeseman (2003) argues that integrated theories of the two models have offered new understanding of the crime phenomenon.

However, Luyt (2018) coined a new inmate culture with the term "exportation model" where the correctional environment now executes significant prison-like and other criminal influences on society itself. This is observed as a new development trending in South Africa with origins in the mid 1990's, but where full fruition was reached since around 2015. Crime export from inside the correctional system to society is now fully flexed.

The aim of this manuscript is to introduce this new inmate subculture theory, coined as the Exportation Theory. Inmate subculture directly influences the unique need for social order, but is shaped by fundamentals within incarceration, which will also be addressed. I briefly discuss the deprivation and importation theories, while the emphasis falls on new developments, at least in the South African correctional context, and their influence on best practices within the correctional environment.

Background

The formation of inmate subculture is traditionally influenced by two primary factors: deprivation and importation. Deprivation theory suggests that the harsh realities of incarceration compel inmates to create a new social order to cope with psychological and emotional stresses (Shammas, 2017). On the other hand, the Importation theory posits that inmates import pre-existing norms, values, and behaviours from outside society into the prison. These external influences are then adapted and integrated into the closed environment (Shamas, 2017). The subculture becomes a coping mechanism to the unique challenges of prison life.

The new Exportation theory, however, originates from South African criminal justice and gangsterism (Luyt, 2018). It probably started with the notorious Staggie twins and their Hard Livings gang, who



began dealing drugs as teenagers in the 1970s. Their reign partly ended in August 1996, when Rashaad was killed in a vigilante attack by People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) members. Twenty-three years later (2019) the twin brother, Rashied was killed in the same street, in front of their home. In 2003, Rashied Staggie was sentenced to 15 years for kidnapping and rape after ordering the gang rape of a 17-year-old girl (Voice Reporter, 2020). An alleged 28s gang leader was associated with his killing (Nene, 2024). The 28 gang is a long-standing prison gang, and it is theorised that the Hard Livings gang interfered in the domain of the traditional prison gangs, creating inevitable conflict, and that resulted in the exportation of prison gangs to the streets.

Gang proliferation in South Africa has a long history. There was always a clear distinction between street gangs and prison gangs. However, today prison gangs wield significant influence both inside correctional facilities and in outside communities **from inside correctional centres**. Highly organised, gangs maintain strict hierarchies and codes of conduct, extending their reach through networks of former inmates and family connections (Ifearless, 2025), and correctional staff. Today, gang violence remains one of South Africa's most pressing social challenges, despite strategies against it.

Three existing inmate subculture theories

The inmate subculture is historically maintained under either the deprivation theory, or the importation theory, or a combination, known as the integrated theory.

Deprivation theory

Sykes (1958) sought to understand why inmates develop their own subcultures during incarceration. Sykes formulated the pains of imprisonment, leading to gang formation, and identifiable by deprivation of autonomy, liberty, goods and services, heterosexual intimacy, and security. Losses caused by incarceration can be mitigated through inmate social interaction (Sykes, 1958). Inmates unite for cooperation, or they withdraw into self-satisfaction. Both reactions are adaptations to deprivation (Luyt, 2018).

Importation theory

Irwin and Cressey (1962) argue that not all inmate behaviour result from prison environment deprivation, creating three categories:

- Those oriented toward a criminal subculture, due to values inherent to dimensions of the professional career criminal.
- Those oriented toward the inmate subculture, inmates who seek positions of influence, power and sources of information.
- Those oriented toward a legitimate subculture, not forming not part of the criminal subculture before entering prison and reject involvement in the inmate subculture while incarcerated.

A combination of career criminal dimensions gives origin to the inmate subculture. Although the criminal and inmate subcultures are conflicting, they share values. Irwin and Cressey (1962) argue that it is not known how much the first two categories influence the third (legitimate subculture), but they hypothesise that all three categories import patterns of knowledge, skills and attitudes from past experience into the prison.

Integration theory

The integration model argues that both the above theories influence inmates (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2001; Luyt, 2018). As a result, some inmates acquire pre-prison experiences, while others do so after incarceration. The integration model theorises that each inmate has earlier criminal experience that is integrated with subculture values.

The Exportation model as a potentially new inmate subculture theory

The influence of South African prison gangs had largely been limited to the correctional environment. During the 1990s, a new phenomenon occurred. These gangs began to function outside the prison environment with initial activities largely limited to the Western Cape (Roloff, 2014). When this occurred, Luyt (2018) identified it to be a new trend (more than just an occasional occurrence) and coined it as the exportation model.

Meanwhile, the tendency grew into a fully-fledged phenomenon. By 2025 it was so well developed that newspaper reporters (Fengu, 2025) asked questions like "Are hit-style murders being plotted from St. Albans prison?" The Eastern Cape Transport and Community Safety MEC raised alarm over claims that serious crimes were being planned inside correctional facilities (Fengu, 2025).

Where prison gangs struggled to make ends meet for decades, the so-called Numbers gangs are now regarded as one of the seven most dangerous South African gangs (Tenpas, 2024). Kgosana (2023) highlights notorious prison Numbers gangs increasingly working with street gangs. Starting since the Staggie era, the Numbers gangs now have controlling influence on street gangs, a concept which was previously not endorsed. Street gangs were regarded as "the fourth" camp and not allowed to be active in correctional centres.

Drug trade factors forced the acknowledgment of street gangs, whose members started to enter the correctional environment as Numbers gang members, while the Numbers gang members joined street gangs after release. These two groups now work closely together, for example, in smuggling contraband into prisons (Kgosana, 2023; Williams, 2023). Major street gangs aligned with the 28s prison gang include the Terrible Josters, Mongrels, G-Units, the Firm, Mobsters and Junior Mafias, while those affiliated with the 26s/27s include the Junky Funky Kids, Americans, Sexy Boys, Fast Guns, Clever Kids, Junior Cisco Yankees (Kgosana, 2023).

The researcher acknowledges that one country cannot be regarded as sufficient scientific evidence of a universal new crime theory. Therefore, much research still needs to be done in this regard. The framework for this article does not allow the scope for that. However, with these developments it would be safe to hypothesise that correctional institutions may be influential in exporting crime to communities through causal factors that allow inmates to plan and execute crime from within.

Government initiatives

The Commission for Gender Equality (2024) report that gang members mentioned that there was no strategy to combat gangs. Government's strategy of mass incarceration was bringing together idle men who had committed heinous crimes to spend long periods together without addressing the issues of gangsterism. Available programmes were not strategies targeted at offenders. Participation in prison gangs did not afford the opportunity to make changes, particularly during long sentences.



Participation resulted in despondency and frustration with the correctional facility and limited the scope of imagining a different future.

The DCS's Gang Combatting Strategy of 2021 had the following objectives (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024):

1. To maintain secure and safe environments conducive to rehabilitation of inmates
2. To prevent and reduce the impact of disruptive groups (e.g., gangs) on the management of correctional centres
3. To enable inter-sectoral co-operation to promote correctional centre and community safety
4. To develop and build knowledge about gangs and effective responses to combatting gangsterism and to inform, review and monitor/improve these strategies
5. To develop programmes for preventing and combatting gangsterism
6. To combat gangs/gang activities of parolees and probationers under community corrections.

The strategy acknowledges the problem of gangsterism within correctional centres that contributes to gang formation outside the centres. Participants echoed this point by highlighting the exchange of information, resources, and personnel between the traditional prison gangs and the outside street gangs. This exchange system compounded the problem and worsened the success of efforts towards combating gangsterism (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024).

Causality

In research titled *Prison Reform and the Inmate Population in SADC Countries*, Luyt (forthcoming) determined fundamental causal factors that may further contribute to exportation of crime from correctional centres. These are now discussed in more detail.

Career advancement and staff motivation

After demilitarisation in 1996 the entire promotion system within South African corrections collapsed. Staff members could not be promoted unless a senior position became vacant. Several individuals had to apply, but only one received appointment, sometimes expecting transfer, and often destructing family structures and spousal employment. To exacerbate the lack of promotion, overtime payment was stopped in favour of time off, leaving staff in tatters because most could only make ends meet through overtime.

Staff neglect went further. Lack of uniforms became critical. Once known for their neatness, correctional officials today are amongst the worst dressed uniform-bearers in the country. Other benefits also disappeared, for example an allowance obtained after completing tertiary qualifications.

Motivation and pride of staff was depleted, resulting in negative attitudes. The National Commissioner (NC) reported on *Crimewatch* (ENCA, 2025) that 180 staff members were dismissed in 2025 for smuggling with inmates, while 600 disciplinary cases are ongoing.

Covid

The NC (ENCA, 2025) argued that during the Covid-19 pandemic staff were the only link between inmates and the outside world. Yet, staff became the only source of all smuggled goods, including drugs, cell phones, and other contraband. The NC declared that staff became criminals. This is ironic,

given that staff are supposed to be the greatest asset (Bergh & Theron, 2005), but this is not the case in South Africa due to marginalisation, and lack of career advancement opportunities.

Corruption

Inmates and staff reported corruption (Luyt, forthcoming). According to the Commission for Gender Equality (2024) corrupt DCS officials work in partnership and under the authority of gang leaders, as though they were subordinate gang members. Staff are involved in smuggling cell phones, drugs, money, and other contraband. Officials even run gang affairs outside of correctional centres. This is no surprise, seen that career advancement opportunities are non-existent.

Cash

Historically, inmates never carried cash and possession of money was prohibited. In a braindead moment this long-standing limitation was reversed. In the late 1990's the new, transformed DCS management allowed inmates to carry cash on their person during incarceration. This was a fatal mistake. Officials reported that carrying money "creates the breeding ground for acts of mismanagement, corruption and bribery." A DCS statement said the move should help reduce the opportunities for corruption, bribery and mismanagement (Mail & Guardian, 2002). Worse, it took a whole year to undo the worst decision in correctional history. According to DCS "the new system had already been implemented at some prisons and it was expected to be in place at all jails by the end of the year" meaning the end of 2002.

Luyt (forthcoming) reports that inmates confirmed that they have largely ignored these instructions. The minimum amount of money has been paid into inmate accounts. Money remained a powerful tool that inmates were not prepared to give up. Inmates report bribing staff, buying almost anything, and living a life of luxury with available cash. This aspect has also sparked the exportation of crime from inside the correctional centres to the community.

Technology

The use of technology by inmates became a major obstacle in recent years. The main culprits are laptops and cell phones. Dolley (2025) reports that correctional centres became smuggling hubs, plagued by an abundance of cell phones, cash, drugs, knives and alcohol.

Staff attitudes about regular searching for contraband have become so bad that raids under supervision of the National Commissioner must be executed under instruction of the Minister of Correctional Services (ENCA, 2025). Weak DCS systems and corrupt officials are contributing factors (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024).

To exacerbate matters, inmates receive official training in fixing cell phones, as was reported by the National Commissioner (ENCA, 2025). In the general absence of properly structured inmate training programmes, one would argue that this specific training initiative was poorly considered, considering that dismantled cell phones are smuggled in and are assembled inside. Also, cell phones are confiscated in their hundreds during raids. Apart from being used to export crime, they also become a business inside where thousands without them pay to use them.

There are calls for cell phone jamming equipment to be installed in correctional centres, warning that



criminals are using mobile phones behind bars to co-ordinate extortion rackets (Times Live, 2025). The National Commissioner also reported that different financial scams are executed from behind bars, while staff look the other way because of protection fees that inmates pay (ENCA, 2025). Jamming is a rather expensive solution for a problem with much wider causal effects, the most obvious that of poor staff motivation and commitment. Job enrichment, promotion opportunities and career advancement should take priority in all solutions, or else the rotten apple theory (Brecher, 2014) remains on fertile ground.

Laptops pose their own challenge. The Constitutional Court has unanimously ruled and declared that barring inmates from using personal computers in their cells for studying is unconstitutional. The court ordered that the constitutional invalidity be suspended for a year and directed the National Commissioner of Correctional Services to promulgate a revised policy. Pending that, the court said that any inmate registered as a student with a recognised tertiary or further education institution and who reasonably needs a computer to support their studies, would be entitled to use their personal in their cell, but without the use of an internet modem (Broughton, 2025).

The above decision is particularly problematic, as it creates further grounds for smuggling of laptop parts and cell phones to allow for internet access. This will enlarge the exportation of crime. We must consider the fact that inmate rights can be limited. Since inmates do not have daily jobs, those that study should do so from a dedicated study centre during normal working hours. To allow laptops in cells, given that most correctional centres have dormitories, will lead to future challenges that could have been avoided.

Correctional programmes

Very few correctional programmes remain available countrywide. If offered, it is done through NGO's. There is no job enrichment for staff, little opportunity to build rapport with inmates, and no promotion of direct supervision (Luyt, 2020). Staff are not empowered in the current system, which is why so many cases of corruption and security breaches occur.

Summary

There can be little doubt about the development of the exportation theory. Wider research is needed to ascertain broader implications, but the theory is already a custom in the South African correctional system. The direction for research is set here, but with it goes a call for action into more research, as many open questions remain. The scope of this article, however, does not allow for a more comprehensive discussion, but it is hoped that what is written, provides invaluable insights into the phenomenon.

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About the Author

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GREENSPACE AND WELLBEING IN CUSTODIAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between greenspace and wellbeing in correctional environments, tracing the development of an evidence base that now supports its inclusion in prison design and policy. Research has long demonstrated the health and psychological benefits of nature exposure in community settings such as hospitals and schools, yet prisons have historically lagged behind in applying this knowledge. Early empirical work in prisons identified lower stress-related illness among prisoners with natural views, initiating a research trajectory that connects greenspace to improved wellbeing outcomes. Subsequent qualitative and mixed-method studies have explored horticultural and green-skills programs, reporting consistent benefits including reduced anxiety and depression, enhanced mood, self-efficacy, and social connection. Despite operational and conceptual barriers—cost, security, and perceived public opposition—recent large-scale analyses have transformed the field. Using GIS mapping and national administrative data, recent work has demonstrated statistically significant associations between the extent of prison greenspace and reduced self-harm and violence, findings corroborated by further research linking biodiversity and environmental quality to improved outcomes. Collectively, this growing body of evidence identifies greenspace as a credible, low-cost intervention with multi-pathway benefits for prisoner wellbeing, and institutional staffing and safety. Building on this foundation, the paper presents the *Design Principles for Prison Landscapes: Security, Biodiversity and Wellbeing*, developed collaboratively with landscape and ecological specialists.

These guidelines translate research into actionable design strategies that integrate security-compatible planting, biodiversity enhancement, and microclimate management while maintaining visibility and control. The principles align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Nelson Mandela Rules, bridging research and practice. Overall, the paper argues that well-designed prison greenspaces enhance security, rehabilitation, and environmental performance simultaneously, reframing nature not as an aesthetic feature in custodial environments, but as an essential component of humane, evidence-based design.

Keywords: greenspace, wellbeing, prisons, nature contact, prison design, biodiversity, climate change mitigation



Introduction

Green spaces play a crucial role in promoting physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Access to parks, gardens, and natural environments encourages physical activity, which improves fitness and reduces the risk of chronic disease. Nature contact can lower stress levels, heart rate, and blood pressure, while exposure to greenery has been shown to boost mood, attention, and overall mental health. Green spaces also foster social interaction and a sense of community, providing safe, welcoming environments where people can connect and unwind. For those living in dense urban areas, even small pockets of nature can offer restorative effects, improving concentration and resilience. On a broader scale, green spaces contribute to cleaner air, reduced urban heat, and biodiversity—all of which enhance the quality of life. Ultimately, contact with nature supports human wellbeing by nurturing both body and mind, helping people feel calmer, healthier, and more connected.

Green spaces are also vital for mitigating the impacts of climate change. Vegetation absorbs carbon dioxide—the main greenhouse gas driving global warming—and stores carbon in biomass and soil. Urban parks, woodlands, and gardens help to regulate local temperatures by providing shade and releasing moisture through evapotranspiration, which reduces the “urban heat island” effect. Green roofs and walls can further insulate buildings, lowering energy use for cooling and heating. Vegetated areas also manage stormwater more effectively, absorbing rainfall and reducing the risk of flooding linked to extreme weather events. Beyond their physical functions, green spaces support biodiversity, helping ecosystems adapt to changing climates and maintain essential services like pollination.

These benefits have been recognized for some time, and investing in green space has become both an environmental and a wellbeing imperative, with national programs and certification schemes increasingly embedding the wellbeing and environmental benefits of green space into planning and construction. Designers and planners increasingly incorporate green space into hospitals, schools, and housing developments to maximize health and environmental benefits. In healthcare settings, access to gardens and views of nature support recovery, reduce stress, and improve patient outcomes. Schools use green playgrounds and outdoor classrooms to enhance learning, concentration, and physical activity. Housing projects integrate communal gardens, tree-lined streets, and green roofs to foster social connection, biodiversity, and energy efficiency. Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) manage rainwater naturally while adding attractive planting. Across sectors, evidence-based design ensures that green infrastructure is not decorative but a core feature promoting wellbeing and climate resilience.

Whilst the design and construction of new facilities in other sectors has embraced this evidence-based approach, arguably the correctional sector has lagged behind. To an extent, this is because although the evidence base for the wellbeing effects of green spaces in contexts such as hospitals and schools is already well-established, until relatively recently, comparable evidence for the correctional sector has been lacking. Research in this area has been much needed, because incorporating green space into prisons presents more significant practical and conceptual difficulties than its introduction in hospitals and schools. A triple bottom line of cost, safety and security (Moran & Turner, 2019, p. 64) has resulted in many prisons being austere, harsh, and sterile environments. Policymakers, influenced by perceptions of public opinion, often assume that prison conditions must remain inferior to those experienced by low-paid workers outside. Consequently, green space within prisons can be extremely limited (Moran, Turner & Jewkes, 2016). Features such as lawns, shrubs, and trees are often viewed as

costly to install and maintain, as well as posing potential security risks, either by enabling incidents at height, weaponization of materials or concealment of contraband (Moran & Turner, 2019). Combined with additional concerns that generous green areas might appear an unjustified “luxury” to taxpayers, their inclusion has frequently been curtailed.

Until recently, the small number of research studies has meant that the evidence base for the benefits of green spaces in prisons rendered such objections difficult to challenge. Ernest Moore provided early empirical evidence that incarcerated people with views of natural landscapes from their cells made significantly fewer sick calls than those with views only of concrete or inner yards, suggesting that visible greenspace reduces environmental stress in prison populations (Moore, 1981). Further studies replicated and extended Moore’s work, showing that prisoners and staff felt calmer when prisons offered more visually complex views, and that prisoners with a higher percentage of naturalistic elements visible from their cells made fewer sickness-calls than those with views dominated by the built environment (Spafford, 1991, West, 1986).

Additional qualitative and mixed method studies in the UK have examined horticultural programs, finding marked improvements in prisoners’ mental health and wellbeing, particularly reductions in anxiety, enhanced purpose, self-esteem and mood (Farrier et al., 2019). Another line of work has examined prison design and nature contact more broadly. Moran & Turner (2019) argue from qualitative interviews in the UK and Norway that contact with nature can ameliorate stress, reduce tension, and support psychological restoration in imprisoned populations.

Small-scale and qualitative studies, whilst of high quality individually, had not proved persuasive to policymakers. However, by 2020, methodological innovation enabled GIS (Geographical Information Systems) measures of greenspace within prison perimeters to be linked to published administrative data on self-harm, violence and staff absence. This work, which found that prisons with more greenspace had significantly lower levels of self-harm and violence, when controlling for prison age, size, type, and crowding, was the first study at the national scale, and provided a more robust evidence source for policymakers (Moran, Jones, Jordaan & Porter, 2021)

Today, there is a growing, convergent literature which finds that contact with greenspace — whether measured as proximate vegetated land, participation in horticultural programs, or exposure to biodiverse landscapes — is associated with improved mental health and reduced harmful incidents among incarcerated populations. The most recent cross-prison analyses show consistent negative associations between the extent/quality of greenspace within and near to prisons and institutional harms (self-harm, interpersonal violence, assaults) and positive associations with self-reported wellbeing. Smaller evaluation and program studies of horticultural/green-skills interventions corroborate mechanisms (restoration, social connection, skill-building) and show improvements in mood, self-efficacy and behavior. Together, the body of evidence supports greenspace as a promising, low-cost component of prison wellbeing and safety strategies.

The research evidence shows that prison-level greenspace correlates with better outcomes. Since our original set of findings in 2021, I have shown in a series of studies with colleagues that prisons with higher percentages of greenspace show lower rates of recorded self-harm and violence after controlling for a suite of institutional covariates (prison size, security category, level of crowding,

transport connections etc.). The finding is robust across specifications and aligns with complementary analyses showing positive associations between greenspace and prisoner self-reported wellbeing (Moran et al., 2021a&b, 2022, 2023).

Greenspace effects are context-dependent. Our research was also able to show that the benefits of greenspaces are amplified where local environmental quality is better (higher biodiversity, lower air pollution) (Moran et al., 2024). This suggests that more biodiverse greenspace is more beneficial – both for incarcerated people and, of course, for ecological aspirations.

A wider body of work also shows that structured horticultural programs produce positive psychological and social effects. Evaluations of prison gardening and horticultural therapy continue to report improvements in wellbeing scales, reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, enhanced self-efficacy and social skills, and qualitative gains in identity and employability (Lee et al., 2021, Fisk & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2024). These programs clearly depend on the presence and accessibility of the sorts of green spaces in prison that are *already* supporting wellbeing in the ways we have shown.

How does green space support wellbeing?

The empirical literature and program evaluations converge on a small set of partly overlapping mechanisms. Exposure to natural landscapes is known to reduce physiological stress and to restore directed attention capacity in non-prison populations, and self-report data from prisoners suggest similarly restorative effects in custody. Collective gardening and green projects create structured social interaction, routine, and pro-social roles that reduce isolation and can de-escalate violence. Programs report improved teamwork and communication. Horticultural training can also build practical skills that increase self-esteem and prospects post-release, potentially providing a pathway from improved wellbeing to reduced recidivism risk, though long-run causal evidence here is sparse. Vegetation can also attenuate noise and capture particulates; the presence of biodiversity and lower air pollution magnify greenspace benefits, suggesting environmental quality moderates psychosocial gains (Moran et al., 2024).

The strengths of the evidence here are in the multiple complementary data sources: large cross-prison administrative datasets (self-harm and violence records), survey data on self-reported wellbeing, and detailed program evaluations provide convergent signals.

The robustness of the evidence base now enables translation into practical recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers:

1. **Protect and expand greenspace in and around prisons, prioritizing quality not just quantity.** Our analysis shows that biodiverse, low-pollution green areas confer greater benefits than close-mown lawns. Design guidance should therefore prioritize species diversity, layered planting and microhabitats compatible with security requirements.
2. **Implement and evaluate structured horticultural programs as part of rehabilitation.** Evidence from program evaluations points to psychological, social and skill-building benefits.
3. **Invest in site-level monitoring and experimental evaluation.** Green spaces improve wellbeing and are associated with lower levels of self-harm and violence, but operational security concerns are still valid. Custodial services should ideally monitor the effects of greening initiatives, allowing

robust return-on-investment analyses for estate planning.

Recent, rigorous cross-prison analyses indicate that greenspace is a credible, multi-pathway contributor to prisoner wellbeing and institutional safety. Benefits are most reliably observed where greenspace is of higher environmental quality and when green exposure is accompanied by structured programs and broader operational supports. To convert promising associations into robust policy prescriptions, custodial services could support monitoring and experimental program designs while adopting pragmatic greening and horticultural strategies now as low-risk, potentially high-return complements to other interventions.

Policymakers and designers are increasingly deploying the evidence base summarized above in the development of new prisons and the retrofit of existing ones. However, introducing green spaces into prisons is not straightforward. Operational staff have justifiable security concerns, and care must be taken to ensure that safety needs are addressed. For this reason, and to translate evidentiary insight into actionable design, I have recently collaborated with landscape architect Emma Widdop and urban ecologist Jon Sadler to develop *Design Principles for Prison Landscapes: Security, Biodiversity and Wellbeing*.

This guide is intended as a bridge between research and implementation. It outlines practical principles for designing prison landscapes that balance wellbeing, security and ecological integrity. The Design Principles map directly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Nelson Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules, and build on UNOPS *Technical Guidance for Prison Planning* and the International Committee of the Red Cross' *Towards Humane Prisons*. They are underpinned throughout by robust academic research, by reflection on many years of advising prison systems and individual prisons on inclusion of green spaces, and benefitted in draft from the critique and insight of an international expert advisory group with membership drawn from Australia, the Netherlands, France, Norway, Ireland, Sweden and the USA, as well as representatives of Penal Reform International, the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

Key features include:

- **Typology-sensitive design:** Guidance tailored for different custody categories (e.g., high security, medium, open) and incarcerated populations (e.g., mental health, older age, neurodiversity).
- **Sightlines and vegetation layering:** Recommendations for planting schemes that maintain visibility and reduce concealment risk while offering varied green experience (trees, shrubs, groundcover).
- **Biodiversity enhancement:** Strategies to incorporate native species, habitat microfeatures (e.g., pollinator beds, structural complexity) and soil health to elevate ecological value.
- **Microclimate and buffer systems:** Use of vegetative buffers to mitigate noise, dust, solar gain and wind, especially in sites near roads or polluted zones.
- **Phased retrofit and modular interventions:** Solutions for adding green space incrementally in existing prisons, with modular elements (raised planters, green screens) and flexibility.
- **Security-compatible features:** Vegetation choices and layout constraints that preserve necessary security clearances, penetration risk management and maintenance access.
- **Monitoring and evaluation linkage:** Guidance on instrumentation (air quality, noise, soil moisture,

biodiverse metrics) integrated with wellbeing and incident tracking systems.

A key component of the Design Principles is the insight that landscape design can *enhance* security rather than undermining it. Positive impacts of greenspace on wellbeing reduce violence and self-harm, thus improving the security of correctional establishments. However, the design of prison landscapes can also directly act as a security asset. Use of terrain, planting and visual design can support surveillance and help manage risk. Greenspace can therefore reduce aggression and promote calm, whilst also impeding drones, controlling movement and softening institutional environments.

For practitioners, this guide translates the statistical correlations into concrete spatial and horticultural choices. The document is designed to be a useful support at any design stage, and we suggest applying the full document alongside local site surveys, risk assessments, and multidisciplinary stakeholder input (custodial, landscape, ecology, health) as part of any greening or prison design initiative.

The Design Principles are available for free download at www.greenprison.co.uk

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IS THE RNR MODEL SUPPOSED TO “FIX” PRISONERS AND PRISONS?

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Abstract

In the 35 years since the RNR principles were first published the RNR model remains the foremost framework for reducing recidivism for people in prison. Yet many prison environments have changed little in that time, remaining places of and for punishment, based on outdated and unaffordable ideas about how best to respond to offending. Efforts to improve safety of prison environments for staff and residents, and to enhance community outcomes through rehabilitation are significantly compromised by misalignment with the core philosophy and operating model for prisons. The RNR model has been criticized for failing to substantially reduce the number of people returning to prison. But arguably its implementation has been shaped around an environment intent on harming people rather than helping them. In this paper I suggest that the RNR model could never be the panacea that “reformed” both prisoners and prisons. Yet politicians and correctional executives often use claims of providing “RNR-based rehabilitation” as a defense against more fundamental change, while critics blame the RNR model itself for its modest impact. Creating safe, fair and decent prisons is a foundational activity of immediate importance to the safety and wellbeing of staff and prisoners alike, but the RNR’s model—of reducing reoffending risk by providing human service to those who can most benefit from learning ways to weaken criminogenic needs and live a prosocial life—cannot be that foundation but needs to rest on it. The fundamental prison reform society needs cannot be achieved from inside the system alone. But the development of units, wings or prison regimes with a consistently positive social climate remains an important activity in the interim, along with providing RNR-based interventions in such environments rather than in hostile contexts, so that participants can ingrain new habits of thinking, feeling and behaving, rather than keeping them in a “deep freeze” until they are released.

Keywords: RNR model, social climate, prison reform, cognitive behavioural group programmes

Introduction

In the 35 years since the first publication of the Andrews et al. (1990) Risk Need and Responsivity principles, the RNR model has become the most widely adopted approach to reducing reoffending. But has it had the expected benefits for prisoners or society? Abolitionists remind us that imprisonment is an inherently harmful concept, but research on diverse prison systems and prison social climates supports the view that the degree to which prisons harm or help depends on how they are run (i.e., they may “both damage and repair”; Auty & Liebling, 2020, p. 358). Concerns are growing in some jurisdictions about the prisons upholding the most basic aspects of human rights in correctional regimes (e.g., Boshier, 2023; Taylor, 2025; Walton & Elliott, 2025). In this challenging context, is RNR even relevant?

In this paper I argue that the RNR model (still) outlines the most empirically supported, effective and direct guidance on how to help people gain the skills that can support them to move away from criminal lifestyles. But it is being used by correctional systems as a shield against accusations that they remain entirely places of—and for—punishment. In reality, RNR’s influence on turning prisons into effective rehabilitation environments has only, and could only, be superficial. Prisons claim they adhere to the RNR model while remaining essentially environments that harm at worst or neglect at best. I briefly revisit the development of RNR, examine its impact in prisons, argue for the importance of prison environments in risk-reducing rehabilitation, and against the idea that RNR can change prison culture, concluding with some comments about the future of RNR in prisons.

A Brief History of the RNR Model

Superficially, the RNR model is well known in many correctional systems. Most often people know the model by its three core principles (Risk, Need and Responsivity; see Andrews et al., 1990) but from these three it was expanded to 15 principles (Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Nevertheless, people are often only familiar with the first three; an outdated and incomplete vision of the model.

The significance and importance of Andrews and Bonta’s approach derives from largely ignoring intervention “brand names” (e.g., boot camp, anger management, employment) or other external features (e.g., community vs. prison, length, admission criteria), and instead categorizing what was going on *inside* procedures, programs and services (Dowden, 1998), producing meta-analyses of the risk, need, responsivity, integrity, and core correctional staff practices.

The model is underpinned by the General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning (GPCSL) framework (Bonta & Andrews, 2024), whose central premise is that criminal behavior is learned, typically in adverse early social conditions that promote antisocial behavior as adaptive for survival, and that fail to teach cognitive and behavioral skills that can both motivate and give easier access to rewarding prosocial alternatives.

RNR’s Principle 7 (*General Responsivity*) specifies that interventions and services “employ behavioral, social learning and cognitive-behavioral influence and skill building strategies.” (p. 186, Bonta & Andrews, 2024). It allows for breadth; RNR bridges learning theory/behaviorism—with an emphasis on reinforcement and punishment as the key agents of behavior change—and the subsequent “cognitive revolution” that saw a growing emphasis on people’s thinking, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and values as a focus for treatment. At the same time, learning theory extended into social learning

theory: people also learn from imitating behavior modelled by others (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, most effective RNR interventions require opportunities for people to learn new ways of thinking and behaving through modelling and imitation, and to practice them in social environments where they are rewarded until they become second nature.

The Modest Impact of RNR in Custodial Corrections

Jumping forward to today, RNR has ostensibly become “business as usual” in many jurisdictions. Prison systems seeking to claim policy alignment with the RNR model triage people based on level of risk and need using validated instruments, and then plug them into a place in the indicated intervention: most often a cognitive-behavioral group program (CBGP). The impact of this approach on recidivism has been modest at best.

One reason likely lies in poor implementation. There have been some conspicuous failures (e.g., p. 264, Bonta & Andrews, 2024) and less visible implementation problems are probably widespread. Maintaining the *quality* of RNR adherence needs continuous attention at a low level in the organization: regular professional supervision and quality assurance. These essential processes are seldom visible outside of the organization and are easily cut when resources are reduced or referral numbers balloon.

Even if RNR principles are implemented effectively, most people may still be released before they can be paired up with a suitable program, or are held in prison while they wait for a place (Shaskey, 2023). In New Zealand in 2021/22 fewer than a fifth of the total (daily) prison population took a place in a program. In the year ending June 2024, almost a quarter of new prison sentences recipients spent less than 6 months in prison. And almost half of the current population is on remand. In 2021, one-fifth of these prisoners was released on the day they are sentenced, on “time served” (“Court delays” 2022).

Finally, typical interventions derived from RNR’s Principle 7 (*General Responsivity*) are variations of CBGPs. Most meta-analyses of CBGPs do not report on whether the “program” is a few hours a week for a few weeks in an otherwise criminogenic prison setting, or is part of a change-supportive environment (see Gannon et al., 2019, for an exception). CBGPs attended by people living in criminogenic social climates surely are at best, weak interventions (Day, 2020). Koehler and Lösel (2025, p. 20) noted that the recidivism outcomes for these programs appear somewhat diminished compared to earlier eras. They suggested that one explanation was that the “hardships that beset many justice systems, from government austerity to corroded capacity to arbitrary control, could contribute to a depletion of the care that justice systems can accommodate.” In other words, these little bubbles of potentially positive human interaction are siloed, slowly losing the battle with the environment around them.

The Importance of Environments

Prison environments are conceptually complex (Galouzis, et al., 2023). But in many jurisdictions, they are noted to be unsafe for staff and prisoners, and harmful to health, social capital, and prospects, making them an obvious target for improvement. Puzzlingly, environment-level interventions aligned with the RNR model seem largely invisible in current government and academic literature. Approaches that would be RNR-compatible include having all staff adopt the Core Correctional Principles (CCPs) in interactions with prisoners, and contingency management regimes.

The CCPs derived from research by Andrews and Kiessling (1980) tested whether volunteer and staff probation officer behavior with supervisees predicted reduced recidivism. The effective dimensions, which can be learned and used by frontline staff are “effective use of authority, anticriminal modeling and reinforcement, problem solving, use of community resources, and quality of interpersonal relationships between staff and client” (Dowden & Andrews, 2004; p. 204), later also referred to as the relationship and structuring principles¹. Their importance in reducing recidivism was confirmed by meta-analysis (Dowden & Andrews, 2004), and they are Principle 14 in *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Yet, published evaluations of the effectiveness of CCP training with—or even the use of CCPs by—prison officers are hard to find (Haas & Spence, 2016).

Contingency management (CM) programs on the other hand are more common. They were the first behavior change programs to be set up in prisons, in the 1960s. They improved target behaviors (Gendreau et al., 2014) and were associated with reductions in recidivism (Gendreau & Ross, 1979). Contingency management, put simply, refers to influencing desired behavior by rewarding it (and much less often punishing undesirable behavior), and thus is widely used today in everything from parenting to corporate performance management. It is also seen in “incentive” or “privilege” schemes, in pockets of current prison systems. For example, a recent UK HM Chief Inspector’s thematic review (Taylor, 2025) is replete with examples of incentive schemes and enriched environmental opportunities for prisoners to practice prosocial behavior, along with description of the systemic difficulties in doing so. This report does not link these efforts to the RNR model or to recidivism outcomes, but the approaches are compatible, since both are based on learning theory.

The most common type of change-supportive environmental regime in the current literature is probably a Therapeutic Community. The two main traditions—democratic and concept TCs—make use of practices derived from learning theory (e.g., earned privileges, modelling). Their philosophy is indirectly linked to learning, though it is not expressed in those terms, being broadly about resocializing people to be responsible, connected community members (De Leon, 2000; Richardson & Zini, 2021). TCs have been associated with reduced recidivism; though the “how” is not yet clear (Pearce & Pickard, 2013).

Alongside TCs and CM, are various other initiatives under the umbrella term of “better social climates.” Liebling and colleagues’ research is one example. Their theoretical model is intentionally not based on correctional psychology—here operationalized as an “exclusively ‘interventions’ or programs model” (Auty & Liebling, 2020; p. 364). Instead, they draw on three components of prison climate (moral agency, socialization and legitimacy) that together determine social order in a prison. Prisoners’ perceptions of aspects of these components have been linked to recidivism outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2020).

My early career was strongly influenced by experiences in community residential and prison-based treatment environments for men with high propensities for violence (e.g., Polaschek & Dixon, 2001; Polaschek & Kilgour, 2013). So, it has taken me longer than it should have to question how programs can contribute to effective behavior change when they are not supported by their environment. Supportive environments for rehabilitation are not the norm (Olver et al., 2020), and RNR rehabilitation and research on social climate have apparently developed without crossing paths (Harding, 2014). In

¹ In later editions of *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* they are called the GPCSL-based staff practices.



fact, although interventions based on environmental influences on behavior are part of the history of RNR, in recent years, the importance of the residential environment in RNR-aligned interventions seem largely to have disappeared. Meta-analyses note that community settings are more effective than residential ones without discussing whether the nature of the latter might explain why.

How did we practitioners and researchers who understand the psychology of behavior change condone the provision of these siloed little programs? Perhaps the simple answer is that we did not. We are without influence against the behemoth of custodial corrections, and the forces beyond it. At the start of my career, recidivism outcome evaluations were accumulating in volume, and I imagined the field moving from evaluating programs using recidivism outcome data—a poor proxy at best—to investigating *how* they worked. Instead, the field is still trying to prove to a hostile audience that these programs can contribute to reduced reoffending risk; to convince people whose fallback position is that if there is any doubt about effectiveness (e.g., Fazel, et al., 2023; Logan, et al., 2025), prisons without rehabilitation are the better option.

It seems to me today that the field has missed the obvious when ruminating about the limitations of RNR. The RNR model is predicated on the assumption that prisoners who need risk-reducing rehabilitation gain from help to think and behave in ways that support a more prosocial lifestyle. Well-designed CBT gives visibility of the gap between how they have learned to navigate the world and what might be possible now that they are not children. It teaches them capabilities that they often do not have, and that are useful for all of us (e.g., emotional regulation, conflict resolution, problem solving). So, what they learn turns out to be helpful in the “real world” and not just for avoiding offending (Coupland & Olver, 2020). We have also found repeatedly that these programs significantly improve self-reported mental health as well (Kilgour & Polaschek, 2012). These interventions are worthwhile.

But new ways complement old habits; they don’t obliterate them. New learning requires lots of practice in a supportive environment where the unfamiliar ways of thinking and behaving continue to be modelled and rewarded, consistent with the underlying theory; an RNR-based environment. Instead, people in prison are introduced to new ways in group and then return to social climates where the old habits still fit best. Graduates of siloed programs have told me that they plan to hold onto the knowledge provided and then implement it when they get out of prison. They explain that they can safely use only a few of the skills in their living environment without risking conflict with officers or prisoners, and for some skills, there is simply no suitable context for trying them out in their unit. Learning *about* skills only in group is a poor substitute for learning the skills, and while prisons are indeed artificial environments, they can provide genuine opportunities to work on reducing criminogenic needs far more than they currently do.

Delivery of CBGPs in an otherwise criminogenic environment is a poor investment. It is surprising if these circumstances are associated with reduced recidivism. In New Zealand prisons at present only those programs that are provided within a change-supportive environment are associated with meaningful reductions in recidivism (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024).

Conclusions: How Can Prisons Get Better Results from the RNR model?

Just as in medicine, the first rule of prisons should be “first do no harm” no matter who is living in

them. Our prisons have needed reform for years. They are unsafe places to work and live, with high recidivism rates. As a recent Cultural Review puts it: "On the current track, prison growth will continue unsustainably. This is because custodial environments can be criminogenic – meaning people who have spent time in custody will be more likely to engage in further offending" (Victorian Government, 2022, p. 4). The true costs of prisons including impacts on staff, and the social, economic and health impacts of prisons are likely to be even higher. There is no doubt our societies cannot afford to continue on the current trajectory.

So where does RNR fit in? Not as the instrument that will reform prisons. The foundation of a prison should rest on the extent to which it is "safe, decent and fair" (Mann, et al. 2018, p. 4). The application of the RNR model sits over that foundation; it was not designed to be that foundation itself. Absent a consistent and rational societal and political vision of how modern prisons should run, all we can do is keep working on creating pockets of foundational rehabilitative culture: more humane social environments that give prisoners and staff somewhere better to work and live, and in turn can better motivate people to take part in rehabilitation, support risk-reducing rehabilitation, and help people consolidate gains after active periods of new learning.

Initiatives to create rehabilitative prisons may go part of the way to providing environments where investment in RNR yields better results. There doesn't yet appear to be consensus about what these might look like, nor even whether RNR has a place in them (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019). But to get the best out of the application of the RNR model to reducing recidivism, prison systems need to pay more than lip service to the environments in which prisoners live, including prisoners on remand. A rehabilitative prison culture is a necessary (but not sufficient) first step (Mann et al., 2018; see also Mann, 2019).

The parts of the RNR model that are about conditions supporting behavior change rest on robustly established psychological principles, and when enacted well may provide a relatively efficient way to reduce the drivers of reoffending. But there is nothing about the RNR model itself that stops us from experimenting with *how* effective interventions are designed and provided. In a supportive environment there must surely be room for innovations that make the essential ingredients accessible to more prisoners more efficiently.

Custodial frontline staff are central both to a rehabilitative culture in general, and to increasing impact of RNR-based interventions, whether it be through training in CCPs, or 5-minute interventions (Vickers-Pinchbeck, 2019), or any other approach that helps staff to motivate and support prisoners where they can in their daily interactions (Small & Hackett, 2023). Staff in these roles need training and high-quality practice supervision, something that appears to be completely unknown for corrections officers (Forsyth et al., 2022). This is not to suggest the correctional officers are therapists. Rather, it is to equip them to use the skills of a good parent—given that arguably they already act 'in loco parentis' (Arnold, 2016)—to support them to negotiate the complexities of their roles.

It will be very difficult to develop positive social climates in some units or prisons, and some prisoners may not (initially) want to live in them. Creating a "gradient" within a prison, where some units are overtly safer, or more rehabilitative in focus than others, gives prisoners (and staff) some hope of working toward transfer into those environments. Consistent with the risk principle, significantly

more resources are likely to be needed for units where prisoners tend toward higher risk behavior. In New Zealand, sentenced prisoners in high medium security units have very little access to a positive social climate or risk reducing interventions. It is not clear how such units should be designed and resourced to achieve better outcomes.

There are several other approaches or philosophies proposed as alternatives to the RNR model’s underlying theory of what maintains or ameliorates criminal risk, including “trauma-informed care” (McLachlan, 2024), “humanizing and healing” (NZ Government, 2019), and “normalization” (Jewkes & Gooch, 2019). These philosophies are arguably better thought of as reactions to current prison regimes, at the foundational level of the Mann et al. (2018) model. None has yet been established as effective in keeping people out of prison on its own. None is likely to have more than a trivial impact on current prison systems any more than has the RNR model, because the challenge is not in identifying that prisons should be more humane, it is in progressing them in that direction. And although out of scope, reintegration preparation and post-release supervision are also very important to success.

Triaging prisoners with Risk and Needs assessments and then providing a suite of siloed cognitive-behavioral programs for a few of them has not proved to be the panacea our prisons need. Claiming to be aligned with the RNR model serves to create the illusion for politicians, government and society that prisons are doing what they can to rehabilitate, when in reality they are punishing places garnished with isolated bubbles of ad hoc positive activity. At the same time, an active RNR-based intervention that does extend into the living environment of the attendees is an implausible operationalization of the model’s effective intervention principles. So instead of expecting the RNR model to fix prisons as well as prisoners, let’s move into an era where it is implemented with a host that isn’t mostly working against it, and then see how it works. We would then be able to investigate important theoretical questions, such as whether the RNR model has additive effects on outcomes in a positive prison environment or whether there is more than one plausible theoretical way to help prisoners to reduce their risk of future offending.

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SOLITARY IRRATIONALITY: INEFFICIENT AND INEFFECTIVE BUREAUCRATIC RESTRICTIONS ON HUMAN BEINGS

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Abstract

There are two primary arguments against placing human beings in restricted housing units within carceral institutions, and one overarching argument for the practice. The arguments opposing restricted housing rest on the explicit and implicit harm caused to individuals via the practice (Haney, 2018; Luigi et al., 2020) and the lack of positive outcomes that the practice yields (Cloud et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2019). These contentions generally stem from research scientists from psychology, social work, criminology, and sociology and humanitarian advocates working with or for a litany of non-profit and governmental organizations. On the other hand, penal institutions and their associated staff and stakeholders typically favor using restricted housing as a means of instituting control, safety, and/or security within carceral environments to ensure the well-being of both staff and incarcerated individuals (Labrecque, 2015). Framing the current arguments against the use of restricted housing, this paper uses rigorous scientific/research findings to suggest that this practice is not only harmful to incarcerated individuals and does not yield better outcomes (such as misconduct reduction) but it is also a hugely inefficient and ineffective process that resembles organizational *irrationality* rather than sound decision making in carceral spaces. The paper concludes with background regarding decision biases and how to overcome these challenges to improve both correctional practice and human lives.

Keywords: Restricted housing units, solitary confinement, organizational rationality, carceral reform

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INTRODUCTION

Carceral institutions take shape around key tenants of Weberian bureaucratic formal systems (1946). These include written records, prescribed rules/procedures, hierarchical authority, a division of labor, impersonality, and a separation between personal and professional lives. Nearly every carceral facility possesses files that document both incarcerated residents¹ and staff, academy and in-service training and procedural manuals, memos, quasi- or fully militaristic employment hierarchies, tasks separated by position or role, and the implicit and explicit mandate for staff to remain impartial, relatively impersonal, and to not take their work home with them. Yet, a crucial part of bureaucracies includes the *people* working within them, and people are not entirely rational...*they are human after all*. They make decisions that often appear irrational given the constraints they face in time, information, and resources (Haggarty & Bucerius, 2021; Simon, 1955).

Two fundamental parts of the bureaucratic form include the goals of *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. However, much of the science on carceral institutions (and the theories that these institutions follow including incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation, and/or retribution) suggests incarceration as a punishment mechanism and jails/prisons as the delivery vessel are both inefficient and ineffective (Crank & Brezina, 2013; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Heaton et al., 2017; Loeffler & Nagin, 2022; Nagin, 2013). In fact, some scholarship even suggests that incarceration may increase criminogenicity (Cullen et al., 2011). One poignant place to examine the failing goals of efficiency and effectiveness within carceral institutions is via the use of restricted housing units (RHUs; also called solitary confinement, segregated housing, or lockdown) where bureaucracy is on full display. Science strongly suggests the inefficient and ineffectual nature of locking human beings down in this way. In this paper, we explore how RHUs can be inefficient and ineffective and introduce promising pathways forward.

BUREAUCRACY, BOUNDED RATIONALITY, EFFICIENCY, & EFFECTIVENESS

Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is considered a rationalized form of organizing. Formal rationalization occurs when organizations organize to use the most efficient means to achieve goals (Weber, 1946). Bureaucracies are the embodiment of rationality through the formal-rational authority that emerges from the use of clear hierarchies, a division of labor, impersonality, and standardized rules—all designed to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. The individuals working in bureaucracies make choices and decisions within this environment operating under a framework of “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1955) as the choices they make occur from limited options, driven by imperfect information, cognitive limitations, and time constraints. In bureaucracies, people make decisions in ways that use heuristics (mental short cuts) and satisficing (finding *a* solution to a problem, not necessarily the *best* one). While these decisions do not always align perfectly with organizational goals (due to self-interest and human error), it is expected that people working for organizations do, at least at some level, strive toward organizational goals.

Carceral Facilities as Bureaucracies. Exhibiting all the components of rationalization, prisons/jails model a logical or reasonable system. In theory, they should be efficient and effective systems that meet their goals. However, overly rational systems are often inefficient and ineffective (Henry, 2003). Abundant literature denotes the negative outcomes associated with incarceration. These

1 Throughout this paper we use the term “residents” or “incarcerated people/persons” to include any/all incarcerated people. We chose these terms to humanize individuals who reside in prisons rather than other terms like “offenders,” “prisoners,” and/or “inmates” as these terms render an identity rather than a living status.

include: dehumanizing conditions (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020); goal displacement/confusion (Merton 1938; Marti et al., 2017), staff corruption (Novisky et al., 2022), staff apathy or lack of organizational commitment (Lambert et al., 2017), and resident misconduct (Peterson et al., 2023; Steiner et al., 2014). While prisons/jails appear to offer an example of a rational bureaucracy, they overly rationalize rules and processes. The decision-making process by the humans implementing these often leads to irrationality. This in turns leaves prisons/jails unable to meet their goals.

Efficiency & Effectiveness. As two indicators of an organization's performance, *efficiency* and *effectiveness* (Mouzas, 2006) are sometimes used interchangeably. However, efficiency focuses on processes and effectiveness focuses on outcomes. Organizational efficiency is a measurement of the relationship(s) between inputs and outputs or how successfully the inputs have been transformed into outputs (Low, 2000). If an organization is efficient it will likely be resourceful and will work to streamline processes. On the other hand, effective organizations focus on the output itself. Effectiveness is situation-specific (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981), making it difficult to measure due to competing goals and the challenge of operationalizing all aspects of organizational performance. Here, we adhere to a basic definition that notes an effective organization is one that achieves its goal(s).

Efficiency and Effectiveness within Carceral Organizations. Carceral institutions strive for both efficiency and effectiveness. While prisons/jails have multiple and often competing goals, the overarching and regularly acknowledged goals of control, rehabilitation, safety, and security generally drive carceral practices (Marti et al., 2017; McPherson & Rudes, 2022). Prisons/jails show efficiency by using the best, most direct, and most suitable means to achieve these goals. When they achieve the goals in ways that are both measurable and demonstratable, they are considered effective. The question then is: *Is using the RHU as a means of achieving control, safety, and security effective and efficient?*

RESTRICTED HOUSING

Brief Overview. RHU practices typically include removing a individual from a general housing unit and placing them into a more restrictive unit where their privileges may be diminished and they are typically locked in their cells for 22+ hours per day. Restricted housing consists of three primary types (although these vary in name and form by institution): 1) administrative segregation (e.g., for persons who are a risk to themselves or others); 2) disciplinary segregation (e.g., for misconducts), and 3) protective custody (for persons at risk of harm), with some entire institutions devoted to segregation (i.e., supermax facilities). There are no global estimates on the number of people housed in RHUs, but a recent report estimates there are more than 122,000 people held in RHUs on any given day in the U.S. alone (Solitary Watch, 2023).

RHU Efficiency and Effectiveness. If carceral institutions strive for control, behavioral change, safety, and security and they work toward these goals using incapacitation, deterrence, retribution, and rehabilitation, then RHUs may actually be working in direct opposition to these goals. That is, a focus on short-term control, safety, and security may present as an easier option when situations seemingly demand immediate action and when their use is normative. However, the social and financial costs involved with short-term, normative/bounded decisions to complex human problems renders nearly any amount of time in RHUs as inefficient and ineffective for longer term outcomes including

rehabilitative behavioral change.

Data Showing Harm

For Incarcerated People. Decades of research finds that confinement in RHUs is tied to negative physiological and psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, stress, aggression, insomnia, cognitive disfunction, paranoia, hopelessness, headaches, heart palpitations, oversensitivity, and loss of appetite (Cloud et al., 2023; Grassian, 1983; Haney, 2018; Luigi et al., 2020; Smith, 2006). Additionally, evidence suggests that the use of RHUs may be counterproductive for maintaining institutional order and safety. Studies find that placing individuals in RHUs is ineffective for reducing misconducts post-release from segregation (Labrecque & Smith, 2019; Luigi et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2023). Studies focused on specific populations such as people on short-term placement in RHUs (Morris, 2016), gang-affiliated people (Motz et al., 2020), and women (Toman, 2022) report similar results. Scholars also find that placement in RHUs may actually have a criminogenic effect leading to an increased likelihood of misconducts (within custody) and new crimes (post carceral release) because of the tense and challenging environment (Cloud et al., 2015; Cloud et al., 2021; Haney, 2018; Lovell et al., 2007; Woo et al., 2019). Collectively, these studies challenge the efficacy of using RHUs as a deterrence-based punishment for a disciplinary infraction.

For Staff. RHUs also harm staff. Research finds that RHU staff experience pains akin to the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958). Officers feel *deprived of liberty* when they are physically separated from the rest of the facility and *deprived of relationships* when their work issues spill over into their home life (Mears et al., 2023; Rudes et al., 2022). Aranda-Hughes and Mears (2023) found that staff working in RHUs experience heightened emotional numbing because of the tense and often violent interactions they have with incarcerated people and the high rates of self-harm and suicide they witness—all of which are exacerbated within RHUs. Emotional numbing has adverse consequences for work performance, mental and physical health, and relationships. RHUs efficacy and effectiveness are hampered because its practice harms both incarcerated individuals and staff.

For Carceral Systems & Institutions. RHUs are exorbitantly expensive. The Vera Institute of Justice (James & Vanko, 2021) reports that in 2013, housing someone in a federal prison’s general population cost about \$86 per day, compared to \$216 per day in solitary confinement. In Illinois, annual costs were similarly higher—about \$22,000 for general population versus \$60,000 for solitary confinement. These costs are higher due to the need for staff to bring nearly everything to individuals housed in RHUs and the increased cost of unit procedures that often include frequent staff checks on residents and having two or more staff involved in all movements (e.g., to shower or yard). In a New York City study, Venters (2019) reports, “We conservatively estimate that for every 100 acts of self-harm, 2,760 hours of officer escort time and 450 clinical hours were required.”

Inconclusive Data or Data Suggesting Limited Harm

RHUs are often considered tools for reducing misbehavior and enhancing control, safety, and security by limiting opportunities for violence and deterring misconducts (Labrecque, 2015). While a litany of research on RHUs finds it is an unhelpful and harmful practice, some scholars report findings to the contrary. Morgan and colleagues (2017) contend that existing studies of RHUs suffer methodological flaws (e.g., small samples, lack of baseline measures) meaning conclusions “do not paint a complete

picture” (p. 19). Their meta-analysis found that RHUs had significant but small detrimental effects on people’s mental and physical functioning – suggesting harms are not universally experienced. Yet even “small” effects represent real suffering for some. Wooldredge and colleagues (2024) found that RHU confinement was more common and longer for those with poor mental health at intake but did not worsen functioning over time or after release. Siennick and colleagues (2022) found that residents in the RHU reported increased service use, improved functioning, and fewer crises. This conclusion warrants caution, however, since most RHUs provide only limited and as-needed services (Rudes et al., 2022). Finally, some scholars argue the physical structure itself is not the problem; rather, staff create the unit culture. Gendreau and Bonta (1984) write, “People create problems for each other. Physical environments are often relatively innocent bystanders” (p. 474). From this perspective, outcomes hinge on implementation, not architecture. Yet we argue the structure and staff practices are inextricably linked, together shaping the realities of RHUs.

DISCUSSION

RHUs are a commonly used means for achieving control, safety, and security. However, the relatively easier and quicker fix that arises from placing individuals into restricted housing comes at a significant cost to the well-being of residents *and* staff. The practice of using RHUs is a means to achieve an end, but in using that means several ends are achieved and several of these are detrimental. While control, safety, and security may temporarily improve, the level of control, safety, and security also lessens as individuals experience the harms that accompany this type of confinement. Research finds that the resulting biproducts of RHUs include increased violence and recidivism and, at best, statistically insignificant differences between misconducts of individuals placed or not placed in RHUs for misconduct. Thus, the punishment goal of deterrence is not achieved, rendering RHUs as ineffective.

Additionally, while RHUs achieve incapacitation (the removal of a person) and perhaps retribution (vengeance for a misconduct), the process is inefficient as it does little to minimize the use of resources like time, money, and effort; it is not a streamlined process. In fact, removing an individual from general population and placing them in RHUs is costly in several ways. These include the time, effort, and resources expended to remove the individual from general population housing and transfer/transport them to the RHU, the re-classification and intake process that occurs upon entry, and the often mandatory processes including transferring files, posting name placards on cell doors, and notifying meal, medical, and psychological services about the revised housing assignment to fulfill any legal mandates or institutional policies. These are just some of the tasks and responsibilities that come with transferring an individual from a general population unit to an RHU and these processes will again be required upon transfer back to general population. Moreover, these are just the bureaucratic processes! Add these to the physical and psychological harms that living and working in the RHU brings, and the picture of ineffectiveness and inefficiency is amplified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While many staff and carceral organizations argue that RHUs are a necessary tool for control and security, there are a multitude of other options. To understand how to maneuver away from RHUs, it is imperative to understand how these irrational actions (against strong science) take shape and hold on. For this, we turn to the concept of irrationality itself. Rational irrationality occurs when “people hold systematically biased, low-information, higher certitude beliefs” (Caplan, 2001, p. 4). When the price of the irrational belief is low enough that real, practical consequences are not expected, the rational

irrationality takes hold. In carceral environments, the view that RHUs are necessary and effective is a rational irrationality. From here, a type of “decision tunneling” occurs whereby “decision makers pursue ever-diminishing ‘utilities’ [gains] at progressively higher risk...[and organizational actors] are caught in a string of choices among spiraling ‘disutilities’” (Schulman, 1989, p. 33). This represents a form of “decisional trap” based on means-ends thinking. When decisions are made to employ RHUs as a security/control option and to place individuals in RHUs as a response to misconduct (for example), the choice for restrictive housing is a low-risk option. It adheres to formal rules, immediately yields an incapacitation effect, and offers temporary relief. However, a more moderately risky decision involves engaging in alternatives that may lessen security in the short-term, but in the longer term, will yield an overall safer environment for both staff and residents and potentially families and communities as inter-carceral and/or community recidivism risk lessens.

Rather than focus on one or more “ideal” replacements for RHUs, science suggests that it is best for carceral systems to work with researchers to identify and/or develop sets of alternative options that are culturally appropriate for their organizational climate and have scientifically supported results in similarly situated carceral environments. For example, for many decades carceral institutions viewed both mental illness and substance use disorder as misconducts (rule-breaking) but with the help of rigorous science and training, many carceral institutions now view both as medical issues in need of treatment rather than punishment. Pathways toward this important change include what climate researchers call “making use of the biases.” Rabaa and colleagues (2024) note the importance of creating and enforcing target commitments, providing frequent and ample information, instituting reward structures, using a step-wise approach to introducing change slowly, amplifying the evidence of harm caused and the potential damage incurred by maintaining the status quo, creating a culture of ownership over the evidence and the proposed changes, highlighting successful movement away from current operations and into new behaviors, and creating a positively driven policy structure that engages and enhances the workplace environment while supporting the change. *Yes, this is a tall order.* It involves a multi-faceted, complex negotiation between what is and what could be. But the most important part of this change process includes the belief in science and the innate or instilled desire to reduce harm by improving efficiency and effectiveness.

Practitioner-researcher partnerships are a wise strategy for tackling problems like this. Not only for the benefit of having both insider and outsider perspectives and not only for the expertise expansion possible through these collaborations, but also, and perhaps most importantly, because tearing down existing structures with deeply rooted history, imposed values, and perceived legitimacy is hard... *really hard.* Correctional leaders are ill-equipped to do this work alone. The strongest team knows the value of each of its players and uses them to fulfill the overall goal of winning. Right now, carceral systems that rely on RHUs as a primary mechanism of control, safety, and security are *not winning*...in fact, research suggests they are losing. Band-aiding the problem with short-term fixes like reforms to policies that include fewer days in restricted housing is a good start, but it is not ultimately a solution worth keeping. The only way to win is to privilege human dignity as *THE* carceral goal and to instill in everyone that only efficient actions that lead to that goal will ever be considered effective. Of course, maintaining control, safety, and security is imperative. And of course rehabilitation is crucial. But none of these goals should ever be expected, approached, or even tolerated if they include the intended or unintended consequences of harm to human beings. We already have the science, now we need to focus on the *action*.

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SENS(E)IBLE DESIGN: A CALL FOR PARTICIPATORY PRISON DESIGN (PPD)

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Abstract

Sensory experiences play a central role in shaping everyday life in prison. These embodied dynamics cannot be fully anticipated through architectural plans, procurement processes or prefabricated design models alone. This commentary draws on emerging insights from carceral geography and sensory criminology to argue for more systematic inclusion of experiential knowledge in prison design, repair and refurbishment. It proposes Participatory Prison Design (PPD) as an approach to engage incarcerated people and staff in generating knowledge about how prison spaces are experienced, enabling design choices that balance safety and security with the embodied realities of living and working in these environments.

Keywords: Prison design; Participatory Prison Design (PPD); architecture; participatory methods; sensory experiences

#Day 5; Friday: The weather is pretty biblical today – the entrance seems much further away from the car park than usual. It's quite warm despite this. I'm not looking forward to my morning of interviews in the work-sheds, where it's frighteningly hot at any degree. A muddy smear greets me as I enter through the automatic doors. I make bad jokes about the rain and am asked for the 5th time in five days if I have authorisation for my Dictaphones. My buckle catches on my belt loop as I try to drop my belongings in the security scanner tray. I feel a droplet of sweat make its way down between my shoulder blades.

#Day 10, Wednesday: The wings do feel quite light and bright. But what is striking is the acoustics. Noise – or certain noise – travels. The vacuum cleaner was loud as hell, for example, but the officers trying to shout to each other were useless. You really have to yell. The smell of toast is wafting down the stairs. I am yet to understand the rationale for the green and blue stripes across the carpet. When the vacuum stops I can hear the whirring of the ventilation or some kind of other air system. And now the sound seems to travel, so the few conversations I can hear from the office staff seem like they shouldn't be heard.

#Day 11, Thursday: The cell was all set up to receive its next occupant. The TV and remote, a lamp and a small kettle were all waiting. Phone pin numbers were scrawled on one wall. The painted square that acts as a notice board was speckled with white spots where the toothpaste used to fix photographs to the wall had pulled the paint off. I run my fingers over the surface – a few flakes fall away ... I'd say that the place was clean, but it still looked a bit grubby. ... Nevertheless, it wasn't dull, it wasn't dark and it was smelling okay. You'd feel basic but you'd be equipped I'd say ...

#Day 15, Monday: My staff alarm went off again today. It was about 12 noon, and my first thought is always that I've pressed something by accident. Everyone checked their belt and looked down to see where the source was. It was 1C. One second after the high-pitched siren, the thunderclap arrived – boots pounding stair treads and concrete like a runaway herd. Just as suddenly, it was over. The radio confirmed "all clear." The stampede faded, the roar of feet fracturing into irregular thuds as staff drifted back, shuffling and slowing, until the afternoon settled into quiet once more.

Introduction

Although prisons are typically designed with security and functionality in mind, their most powerful effects are often sensory – experienced through sight, sound, touch, smell and taste – and most apparent in the minute operational routines of these spaces. However, much of what shapes the experience of incarceration – and, indeed, the work of those who move through these spaces – rarely makes its way into architectural plans or policy documents. As the above excerpts from one of my field diaries demonstrate, it is often obvious how quickly the built environment communicates its sensory pressures and demands. The weather, the acoustics, the way heat accumulates, the persistence of smells, the choreography of movement – each of these elements shape how spaces are used, understood and endured. These are the kinds of insights that only emerge through close, embodied engagement with the facility, and they underscore why the perspectives of those who inhabit these environments are indispensable to any meaningful design process. Through this commentary, I propose the use of Participatory Prison Design (PPD) to not only capture the physical



and sensory character of the prison but to recognize and document the kind of experiential knowledge that could be translated into design and policy decisions. In the following, I briefly outline the existent literature that highlights the importance of prison design and sensory experiences of carceral space before introducing PPD and suggesting how it may be deployed on the premise that lived sensorial details are not peripheral but foundational – they constitute the very conditions that design must address – and that they must be captured from those who experience them.

Carceral space, prison design and sensory experiences

Wherever they are often positioned along the continuum between extreme punitiveness and progressive exceptionalism, all prisons deliberately shape the experiences of those within them. Traditional research, notably Sykes' (1958) "pains of imprisonment," has focused on the bodily, symbolic and societal impacts of incarceration, highlighting the oppressiveness of prison conditions. More recent scholarship, however, has begun to interrogate how the built environment itself produces tension, stress and affective responses among both incarcerated persons and staff (Moran & Turner, 2019: 63). Carceral geography has emerged as a vital lens for understanding prisons not simply as containers of life, but as socially and materially coded landscapes (Moran et al., 2018) by focusing on the significance of carceral *space*. Prisons are inhabited spaces imbued with meaning through practices, systems and spatial configurations. Architecture and design are central to these analyses, shaping how prison spaces operate and are experienced. Scholarship has explored prison origins, construction processes and operational philosophies, emphasizing both the punitive intentions and the potential for architecture to influence well-being and ergo support the wider goals of the prison system (Jewkes et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2016).

A growing body of work applies a multi-sensory lens, exploring how physical components of prisons – light, sound, air, water, spatial layout, and access to nature – intersect with human experience. For example, recent research indicates that restricted access to natural daylight and over-reliance on static artificial lighting in prisons can impair circadian regulation, disrupt sleep, and exacerbate stress, depression and aggression among incarcerated people (Urrutia-Moldes, 2025). Conversely, natural light and access to views of the outside world support physical and mental well-being, paralleling evidence on the benefits of contact with nature (Moran 2019; Moran & Turner, 2019; Turner, Moran, & Jewkes, 2020). Beyond light, other sensory dimensions – air quality and sound – critically shape prison experiences (Turner et al., 2023). Poor ventilation, overcrowding and aging infrastructure compromise respiratory health, increasing susceptibility to infections such as tuberculosis and influenza (Moxey-Adderley et al., 2016; Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; O'Grady et al., 2011). Soundscapes, meanwhile, influence both hearing and psychological health: high ambient noise, reverberant surfaces and constant chatter have been linked to hearing loss, stress and difficulties in communication among incarcerated persons, particular those from ethnic minorities (Jacobson et al., 1989; Vanderpoll & Howard, 2012). These sensory environments do not only affect incarcerated individuals but those for whom prison is the workspace (Gacek et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2023), linking staff well-being directly to the design and materiality of carceral spaces.

Sensory experiences in prison are also politically and socially constructed. Air, for instance, is not merely a product of architecture; it can be managed, restricted or controlled in ways that reinforce disciplinary regimes (Martin, 2021). Similarly, noise and sound can be used to regulate behavior, enforce attention or degrade experiences, highlighting how sensory environments are intertwined

with power and governance (McClanahan & South, 2020). These dynamics underscore that the senses are not only biologically consequential but socially and historically situated: how individuals perceive and react to light, sound and air is mediated by broader cultural and institutional contexts.

This emphasis on sensory engagement aligns with emergent work in carceral geography and sensory criminology. Scholars have begun to analyze soundscapes, olfactory experiences, tactile interactions and visual stimuli within prisons, recognizing their cumulative impact on atmospheres of incarceration (Crewe et al., 2014; Herrity et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022). Multi-sensory attention reveals both health risks and possibilities for more humane environments. For instance, gardens, greenery and visual access to nature improve mood, reduce aggression and enhance well-being for both incarcerated persons and staff (Moran & Turner, 2019; Moran et al., 2024; Richards & Kafami, 1999). Similarly, lighting, sound, and air can be harnessed to create health-promoting, restorative, or therapeutic spaces rather than solely security-focused environments.

However, whilst there is emergent work on sensory carceral experiences, there is less written about how these sensory experiences might be harnessed to improve and/or rethink principles of prison design, re-design and renovation. It would be easy to make strong policy recommendations that respond to the narrow but powerful range of academic work that already explains the impacts of architectural spaces; that is, making clear recommendations that would mandate, for example, increase natural lighting, acoustic planning and appreciation for the tactile and material qualities of cells and communal spaces. However, we still know very little about the acute sensory impacts of design choices in carceral space – a situation that should be rectified before more concrete recommendations are widely shared. Because sensory experience emerges only through occupation – how noise reverberates, how heat accumulates, how smells circulate around and via people – these dimensions cannot be fully anticipated by the planning process alone. Prisons change: their occupancy levels often deviate from what was intended; spaces are re-purposed following a transfer in management structure and financing; and security incidents often force usage into unexpected ways. This creates a structural gap that only participatory approaches can fill.

It is not to say that prison designers do not consider end users. However, it is commonly the case that new build prison design, for example, highlights restrictions in terms of the procurement process and often uses prefabricated design components to achieve the most cost-effective option in an increasingly punitive but budget-conscious society (see Moran et al., 2016). And, whilst each element of the prison experience is harnessed in the design process, it is questionable as to how far it can capture, understand and meaningfully deploy aspects of the sensory experience – such as the almost intangible notion of a prison atmosphere. If sensory experiences are both consequential and currently under-documented, then prison design requires a mechanism through which experiential, embodied and multisensory knowledge can meaningfully inform architectural decisions. Participatory Prison Design offers one such mechanism. In view of this, I call for a prison design process that places end-user consultation at its core, recognizing that the minutiae of sensory experience are fundamental to architectural decisions at every level. Participatory approaches to prison design can leverage this sensory knowledge to benefit both occupants and staff. By engaging those who live and work in prisons, architects, policymakers and researchers can better align built environments with human (sensory) needs while maintaining safety and operational effectiveness.



Participatory Prison Design (PPD) and its capacity for sensory appreciation

User participation in design has several desirable motivations including: "improving the knowledge upon which systems are built" and "enabling people to develop realistic expectations" (Gregory, 2003: 63). Such an approach would ensure that the design was "informed by the needs of actual building users rather than by generalizations from a non-representative group and that the architect was not designing on behalf of people beyond their own experience" (Luck, 2003: 525-525); the latter factor being a highly likely scenario. It is certainly the case that incarcerated persons are often included in decision-making in penal institutions. Useful examples can be drawn from the mechanism used to implement 'prisoner councils,' for example (see Solomon, 2004). Indeed, Bishop (2006) successfully utilized prisoner councils during the 1960s when he was a prison governor in England. Further successful examples of attempts to instill "co-responsibility" (Bishop, 2006: 7) were also found outside of the UK (with Bishop noting functioning prisoner councils in Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Herzegovina and Spain). The councils were intended to allow incarcerated persons to participate in the running of the prison, and as Solomon and Edgar explain, "[b]y giving voice to prisoners' concerns ... The council was seen by many governors as vital in order to change and to avoid resentment" (2004: 33-34). Baker long ago identified that prisoner councils served a "therapeutic purpose" where "[a] properly operated council offers an excellent vehicle for the harnessing and direction of the abundant energies and usually high abilities of many offenders" (Baker, 1964: 47) – a purpose that is still vital today.

Despite this, considerations of architecture or design do not appear to feature as a stable item in the extensive list of topics identified on the agendas of these councils (Bishop, 2006: 7). Other areas of research focus on the capacity to include incarcerated persons as vital components of participatory action research in the prison setting (McKenzie & Wright, 2024). Evidence from participatory research indicates that the inclusion of incarcerated persons in the design process – whether in terms of the design of entire prison facilities or for the modification and refurbishment of existing spaces – can improve both the functionality of prison spaces and the well-being of occupants (Massimi, 2019). As such, I call for what I term Participatory Prison Design (PPD), which provides a structured framework for integrating the voices of incarcerated persons and staff into architectural and operational decision-making, moving beyond tokenistic consultation toward meaningful involvement (Binder, 1996; Gregory, 2003; Luck, 2003). PPD builds on principles of user-centered and participatory design established in other sectors, including education, healthcare and community planning (Jeanroy et al., 2025; Juarez and Brown, 2008; Woolner et al., 2007).

Accordingly, PPD can have powerful outcomes in the carceral context. Allowing incarcerated persons to 'have their say' is part of a process of contributing knowledge about the functional and practical requirements of spaces that architects and managers may not anticipate, whilst simultaneously fostering ownership and agency within the prison environment (Baer, 2005; Baker, 1964; Solomon, 2004). Using, in particular, mobile methods and creative, embodied approaches to knowledge production (von Benzon et al., 2021), this type of end-user engagement has the capacity to understand the sensory impacts of everyday design choices in ways that have crucially been absent from both prison design research and implementation. Participation in design also enhances incarcerated persons' understanding of operational constraints and design trade-offs, aligning expectations with feasible solutions and promoting collaboration between staff, management and architects (Gregory, 2003; Wener, 2012). Even when recommendations are not fully implemented, the process itself can

positively influence perceptions of procedural fairness and engagement (Mobley et al., 2007; Solnit, 2001).

For policymakers, the integration of PPD into prison planning and refurbishment represents an evidence-informed strategy to improve design outcomes and operational effectiveness. Successful implementation requires careful attention to participant selection, methodological design and ethical considerations, including confidentiality, incentive structures and adaptability to the complex and unpredictable prison environment (Brown-Sica et al., 2010; Woolner et al., 2007). PPD is not a replacement for professional architectural expertise; rather, it complements it by incorporating experiential knowledge from those who live and work in prisons, providing a more holistic foundation for decision-making.

There are some caveats to be made about such methods to involve end-users in design strategies. As Woolner et al. found in their case study of the consultation of young people in school renovation plans, “the message which is heard by designers and architects is no more certain to lead to a complete design solution and still runs the risk of being unrepresentative of the full range of relevant views” (2007: 247). As Luck (2003) suggests, end users (plausibly, due to their likely inexperience in architectural design) are unlikely to be aware of all the design opportunities such as materials, technologies and innovations available for use in contemporary design. They might be unfamiliar with design language; not have an extensive vocabulary; or (as is often the case with incarcerated persons coming from lower-income backgrounds) have limited experience with a range of buildings across the architectural spectrum. As a result, Luck recognizes that “users suggesting ‘solutions’ can limit a design solution” (2003: 534). Additionally, Woolner et al. (2007) considered that such consultation processes are often complicated and lengthy, particularly if attempts are made to encourage participation from a wide range of people. As a result, it may be “harder to balance the long-term need of design with the day-to-day requirements” of that environment (Woolner et al., 2007: 247). However, Brown-Sica et al. also recognized that although such consultation adds “tremendously to the timeline,” it was indeed essential for “authentic and user-centered” data in their design consultation for library improvements in Denver, Colorado, USA (2010: 303).

Accordingly, the PPD approach involves three key components: First, the active involvement of incarcerated persons and staff in identifying problems and evaluating existing facilities ensures that designs reflect lived experiences. Correctional authorities should establish formal consultation mechanisms, such as regular co-design workshops or advisory panels, to systematically gather input from both incarcerated persons and staff during planning and refurbishment. Second, the use of diverse research methods – including focus groups, walking interviews¹, creative design exercises and visual prompts – captures a richer, multisensory understanding of the environment (Evans & Jones, 2011; Leyshon, 2002; Pain, 2004). Research protocols in prison design projects should mandate multi-method engagement strategies that go beyond surveys or interviews, ensuring that sensory,

¹ *Walking interviews are interviews conducted on the move. Typically, this involves a researcher walking alongside a participant during an interview where the route can be prescribed by either person. The method prioritises the places and spaces within which the conversation takes place, encouraging a different kind of reflection than in static interviews. ‘Walking’ interviews might also refer to other mobile practices such as running, and other terms such as ‘go along’ interviews describe situations where researchers may travel alongside participants using different forms of (accessible) transport (Riley et al., 2021).*



spatial and emotional aspects of the environment are documented and considered. Third, the provision of transparent feedback to participants validates their contributions and demonstrates the practical impact of their input (Luck, 2007; Soloman & Edgar, 2004). Institutions should implement structured feedback loops, such as workshops or brief user-friendly reports, showing how participant insights have informed design decisions and identifying any constraints that limited implementation.

In sum, prisons are more than sites of confinement; they are multi-sensory landscapes that actively shape behavior, health and experience. Both recognizing the agency of sensory environments and including the voices of both incarcerated people and staff in design is vital. Participatory Prison Design (PPD) offers a replicable and policy-relevant approach to prison design that situates incarcerated persons (and staff) as legitimate contributors to shaping their environments. Embedding PPD within prison planning and (re)development frameworks offers the opportunity to contribute to a more just, functional environment that can better serve the (rehabilitative) goals of the wider prison system. By foregrounding sensory experience and its implications in a user-centric, research-led policy approach, we can ensure that the voices of end-users – both incarcerated persons and staff – inform the design of safe, secure and sustainable carceral spaces in ways that are both sensory and sensible.

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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 & Terlizze, 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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BUREAUCRATISED RISK: ETHICAL AND MORAL BLINDNESS IN CONTEMPORARY PENAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper explores how risk bureaucracies that have come to dominate in contemporary penal practice can result in diverse forms of Ethical and Moral Blindness. These issues arise when the deployment of penal institutional aims related to risk, and administrative risk technologies, results in practices that are either blind to the impacts for individuals in prison (ethical) or in blindness to the very humans central to that risk work (moral). Here I explore three forms of risk practice that are foremost in the contemporary prisons of England and Wales to think through the implications of these issues for broader penal policy: 1. Forensic Psychology; 2. Prison Security; 3. the National Research Committee that oversees applications by external parties to conduct research in prisons. I will argue that for each of these bureaucratised risk processes there are resulting harmful, unethical, and immoral practices that arise out of institutional and system level risk obsessions.

Keywords: Prison, Psychology, Risk, Security



Introduction

Prisons are constructed from complex matrices of overt and covert forms of power (Sim, 2009). These forms of power are designed to fulfil and maintain the prison's functions and disciplinary 'change' agenda, whilst simultaneously protecting the institution and those who act in the furtherance of its aims. Physical force and coercion will always operate within prisons; however, much of the day-to-day power of the institution is diffused into more covert, bureaucratic modes of operation (Crewe, 2009; Mathiesen, 1990, 1965; Warr, 2021). These scriptural forms of dominion manifest through varying 'expert' discourses (i.e., security, medicine, education, etc. – Foucault, 1979). They become powerful because as operative systems of control they generate, gather, record, control, and strategically disseminate personal data/intelligence that is central to the aims of the institution (Habermas, 1981).

Risk and its control have become the defining concern of the contemporary prison. The scriptural knowledge technologies in carceral institutions are at their most powerful when concerned with the assessment, management, and mitigation of risk. Here I discuss three such risk-centric discourses from the context of England and Wales (forensic psychology, security, and the National Research Committee). I have chosen these as good illustrative examples of the array of powerful forms of expertise (see Foucault, 1994) that are central to both the good order and functioning of the prison. It is important to note that each produces distinct forms of both ethical and moral blindness. These are not always the focus of academic or policy enquiry, nor that of National Preventative Mechanisms, despite the harms that they produce. This article, is based on nearly 20 years of research conducted in prisons, Young Offender Institutions, Secure Training Centres, secure Forensic Mental Health institutions, and with various criminal justice practitioners and professionals.

Context

Prisons exist in an increasingly anomic social context. Required to operate as a place of security and 'safety' in the face of rapidly changing legal orders, shifting population dynamics, technological advance, fraught political contexts, and a perceived breakdown of norms and traditions, they have become inherently bound to the State's desire to control both the present and future risks (see Beck, 1992). Adams (1995: p.10) argues that theoretically risk is defined by those who seek to measure it as the '*product and utility of some future even.*' In this strict sense, 'risk' is a neutral term and can refer to both positive and negative outcomes (Renn, 1992). However, within penal risk discourse this term neutrality has been suppressed under a more securitised view; one which perceives the 'risks' posed by prisoners (and 'dangerous' others) as negatives that need to be measured, predicted, and prevented and/or controlled (Lupton, 1999).

A characteristic of the modern risk society is the prevalence and pre-eminence of industries who both promote risk detection tools and sell risk reducing products. Prisons have a statutory duty to manage and mitigate the risk(s) that prisoners (and perceived 'dangerous' others) are thought to represent. In response to that duty, there is the development and entrenchment of both security and treatment industries in the contemporary prison landscape. These are the 'experts' who provide the discursive models that allow the risk assessment/assuagement work to be seen to be done. These models operate bureaucratically. Their symbolic language flows through administrative processes and shapes, controls, and constrains the action alternatives of those targeted by them. The more a discourse constrains the targeted individuals/groups, and thus serves the disciplinary and institutional interests of the prison, the more power they secure, and the more central to everyday

practice they become (Warr, 2021).

Ethical and Moral Blindness

Once expert discourses are disseminated throughout an institution they do not dissipate. They become an embedded, yet diffused and hidden, aspect of the cognitive lifeworld which informs the perceptual reality of prison staff. This amplifies the potency of these forms of power (Crewe, 2009; Lukes, 1974) as they become the primary, yet unconsidered, factor informing daily operations. This shifts staff's attention away from the individuals (prisoners or staff) who occupy the prison, to the securitised and disciplinary ends of the institution. However, this overt focus often renders those staff both:

Morally Blind – where the deployment of expert technologies/models of knowing within the prison render the powerful insensitive to the humans at the heart of their practice (Bauman & Donskis, 2013).

and

Ethically Blind – where the frame of attention on securitised and disciplinary ends prevents prison staff from fully understanding the implications of their practice on those humans that are subject to their interventions (Trotter & Ward, 2013).

In prisons, where the disparities of power are both extreme and hard set, these forms of blindness can (and do) create a range of interpersonal and social harms. These harms are manifold and are too extensive to cover in any comprehensive way in this article. However, here I set out three illustrative examples that demonstrate how both ethical and moral blindness can occur in risk work.

Forensic Psychology

Forensic Psychology has a great deal of disciplinary capital within prisons in England and Wales (see Crewe, 2009; Warr, 2021). As a discourse it both serves the interests of the prison in terms of its public protection and disciplinary goals. It does this by providing both risk assessment and assuagement functions. However, it also informs, and is heavily weighted by, external judicial bodies (i.e., Parole Board) in relation to their official functions. Forensic psychology is an internally constraining form of risk expertise as it categorises, labels, and pathologizes prisoners via the symbolic medicalised language (signifiers) of their discourse. Yet it is also an externally influential form of expertise that can shape the life-course of a prisoner both within and without the prison by affecting decision making in the wider criminal justice system.

The major form of blindness that occurs with forensic psychology relates to what is known as the 'dual-relationship issue' (Trotter & Ward, 2013). This is when medicalised interventions serve both a care and a control function. With forensic psychologists working in prisons this dual-relationship issue involves two interlinked factors: 1) the institutional logics of public protection that govern their employment; and 2) the adoption of the Risk Needs Responsivity model which coerces engagement, prioritises risk, and transposes disciplinary concerns into therapeutic concerns. As these two psychologists, working in opposite ends of the security landscape of the system, noted:

Society – public protection is the prime, the public if you like. So that is kind of where the focus is, it is always about protection, risk and managing that. But obviously in balance there is duty of care to the individuals that we work with. But the end point is the public (Trotter & Ward, 2013).

I do lots of different things ... assessments, programme delivery, safer custody ... lots of different things but they're always centred around public protection

Prisoners were not the primary stakeholders of forensic psychological practice - it was the public, the courts, the prison, and the criminal justice system. This was the source of both the *Moral* and *Ethical Blindness* as the work was being done to, and not with, prisoners. Though there is no direct *animus nocendi*, this diverted gaze resulted in a number of harms: from not confronting the experiential reality of prisoners subject to these risk technologies, to being in denial about the consequences of their interventions by prioritising the tools and programmes they delivered in service of the prison. Likewise, conflating disciplinary concerns with therapeutic rhetoric meant prisoners subject to this psychological 'gaze' often had their actual needs unrecognised and unmet as they were not really the target of (risk assuaging) intervention.

Security

If security say no, that's it, it aint happening. Don't matter how good it is for the lads, the prison, for us, its just ... no!

Security has the most material power in the prison. It infuses every element of the institution, its regime, and its daily operations. The above quote was given by a senior manager after their security department had blocked an arts-based group from coming to the prison as part of the establishment's Violence Reduction Strategy. The security department is tasked with intelligence gathering activities within, and operational disruption of threats to, the prison (O'Mara, 2024). Security is a constraining/restraining form of power because its 'gaze' both categorises, labels, surveils, and forms deep actioned intelligence on prisoners (and staff) via the symbolic threat management language (signifiers) of their discourse. Unlike Forensic Psychology, whose power is prisoner focused, invasive, and extramural, the power of security falls upon all who step beyond the wall and as such is both intramural and procedural in nature.

Prioritising these securitised processes and risk-based governance, over that of humanistic concerns, is where one finds the most blatant examples of morally and ethically blind behaviour. I have argued elsewhere (Warr, 2023) that such blindness exists around searching practices. Searches are imposed on people within the institution as a matter of securitised routine. This enforced touching can evoke direct harms for those who are Neuro-Divergent, have histories of victimisation, or other forms of trauma and who suffer with touch sensitivities/defensiveness. However, a more subtle example was highlighted to me by a number of forensic psychologists who noted that security officers would regularly, *ultra vires*, breach their professional ethical practices/boundaries by either covertly accessing, or overtly demanding access to, 'intelligence' kept in confidential files/notes (see Warr, 2021: p.145-146). One psychologist, when asked how they navigated the professional ethics of this, replied:

What could I do? It's security ... everyone did what they said. In the end, I just carried on and tried to ignore it. I just became more careful what I would put in my notes. I still feel uncomfortable about it though.

Another noted that that they had been told by their line manager to give 'Security' whatever they wanted, even though it presented an ethical conundrum. They contrasted this with other psychological professionals:

We work in an entirely different setting [than health or education], some of the BPS/HCPC¹ stuff does not apply as simply to us. It clearly applies to us but you have to think ... it is great chatting to forensic and clinical chums in health and they just kind of roll their eyes, but I say we get told to do that and you can't not, and people say "well, just say no." No, you don't understand because three men in uniform will just come in and just take the file.

Here, there is an ethical blindness by security staff to the impacts that such work/behaviour has for the standing and practice of fellow staff. No thought is given to the professional, or personal, harms that may arise from these breaches of confidentiality. There is also a moral blindness to the very humans, the prisoners, that this 'intelligence' relates to. There is an implicit denial of the status and condition dignity of the people who are incarcerated here as they are used as a means to a risk end, rather than end in and of themselves. Where the priority of security, and the maintenance of its integrity, trumps all other concerns within the prison the harms of its practice, not only go unconsidered, they are actively suppressed.

National Research Committee (NRC)

The NRC represents a different form of the same problem. The NRC exists as a bureaucratic gate-keeping entity that is designed to assess the 'risks' of research applications to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Justice. Made up of designated individuals dispersed throughout the estate, they are tasked with ensuring that research applications are of suitable (and industry level) standard, adhere to the Areas of Research Interest set out by the Ministry, protect resources and operational delivery, and that data protection, security, and (relevant) ethical standards² are considered/maintained. It does this through the advent of a specific form and application process that is both somewhat opaque and rigid. The body has become something of a controversial entity in that it is seen, and often accused, of only permitting research that serves the interests of the authorities, whilst maintaining the closed, deliberately hidden, reality of the prison from academic scrutiny.

The most egregious, and public example of this (of course most examples are not made public) was in relation to a study on sex in prisons in England and Wales (see Stevens, 2020). The project was a collaboration between the Howard League for Penal Reform, a commission they set up to investigate the issue, a university-based researcher, and a number of other stakeholders. The design was to survey and interview prisoners from multiple prisons, in varying security classifications, across the estate. The project gained some media attention in its early stages and the in-coming Secretary of State at the time, Chris Grayling, objected to the project. As a direct result of that objection the

1 BPS – British Psychological Society; HCPC – Health and Care Professionals Council.

2 This is despite the NRC ceasing to be an explicit ethics committee in 2015.



NRC put a block on the project on the grounds of methodological and ethical concerns. After rounds of negotiation the project was never realised within prisons in England and Wales, but was later conducted with a much smaller sample of former prisoners who were willing to speak on the issue.

This is an extension of the risk-based scriptural economy of the prison shifting from internal concerns to a symbolic external boundary, and the threat of outside others. The power here is one in which the symbolic and communicative functions of science are effectively being coopted to complement other risk-centric discourses to both constrain the investigative gaze of social science, and to silence the voices of the vulnerable, via bureaucratic processes. It does this whilst simultaneously pretending to act in their interests by transposing the strategic aims of HMPPS with ethical concerns related to vulnerable prisoners. To some degree this can be thought of as an extreme form of 'ethics creep' (Haggerty, 2004) where risk governance is not focused on the potential harms of social inquiry to vulnerable individuals, but rather using these concepts to constrain academic research, and the revelations (challenges) that may emerge. This is a form of what Davis (2018) refers to as '*epistemic appropriation*' - not only are (potential) modes and benefits of research with and for marginalised prisoners being detached from their actual being, but also misdirected towards the interests of the institution/system. By utilising the institutional concerns to create a form of testimonial suppression, the NRC become effectively blind to the effects they have on prisoners, prison staff, researchers, and our knowledge eco-system. However, by also constructing and reifying the 'prisoner' population to an idealised bureaucratic entity of vulnerability, it promotes the denial of their agency (compounding the deprivations of autonomy and identity they are subject to) in service of protecting the prison from a carefully constructed ideation of external risk.

Conclusions

I have argued here that risk-based discourses in the contemporary prison system create distinct, and wide ranging, forms of moral and ethical blindness. Where institutional aims are prioritised, and where systems of 'knowing' are deployed in such ways that the humans at which they are targeted are secondary, then it is easy for procedures to overtake humanistic concerns. This creates a range of disparate harms experienced by different populations that are either overlooked or actively ignored. This goes beyond the normal issues of institutional thoughtlessness, to more pervasive issues of how symbolic power both operates, and obfuscates the impacts of its operations. There are concerns here not just for human rights as they relate to status and condition dignity, but also in terms of the damage that can be done to those held in custody by the state. In prisons where power imbalances are so severe, and the harms so profound, it behoves us as researchers, practitioners, and professionals to expose, explicate, and eradicate such harms.

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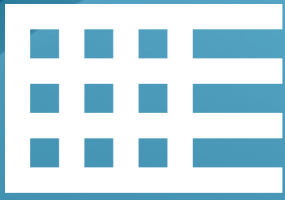
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ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association

STAFF TRAINING AND WELL-BEING

CORRECTIONAL STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF A LOVED ONE'S INCARCERATION ON WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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Abstract

Decades of robust research clearly establishes that caring for incarcerated loved ones adds considerable stress, anxiety, and hardship to women's lives, with important implications for their health and wellbeing. Although incarceration is a complex and multi-systemic issue, correctional systems can enact concrete strategies to ease this burden and help protect women's health. These include facilitating communications between women and their incarcerated loved ones, providing ways for women to know that their loved one is safe and well, making visitation more family-friendly and supportive of health-promoting activities, and removing financial barriers to staying in touch with loved ones.

Keywords: Incarceration, jail, prison, women, family, caregiving



Introduction

Correctional policies and practices tend to focus on people inside of jails and prisons—those held there and those who work there. Yet there are millions of additional people whose lives are profoundly affected by correctional systems: family members and other loved ones of people who are incarcerated. Caring for someone who is incarcerated involves various forms of labor, including communication, visitation, financial support, and legal advocacy. Most of this labor is provided by women, and although the socio-structural reasons that result in women being called upon to care for incarcerated loved ones are complex, there are straightforward ways correctional systems can help to ease the burden of providing such caregiving. Doing so is advantageous to all involved, since positive family and social connections are associated with improved outcomes for in-custody wellbeing, including decreased violence and increased participation in programming (Burns, Murray, Ferguson, & Moore, 2024; Cochran, 2012), as well as for successful transitions to housing, employment, and services upon release (Bales & Mears, 2008; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Duwe & Clark, 2013).

Brief review of justifying literature

Over 10 million people are held annually in jails and prisons in the United States alone (U.S. Department of Justice & Office of Justice Programs, 2023). Carceral facilities rarely collect information about family relations, and health, education, social service, and other community systems do not routinely screen for a loved one's incarceration. The Family History of Incarceration Survey, fielded in 2018, provides the strongest estimates of the prevalence of family member incarceration, finding that 45% of people in the United States had ever had an immediate family member held in jail or prison (Enns et al., 2019). Estimates of current family member imprisonment derived from the 2006 General Social Survey found approximately 25% of women had a loved one in prison at the time the survey was conducted (Lee, McCormick, Hicken, & Wildeman, 2015). Family member incarceration is more concentrated among people of color and people with lower incomes (Enns et al., 2019), reflecting structural factors such as policing practices, money bail, and divestment from social services that make people targeted by racism or experiencing poverty more likely to wind up in carceral facilities (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015, 2016; Tonry, 1995; Wacquant, 2007).

Research clearly indicates that the emotional, financial, practical, and advocacy labor of taking care of people in jail or prison falls primarily to women (Arditti, 2012; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Deckard, 2024; Delorme, 2025; deVunono-Powell, Schweidler, Walters, & Zohrabi, 2015; McKay, 2022; Page, Piehowski, & Soss, 2019). Comfort (2008) developed the conceptual framework of "secondary prisonization" to analyze how non-incarcerated women's daily lives are profoundly affected by carceral institutions, which can shape their options for and choices about food, housing, residential location, physical activity, employment, sexual intimacy, and even clothes and belongings (M. Comfort, Grinstead, McCartney, Bourgois, & Knight, 2005; M. L. Comfort, 2003; O Grinstead et al., 2005). Women often spend substantial periods of time behind bars as they maintain relationships with loved ones, and thereby are subjected to intrusive surveillance, restrictive rules, and punishment despite not having been accused or convicted of a crime (M. L. Comfort, 2002; Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996). Harris (2025) coined the term "mainline mama" to describe the experiences women form in relationship to prisons—through visitation or incarceration—while engaging with family, children, partners, and other women. Mainline Mama is a practical and theoretical way of harnessing the experiences of Black women to describe experiences with state violence, but also connections and joys.

There is a rich literature demonstrating that women experience a range of health-damaging conditions such as anxiety, depression, stigma, despair, loneliness, and high levels of stress related to a loved one's incarceration (Braman, 2004; Christensen, Turney, & Park Jang, 2025; Clayton-Johnson, 2024; M. Comfort, 2007; M. Comfort et al., 2016; McKay, Comfort, Lindquist, & Bir, 2019; Turney, Sugie, Marín, & Kaiser, 2024; Western & McLanahan, 2000). As Lee and Wildeman (2013) observe, these types of emotions and experiences are highly plausible pathways to chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes, and the health-specific research that has been conducted to date supports this hypothesis (Lee, Wildeman, Wang, Matusko, & Jackson, 2014; Sirois, 2020). Harris (2021; 2025) has extensively documented how women caring for incarcerated loved ones frequently present as hyper-competent and strong because they have been socialized to manage other people's tremendous needs while ignoring their own emotional and physical health. Women also may experience health consequences from the trauma of witnessing a loved one's arrest (for examples focused on children's trauma, see Metcalfe et al., 2023; Muentner, Kapoor, Weymouth, & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2021; Phillips & Zhao, 2010; Roberts et al., 2014); worrying about a loved one's safety (Boppre & Novisky, 2023; J. Harris, 2021; Tadros, Presley, & Guzman, 2023); distress around managing phone communications, such as being available for a call, not receiving a call when it is expected, or having phone calls surveilled and controlled (M. Comfort, 2008; Soderlund, 2023); financial precarity caused by the loss of a loved one's economic or childcare support combined with the costs of phone calls, visiting, and sending money to cover essentials such as toiletries and food (deVunono-Powell et al., 2015; Olga Grinstead, Faigles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011); and logistics of jail and prison visitation, including long drives, unpredictability of visits occurring, lack of healthy food options around and inside of carceral facilities, surveillance, searches, and managing children in restricted environments (Clayton, Richardson, Mandlin, & Farr, 2018; M. L. Comfort, 2003; Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996; K. Harris, 2021; Miller, 2021; Zarrow & Blackwell, 2024).

It is increasingly evident that incarceration is a key determinant of health disparities not only for currently and formerly incarcerated people but also for the women who care for them (Lee & Wildeman, 2013; Wildeman, Lee, & Comfort, 2013; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). While the root causes of this phenomenon are deep and complicated and require a robust multi-system approach, there also are strategies correctional systems can advance in the near-term to decrease stress, facilitate caregiving, and protect women's health.

Applied considerations to mitigate the impact of a loved one's incarceration on women's health and wellbeing

Communication

Across research studies and anecdotal accounts, communication is consistently identified as a major source of stress for women caring for incarcerated loved ones. Although the modern world has evolved to facilitate instant, inexpensive, and reliable means of communicating through text messages, emails, and voice and video calls from mobile phones, women are forced to routinely contend with a multitude of challenges to maintaining regular communications with loved ones in jails and prisons. In some facilities, people who are incarcerated continue to be required to use landline pay phones to contact their families and friends; these calls often are limited to 15-minutes once a day, are made from public places where other people can overhear conversations, and are placed as collect calls with inflated fees. It is increasingly common for people who are incarcerated to be provided with



tablets through which they can send electronic messages (emails and texts) and place phone calls. However, these devices (and the wireless or cell services that they rely on) experience frequent technology glitches, rendering the communications conducted through them inconsistent, blurry, and indecipherable. In addition, voice and video calls must be initiated by the person who is incarcerated, so if a woman wants to check on her loved one's wellbeing, she must wait until the person contacts her rather than being able to proactively reach out to them. Thus, while tablets and technology have improved communications to some extent, it is still very difficult for women to assuage their worries and verify that their loved ones are safe and well.

Given the many health and safety concerns one might have about an incarcerated loved one, it is important that facilities provide women with a reliable and no-cost means of gaining information. With the expansion of technology into correctional services, there is a ripe opportunity for an app that could send push notifications with key updates. When someone is booked into a facility, they could designate family members or close connections whom they want to be made aware of their status. Then if the incarcerated person is admitted to the infirmary, is placed in isolation, or no longer has access to their tablet for another reason, a notification could be sent to their designated contacts (ideally containing a phone number the outside person could call for more information). Knowing they would be informed in a timely manner if their loved one was in crisis or needed help would likely go a long way in lessening women's day-to-day stress and anxiety, and could be particularly helpful for women whose loved ones have cognitive or speech challenges that impede their ability to be in touch. An app serving this purpose should draw on existing technology developed for healthcare platforms that protects highly sensitive information and avoids sharing users' data with the company or third parties.

Women caring for incarcerated loved ones often find themselves operating as informal social workers as they plan for the housing, employment, healthcare, and treatment programs someone may need upon their release (M. Comfort, 2016; Miller, 2021). An app providing information about an incarcerated loved one could be further developed to include case management components, such as reminders of the loved one's medical and court appointments; notifications of completion of educational, vocational, or psychosocial programs (including any certificates or credentials earned); contact information for the assigned probation or parole officer; and resources for post-release services. Centralizing this information and providing it directly to women would acknowledge and support the role many mothers, aunts, partners, and sisters take on in helping their loved one transition out of incarceration. This could be especially beneficial for women caring for people who have a hard time tracking and organizing this information themselves.

If correctional systems voiced demand for a loved ones' communication app, the technology likely would be developed quickly. In the interim, making information about incarcerated people's safety, wellbeing, appointments, programming, and re-entry planning needs through other means (e.g., a password-protected website, a counselor, or case manager) would assist women caring for incarcerated loved ones, decrease stress, and improve wellbeing.

Visiting Conditions

Visiting conditions at jails and prisons are another primary source of hardship for women. The app described above could also use push notifications to improve women's ability to know when visiting

has been suspended at a facility due to a lockdown and alert them to any changes to visiting hours or regulations. Some institutions post these types of updates on a website or have numbers people can call, but women caring for incarcerated loved ones often are exceptionally busy managing households, working one or more jobs, and taking care of children and elders (Harris, 2025). Push notifications are routine for updates to weather, transportation, and other conditions that affect our ability to plan our days and manage our time. Real-time alerts would decrease the number of people who show up at jails and prisons who are disappointed and upset when they are told there has been a change and they will not be able to see their loved one, which benefits correctional staff as well as visitors.

As helpful as technology may be, it is imperative that technology not be used as a substitute for human connection. There has been a trend in recent years toward replacing in-person visits with video visits, including the paradoxical practice of requiring people to travel to a jail or prison only to sit in a separate area where they talk with their loved one via video. Video visitation can provide a necessary alternative for people who cannot get to a facility due to distance, mobility issues, or illness, and having a video visit is preferable to not being able to see and talk with a loved one (McNeeley, 2025). However, research strongly supports the benefits of in-person (sometimes referred to as “touch”) visits, especially for establishing connections with children (Charles, Poehlmann, Kerr, Jensen, & Pritzl, 2023; Fasah, 2018; Kremer et al., 2022).

Research also points to the advantages for parents, children, and correctional staff of creating specific areas in visiting rooms with toys, picture books, and mats for children to lie or sit on (Dart, 2021). These areas are beneficial for supporting children’s wellbeing by giving them a space where they can act in age-appropriate ways (e.g., not be expected to sit in a plastic chair for hours) and where they can interact with their incarcerated loved one through play, storytelling, and cuddling in their lap. It may work best to have designated correctional officers who are trained in parent-child interactions supervise these areas. If space allows, having one area for very young children and one for school-age children (with puzzles, board games, and art supplies) would help prevent the harmful adultifying of youth who feel pressured to suppress developmentally appropriate behaviors in order to comply with correctional regulations (Aiello & McCorkel, 2017).

Prison visits are often characterized by traveling long distances in cars or on buses, having limited access to anything other than fast food and vending machines, having one’s movements be heavily restricted and surveilled, and not being allowed to bring purses, toiletries, or other personal belongings into visiting rooms (Christian, 2005; M. Comfort, 2008; Harris, 2025). Practices such as making healthy food options available in waiting areas and visiting rooms and giving permission for visitors and their loved ones to walk together rather than sit in chairs could greatly enhance visitors’ experiences and help counteract visitation’s health-damaging effects. Inclusion of health-promoting practices would be even more beneficial, such as providing an area near the parking lot for visitors to stretch (similar to yoga and meditation rooms that have started appearing in airports and hospitals) or offering a light movement class in the visiting room (indeed, activity-based visitation could be welcome for people who are struggling to connect verbally and for children who need to discharge excess energy). Facilities could also permit women to bring in strollers and small playpens (or these could be provided once visitors are through security checks), and assistance could be provided for women carrying children and people with mobility challenges on long walks from parking lots and to visiting rooms. Finally, menstrual hygiene products should be freely available in restrooms in visiting



areas to avoid women needing to end visits early if caught unawares, and people should be allowed to bring in umbrellas on rainy days to avoid sitting in wet clothes during visits (if umbrellas pose a security concern, they could be left in an entry area of the visiting room).

Financial support

The incarceration of a loved one often has significant financial consequences due to the removal of a wage-earning or childcare-providing adult from the household as well as the incursion of extra expenses for legal representation, fines and fees, communication, and visitation. Financial barriers are consistently reported as a barrier to staying in touch with an incarcerated loved one (Boppre, Dehart, & Shapiro, 2022), and correctional systems can help reduce these barriers and thereby support the maintenance of emotional support and social bonds.

As noted earlier, in many institutions technological advances have shifted communications between people who are incarcerated and their loved ones to emails, texts, and video calls placed through tablets. These interactions should all be free of charge. There is a long history of charging high fees for phone calls with incarcerated loved ones, but this practice levies additional financial burden on already under-resourced families. It also penalizes women who are providing a service to correctional facilities by supporting incarcerated people's emotional wellbeing and improved mental health. Indeed, women already contribute to these communications by paying for their own mobile phones and cell service.

Similarly, it can be extremely costly to visit people who are incarcerated. Women may need to take time off of work, arrange for childcare, cover travel costs (including lodging), and pay for multiple meals for themselves and their loved ones (Harris, 2025). Given the demonstrated benefits of in-person visitation for people who are incarcerated and their loved ones, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in the United Kingdom offers the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, which provides financial support for prison visits (Gov.UK, 2025). Similar assistance is offered in the United States by the Prison Visitation Fund (2025), a non-profit organization founded by people who were incarcerated and who credit their ability to move forward after release to the strong ties they were able to maintain due to visiting with their loved ones. Correctional systems could partner with such organizations and with state and local governments to provide financial aid to women who are unable to cover these expenses. In addition, institutions could work to reduce the costs of jail and prison visitation by helping establish free shuttles from public transportation hubs, offering on-site childcare, maximizing scheduling flexibility so that women can organize visits on days when they do not work, and providing food and drink free of charge in waiting areas and visiting rooms.

Conclusion

Incarceration is a complex issue that can be daunting to address. However, the last several decades have yielded a robust body of research that clearly documents many hardships faced by women caring for incarcerated loved ones and supports policy changes that ease this burden. Concrete practices that strengthen communications between women and their loved ones and help women better understand their loved ones' medical, legal, and reentry resources and needs could decrease women's anxiety and stress while supporting their ongoing efforts to improve their loved ones' wellbeing during and after incarceration. Likewise, putting measures in place to facilitate logistics and improve conditions for jail and prison visitation could minimize damage to women's mental and

physical health and potentially promote wellness practices like movement and healthy eating. Finally, addressing the economic toll of caring for incarcerated loved ones and providing financial support for communications and visitation would reduce women's need to sacrifice their own and their families' welfare to maintain emotional connection and social ties, ultimately benefitting everyone through the increased likelihood of positive in-custody and post-release outcomes.

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TRAUMA-INFORMED COMPREHENSIVE CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSES FOR OFFICER SUICIDE PREVENTION

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Abstract

Correction officers in High Income Countries are at higher risk for suicide than those in almost any other occupation, including other protective service occupations. Suicide prevention for correction officers requires attending to the long-term impacts of violence and suicide exposures on their health and wellbeing. We argue for a two-pronged approach: one that focuses on prevention, through attention to critical incident exposures involving serious violence, injury or death, and comprehensive postvention interventions, following any suicide exposure. Routine peer support and crisis intervention services can begin to normalize self-care and begin to attenuate the stigma surrounding help-seeking that permeates the correctional context. Through implementing a trauma-informed critical incident response approach to officer wellbeing, we hope that officer suicide can be prevented and postvention services may eventually be less necessary.

Keywords: Suicide; Officer Suicide; Suicide Prevention; Critical Incidents; Crisis Intervention



Introduction

Historically correction officers were an understudied population in penal systems. The past two decades, however, brought exponential growth in research aimed at better understanding the impacts of correctional work on correction officers and correctional staff (Brower, 2013; Butler et al., 2019). Much of what we have learned through the research indicates we need to do much more to support those who work in correctional occupational settings. Although we have learned a lot about how which job stress can compromise correction officer wellbeing leading to demonstrable consequences for physical, emotional, and behavioral health, we have markedly less research on correction officer suicide. In the North American context, there have been only a handful of studies focused on officer suicide (Lerman, 2017; Frost & Monteiro, 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2022a, 2024a, 2024b). The dearth of research on officer suicide is due in part to a lack of data¹. Despite little data that can be used to inform our understanding of causes and consequences, we know from occupational prevalence data how correctional officers are at a markedly increased risk for suicide. Correctional officers are at higher risk than almost any other occupation, including other protective service occupations (Stack & Tsoudis, 1997; Zimmerman et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While workplace stressors abound in the correctional occupational context and have been the focus of much of the research on officer health and wellbeing, so to do critical incidents that expose officers to serious violence, injury, death, and suicide. Studies have theorized how chronic exposure to workplace stressors, including violence and other critical incidents, may be a primary factor in officer health and wellbeing (Aranda-Hughes & Mears, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2024; St. Louis, et al., 2023; Steiner & Cain, 2016). Although some argued organizational and operational stressors are more significant correlates of compromised health and wellbeing than critical incidents, research has repeatedly demonstrated the link between violence exposures and depression (Lerman et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2024), anxiety (Lerman et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2024), PTSD (Ellison et al., 2022; Spinaris et al., 2012; Scwartz et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2006), stress (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015), and suicide (Lerman et al., 2022; St. Louis et al., 2023). Furthermore, research has established, compared to other correctional employees (such as institution training staff, parole officers, and probation officers), correctional officers report greater anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Ricciardelli et al., 2022), and each of these are known risk factors for suicide.

Suicide prevention for correctional officers requires attending to the long-term implications of violence and suicide exposures on the health and wellbeing of officers. Although often described as an unfortunate part of the profession, violence, and suicide exposures likely contribute to the increased risk for suicide among officers. A prominent theory of suicide, Joiner's interpersonal-psychological theory, asserts suicide only occurs when a thwarted sense of belonging and perceived burdensomeness coincides with an acquired capability for suicide (Stanley, Horn, & Joiner, 2016; Van

1 *To study officer suicide in the correctional context, original data must be collected by a researcher (or correctional organization). There are only two federal data collection efforts explicitly focused on officer suicide, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection (LESDC) and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Suicide Mitigation and Risk Reduction Tracking (SMARRT) System and each of these efforts is relatively new and focused on law enforcement suicide broadly defined (National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2024). Although LESDC and SMARRT may eventually lead to increased awareness and understanding of the prevalence of and risk factors for officer suicide, neither attends to the unique context in which correction officers work.*

Order et al., 2010). Thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness explain suicidal ideation, and are described as necessary, but not sufficient, predicates for suicidal behavior. The acquired capability allows an individual to overcome the inherent fear of death and is necessary for suicide to occur. Although typically acquired through self-harm and suicide attempts, the capability for suicide can also be acquired through exposure to violence, injury, and trauma. Joiner has used violence and suicide exposures in correctional settings to explain why suicide rates are so high among incarcerated populations (Joiner, 2005).

Repeat exposure to violence, injury, and suicide in the occupational context may also be key to understanding why correctional officers are at such high risk for suicide themselves (Frost & Monteiro, 2020). Although more research is required to firmly establish the links between violence and suicide exposures, an acquired capability for suicide, and suicidal behavior among officers, there is no question that critical incidents are predicates for compromised mental health (Lerman et al., 2022; Schwartz et al. 2024; St. Louis et al., 2023; Spinaris et al., 2012) and compromised mental health is a prominent risk factor for suicide.

Violence and Suicide Exposures

We also know violence exposures are a pervasive feature of the correctional occupational context with officers experiencing both direct and indirect (or vicarious) exposures through critical incidents. Critical incidents are common in correctional work with estimates suggesting on average officers are exposed to more than two-dozen critical incidents over the course of their careers (Fusco et al., 2021). Schwartz and colleagues' recent research (2024) demonstrated the potentially negative consequences of critical incidents are more pervasive and problematic than previously characterized. They provide further physiological evidence of how the accumulation of direct and indirect exposures to critical incidents may have a lasting effect on mental health and overall wellbeing through the well-documented relationship between high cortisol and adverse effects on health. In their study, an increased accumulation of direct exposures was associated with increased levels of PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms while officers with greater accumulations of indirect assault exposures displayed slower declines in daily cortisol levels (Schwartz & Allen, 2024). Despite the pronounced toll correctional work can have on officer health and wellbeing, correctional officers have demonstrated remarkable resiliency (Crawley, 2004a; Liebling et al., 2011; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023). However, Schwartz et al., (2024) found there may be an inflection point, or a threshold in which officers may experience resiliency fatigue. This inflection point has been documented in qualitative research where officers have self-reported reaching a point at which they cannot take another exposure (Frost & Monteiro, 2020). Schwartz et al. ultimately conclude a short-term, rapid increase in critical incident exposures can increase the risk of developing mental health disorders regardless of rank and years in service (Schwartz et al., 2024).

Officer exposures to suicides and suicide attempts are vastly understudied. The few studies conducted on prison staff perceptions of suicide among those incarcerated have shown that staff are more likely to be impacted than not in regards to these events (Barry, 2019; Snow & McHugh, 2002). Interviews with officers who have responded to and been involved in incarcerated suicides and suicide attempts have found COs described "becoming cold" because of the incident, reported compromised well-being, recounted ruminating over the event, and spoke of feeling empathy towards the victim, their loved ones, and their peers who also responded (Burrell, 2024; Ricciardelli, Idzikowski, & Pratt, 2020).



Moreover, officers may harbor negative feelings towards those who harm themselves, referencing a desire for attention or a potential manipulation tactic (Hemming et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2019). The only published study to have examined the impact of correctional officer suicide on survivors, including fellow officers, found that having personally known an officer who died by suicide was significantly associated with increased anger, anxiety, depression, and PTSD (St. Louis et al., 2023).

A Comprehensive Approach to Officer Suicide Prevention

We argue for a two-pronged approach to officer suicide: one focused on prevention, through attention to critical incident exposures involving serious violence, injury, or death, and postvention, following any suicide exposure, but especially following the death of a colleague by suicide. Through implementing a trauma-informed critical incident response approach to officer wellbeing, we hope officer suicide can be prevented and postvention services may eventually be less necessary. Unless designed carefully and intentionally even the best-intentioned mental health and suicide prevention programs will be thwarted in the correctional occupational context due to an especially pronounced stigma around mental illness that creates significant barriers to help-seeking and engaging with treatment.

Suicide prevention should start with more comprehensive suicide prevention for the incarcerated population. To state the obvious, fewer suicides among the incarcerated would lead to fewer suicide exposures for officers. Although suicide is one of any number of critical incidents in a correctional facility and is often treated as such, responding to self-harming behavior, including suicide attempts and suicides, are among the most traumatic experiences an officer can have while working in prisons and jails. When an incarcerated person engages in serious self-harming behaviors (colloquially known as 'cut-ups'), suicide attempts, or dies by suicide, officers are first responders and must provide life-saving interventions (including CPR and rescue breaths) until additional help arrives. Interventions are often required even when these efforts are likely to be futile. Officers are trained and expected to respond to self-harm and suicide as part of their occupation, but training cannot and should not obviate the need for post-response aftercare.

Despite the obvious trauma associated with responding to serious self-harm, through more than a thousand interviews with correctional officers in one state, we have learned that suicide is often treated as just another occupational hazard that officers must become accustomed to (Frost et al., 2020; Frost & Monteiro, 2020; St. Louis et al., 2024). Officers lack meaningful resources to cope with suicide. They report supervisors expect them to operate with a "business as usual" approach after suicide events (Burrell, 2024). Officers are rarely given sufficient time and space to process what they have experienced and are rarely provided the comprehensive support and services found in other occupational contexts.

Increased attention to correctional officer suicide in recent years has led to the development of officer specific suicide prevention resources to help departments and clinicians respond to correctional officers more effectively (Frost & Fields, 2023; SPRC, 2025). While resources are helpful, correctional systems can accomplish a more comprehensive approach to suicide prevention through a multi-pronged strategy that focuses on routinely providing immediate psychological first aid (PFA) and critical incident stress management (CISM) following incidents involving serious violence, injury, and death. PFA focuses on providing basic, non-intrusive care focused on listening to what officers want

to share and protecting them from further harm (The Sphere Project, 2011), whereas CISM provides a more formal, structured intervention best completed by a team of professionally trained clinicians and peer support staff. Two CISM interventions are best suited to this task: critical incident defusing and critical incident debriefing. Critical incident defusing focuses on stabilizing those impacted by critical incidents and is best deployed within 12 hours of the incident. Critical incident debriefing, a more time intensive intervention deployed 24-72 hours after the incident focuses on mitigating negative impacts and assisting officers in recovering from the associated stress (Cardinal, 2025). While recommended in the context of any critical incident, these types of interventions should become standard protocol following every traumatic critical incident involving serious violence, injury, or death.

Given the pronounced impacts of an officer suicide on other officers (Frost et al., 2020; Bates, 2025), in the event of an officer suicide, it will be necessary to go even further, engaging with mobile crisis units and suicide prevention agencies capable of delivering comprehensive postvention services to colleagues. Research suggests more intensive services may be needed for those officers who were close friends of an officer who has died by suicide whether or not they worked side-by-side (Bates, 2025; Frost et al., 2020). Although outside clinical resources are sometimes deployed in correctional settings, teams could be used more consistently and effectively. Mobile crisis teams are staffed with clinicians and other professionals who respond to calls from individuals seeking services, concerned parties seeking services for others, and community agencies needing services for their members. Mobile crisis teams provide over the phone and on-site crisis assessment and care related to trauma and wellbeing, such as PFA and CISM (Trantham & Sherry, 2012). Correctional organizations and their existing peer-support programs can help facilitate an integrated crisis system for their staff by proactively building relationships with their local agencies. An integrated crisis response system, that includes community-based mobile crisis units, would have a substantially positive impact on officers, their families, and departments by making crisis prevention and intervention readily available (Trantham & Sherry, 2012).

Departments must act proactively and adopt comprehensive approaches to suicide prevention. Officers frequently downplay the impact work is having on their mental health and wellbeing and are not likely to proactively seek out services (Wills et al., 2021). Even when they are willing, features of the occupational environment and culture create significant barriers to officers seeking help (Crawley, 2004; Frost & Monteiro, 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Ricciardelli, 2019; Sweeney et al., 2018; Wills et al., 2021). In interview-based studies, officers have acknowledged they need more resources after suicides (Burrell, 2024; Ricciardelli, Idzikowski, & Pratt, 2020), but institutional responses and the correctional occupational culture are standing in the way. Peer networks have been a common resource officers are willing to utilize (Burrell, 2024; Ricciardelli, Idzikowski, & Pratt, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2018), but characteristics of the occupational culture such as stigma, hypermasculinity, and the risk of punitive responses to perceived weakness (Wills et al., 2021) prevent full utilization of peer networks and may be the cause of low engagement in formal critical incident support management (Ludlow et al., 2015; Ricciardelli, Idzikowski, & Pratt, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2018).

Clinicians and researchers need to recognize officers may be more receptive to approaches that use language that resonates with them (see Bernal et al., 2009; Frost & Fields, 2024, Meza & Bath, 2020). A difficulty often encountered in providing services and treatment in the correctional occupational context is that officers rarely describe the work they do as 'traumatic.' That does not, however, mean



that it is not traumatic. The violence, injury, and death exposures officers can face are traumatic under any definition. Through providing critical incident services following every critical incident exposure involving violence, injury, or death, we can begin to normalize self-care and begin to attenuate the stigma surrounding help-seeking that permeates the correctional context.

Without sufficient resources accompanied by occupational culture shifts to reduce stigma and encourage resource utilization, officers will likely continue to mask their emotions (Burrell, 2024), downplay claims these traumatic events have any impact on their wellbeing (Smith et al., 2019), and minimize their negative emotions (Sweeney et al., 2018). Barriers to help-seeking in the correctional occupational context will mean that officers who are struggling and at risk for suicide will have nowhere to turn. Through integrating more comprehensive prevention and postvention services into the correctional occupational culture, we can begin to mitigate the effects of critical incident exposures and trauma on officers and hopefully eventually decrease the risk for and incidence of officer suicide.

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**OPTIMIZING HEALTH IN CORRECTIONAL WORK:
EVIDENCE-INFORMED FEASIBLE UPSTREAM SOLUTIONS**

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Abstract

The current article, based in the context of the Canadian provincial, territorial, and federal correctional services, focuses on the health crisis in correctional work. Correctional workers collectively across all occupational roles screen positive for at least one mental health disorder at a prevalence of over 60%. Their most intensive stresses at work are social in nature, rooted in relationships with colleagues, management, and, although to a less degree, people who are under their care and supervision. Physically, although understudied, there is a toll on the body. For instance, correctional officers work in the same environment prisoners live, thus, are susceptible to compromised hearing, respiratory functioning, and infectious disease. Around the world, correctional workers work in a morally harmful environment, watching human suffering, like that inherent in being separated from loved ones, or missing years of one’s child’s life. As well as the normative “pains of imprisonment,” there are also the “pains of employment.” In response, drawing on my correctional workers training experience and knowledge, I speak to how services can prepare trainees better for working in correctional services, illuminating gaps in training and ways forward with the hope of supporting a healthier correctional workforce and thus correctional population.

Keywords: Correctional Workers, Prisons, Community Correctional Service, Health, Training

Introduction

In a recent trip to a maximum-security prison, a colleague, who had previously visited a youth facility and felt knowledgeable about prison, admitted being entirely surprised by the positivity in the institution, given the rehabilitative programming, opportunities, and pride prisoners had. Asked why I did not correct their narrative regarding their claimed “knowledge of prisons,” I reflected. *How can you tell anyone what they do or do not know? How can I even know what they know and who I am to judge the degree or accuracy of their knowledge?* Given, we cannot know what we do not know, I took their word at face-value and made no assumptions or comments about their scope of knowledge. This reminded me, prisons, and correctional work more broadly, tend to be envisioned based on imaginations, as many (most) people have never stepped foot inside a prison. If toured, people only tend to see a selective presentation of what is within institutions, and most draw impressions of prisons created from news media, television, music, and movies, which are sensationalized representations rooted in mis- or dis-information.

In consequence, correctional workers tend to enter the field without genuine knowledge of prisons, instead all is based on their imaginations. This very fact impairs training. When the setting one is being trained in is actually unknown, a mystery, how can the training be well absorbed and learned? For instance, one cannot learn how to control a sallyport entry without knowledge of what a sallyport entry is; how do you understand working in a pod without understanding how the pod is constructed? The challenge is, we need to better prepare correctional workers for the health outcomes of prison work, yet we are restricted in doing so if recruited trainees truly may not understand the context and content in which they will be performing their occupational responsibilities. The reasons are multifold, including how without realistic understanding, lessons are harder to retain, unimaginable in their impacts, people may feel immune, and much knowledge feels too opaque to truly understand. Against this framing, I provide an overview of the health of correctional workers in Canada and speak to how training can be used to better prepare workers for the realities of their work and the implications of such on their health. Further, well prepared recruits will, hopefully, help improve training outcomes and retention.

Health

The world health organization defines health as inclusive of social, mental, and physical health, rather than just being without illness or bodily harm (World Health Organization, 2020).

Mental Health. The mental health of correctional employees is affected by uncertainty, hypervigilance, potential threat, a lack of safety, exposure to trauma or critical incidents, etc. (Ricciardelli, Andres, et al., 2024; Ricciardelli, Carleton, Groll, & Cramm, 2018). Investigations are a source of stress for correctional workers and a source of compromised mental health, that often comes after critical and/or traumatic incidents. In studying all 13 provincial and federal correctional services in Canada, my team and I found, correctional workers screen positive for Major Depressive Disorder at a prevalence of 37.3%, 27.8% for General Anxiety Disorder, 19% for Panic Disorder, 29% for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and 57.9% for any mental health disorder (Ricciardelli, Carleton, Taillieu, et al., 2024). This is despite the low prevalence of mental health disorders among arriving trainees, where, for example, among federal correctional officer trainees, a prevalence was found that was lower than that of the general Canadian population (Easterbrook et al., 2022). Further, the study also revealed 34.8% of correctional workers had suicidal ideation in their lifetime, with 15.1% in the last year, 20.2% had made

a plan to complete suicide in their lifetime and 7.7% in the last year, and 9.6% had attempted suicide in their lifetime, with 2% doing so in the last year (Ricciardelli, Carleton, Johnston, et al., 2024). There is a suicide crisis in correctional services, evidenced in the suicide inquiry of the Ontario Coroner's Office underway now, in 2025. But the crisis is not just limited to Canada, it is also spreading across North America (Violanti, 2017, see also Frost and Monterio 2020; 2021).

Social Health. For correctional officers, although largely generalizable across correctional service roles, the most intense stress officers experience is social in nature, first due to their interactions with colleagues, then management (i.e., noted as their "biggest stressor" by nearly 70% of interviewed officers), then prisoners (Cassiano & Ricciardelli, 2023). Further, correctional workers enact caveated comradery as a form of solidarity, tempered with a need to adhere to institutional mandates, values, and ethics (Ricciardelli, 2025). They practice solidarity while directing caution toward outsiders (Carbonell & Ricciardelli, 2023), while also perpetuating a culture with an in-group/out-group dynamic largely aligned with occupational tenure and reliability during emergency situations (Ricciardelli & Carbonell, 2025).

Physical Health. Scholarship on the physical health of correctional workers is much more sparse than the literature on prison health, despite how they work in the same space prisoners live, "also serving time" (Ricciardelli, 2019). Like prisoners (Carbonara et al., 2005; Jacobson et al., 1989; Moxey-Adderley et al., 2016; O'Grady et al., 2011), correctional staff, particularly officers, can be impacted by the noise, air quality, lighting, and struggle with infectious disease transmission (Cassiano, Ozturk, & Ricciardelli, 2022; Gacek et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2023). All realities which Turner et al. (2023) refer to as "the pains of employment."

Overall, regarding health, Schultz and Ricciardelli (2025) wrote "in aggregate, the literature suggests prison staff are the unhealthiest of all law enforcement personnel, with seriously compromised physical, mental, and social health..." (np). Essentially, all correctional staff, not just those in prisons, appear to be the most unwell of all public safety professionals, beyond police (for comparisons, see: Carleton et al., 2018; James & Todak, 2018). The health of correctional workers requires study and action, starting at initial training and continuing to be centralized throughout the correctional career. All types of health require focus, without prioritizing any form of health over another, as physical, social, and mental health are interconnected.

Training Gaps and Policy/Applied implications

Challenges in training include: the lack of realistic understanding and knowledge of prison spaces and the disbelief that negative "bad things" will happen to oneself at work. The former as noted impacts the ability to retain and apply knowledge taught in training and the latter suggests certain topics are less relevant in training (i.e., one may pay less attention to the lessons) and feel immune to requiring the retention of certain information.

Thus, first and foremost, recruited trainees must be exposed to the realities of prisons prior to training, they must have an in-depth tour that reveals the best and worst of prisons – the truth, which is good and bad. The tour must describe different areas, tools, structures, and the purposes of each. Doing so will help more learning be retained and increase the applicability of the knowledge shared in training.

Second, staff must understand and learn, particularly if in a security role, the probability of them being investigated during their career is very high, almost guaranteed, they will at some point be involved in an investigation. For instance, every use of force requires investigation, thus, all officers will at some point be involved in an investigation. Trainees must be told: investigations are stressful; even if one did everything as trained, investigations push one to question themselves, and how they are treated during such processes can be detrimental to their health and sense of self.

Third, trainees must understand the realities of prison and community correctional work. This includes understanding what they will see when working, the physical toll of the work, what they will hear, and what they will learn. They must be taught to remain aware of changes in their physical health and reminded to do annual physical check-ups. Moreover, correctional workers must understand they will be asked to perform occupational tasks that counter their morals, ethics, and values – and this can result in harms, distress, frustration, or injury (Ricciardelli, Easterbrook, & Turner, 2024; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Workers will see extreme human suffering, given the deprivations of prison and loss of freedom. Many prisoners are missing years of the lives of their children, life events, and time to bond – the loss is agonizing to experience, and painful to watch. Prisoners may have no visitors, no one to call, they will see prisoners try to end their life or self-harm, experience psychosis, be neuro-diverse, or fueled by self-hate. Some may be violent, maladapted, and harmful while others beyond kind, suffering from challenges in courts, or inside due to actions that were unintentional or accidental but still illegal. Thus, the job is *moral labour* meaning correctional work, in all its essence in prisons and the community, is inherently morally violating, which can be morally frustrating, distressful, harmful, or injurious. Officers must be prepared for what they will see and what they will be required to do, they need to learn such, and they need to be prepared with the skills to manage the implications of what they see – the coping skills. What does not kill you does not make you stronger, but often gives you the skills to cope such that the next harm has a lesser impact. In training, trainees must learn the skills to help them navigate their environments in healthy ways, prioritizing their health – physical, social, and mental – to prepare for their work experiences.

Fourth, to improve social health, the value of kindness (which is not to be reduced to being nice, which can be fake) must be engrained. Being kind refers to not assuming if someone is upset or angered that you are somehow involved, being kind means not making situations about yourself and not being self-focused. Kindness is respecting another person's boundaries, not gossiping, and always listening to colleagues, prisoners, and management. Kindness is learning from others the reasons for their interpretations and positions, and sometimes saying directly to a person very "hard things" rather than saying such behind their back or listening to others do so. Thus, kindness as part of being a team must be taught, built, and reinforced during training. Training must transform groups into teams, which will help teach and remind all about kindness.

Fifth, prison is a society, disconnected from free society. In Canada, it is a system for social welfare that catches people who fall through the cracks of our social welfare system and are caught in our criminal justice system for housing, substance, and clothing. The society has ways of doing, including the "pains of imprisonment" and the "pains of employment," it is a shared living and working space, with unique rules, policies, norms, and ways of living. This must be explained to all entering such a society, to prepare for how working/living in dual spaces (i.e., free society versus prison society, free society versus community correctional space) can impact views of life, their values, their behaviours,

trust, and experience of freedom. Trainees must be prepared for the personal transformation most will experience through prison and correctional work as they become exposed to injustice in their enactment of justice.

Conclusion

In the current article, I spoke to the role of training in supporting the health of correctional workers over their occupational tenure. Focusing on Canadian data from all 14 correctional services in the country, I showed the scope of health challenges among these employees and provided evidence for the suicide endemic across services. However, the suggestions put forth for practical consideration reflect what I have seen in prisons and community correctional services (where existent) across continents – the commonalities all correctional services share. Anywhere in the world, no matter the income of the country, my considerations are possible and feasible. Thus, consider exposing trainees to prisons, ensure they understand investigations will occur, be comprehensive and honest about what people will see and hear working in correctional services, encourage kindness, and recognize correctional work occurs in a rather isolated society that is social support and welfare to many.

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ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

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GENDER & TRANS-GENDER RESPONSIVE



RETHINKING SEX-SEGREGATED INCARCERATION: WHAT TRANSGENDER PRISONERS WANT AND WHY IT MATTERS

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Abstract

Media and political attention have put a spotlight on transgender women living inside prisons designated for men and, in some cases, requesting placement in a women's prison. This, in turn, has raised questions about where to house transgender people who are incarcerated in High Income Countries, given they face high rates of verbal, physical, and sexual victimization and other harms.

Some legislation and policies seeking to address the issue emphasize the incarcerated person's expressed preference for prison type and housing situation should be considered. Data from a national survey of 280 transgender prisoners in 31 states reveals 70% of transgender women prefer to be housed in prisons for women, representing a notable shift from previous research, in the direction of preferring women's prisons. More than three quarters of transgender men and transgender women prefer to be housed with other transgender people. Only about a third of transgender women and about half of transgender men reside in prison facilities that align with their preference (i.e., men's or women's prison). These and other findings emerge amid evolving legal frameworks, including the Prison Rape Elimination Act (2003) and California's Transgender Respect, Agency, and Dignity Act (2020), which mandate consideration of prisoners' gender identity and perspectives on safety and housing. Given the political prominence of this topic and the problems with the status quo, policymakers and correctional leaders must understand transgender people's preferences for prison housing reveal both patterns and variation.

Keywords: Transgender prisoners, conditions of confinement, prison housing policy, safety, civil and human rights, Prison Rape Elimination Act, Transgender Respect, Agency, and Dignity Act

INTRODUCTION

On May 29, 2014, *Time* magazine ran a cover story featuring the actress Laverne Cox, who is transgender and at the time was playing the role of Sophia Burset, a transgender woman in a women's prison, on the wildly popular Netflix series called "Orange is the New Black". The title of the article, "The Transgender Tipping Point," signaled the growing visibility of transgender people in the U.S. The subtitle of the article, "America's Next Civil Rights Frontier," communicated a focus on social progress. When the article was published, it was not the case then—and is not the case now—that transgender women are typically housed in prisons for women. Much has changed since then. Transgender people in prison and their advocates have been—and continue to be—increasingly visible in discussions about conditions of confinement, prison policy and practice, and new ways of thinking about whether transgender women should have the option to transfer to a prison for women.

Across a range of institutional settings—from healthcare to education to employment to criminal justice, for example—the growing recognition of transgender people, and more recently nonbinary people, forces a reckoning with institutional practices that remain organized around a binary understanding of gender (i.e., a system that divides people into two categories based on biological sex at birth—men and women—without recognizing other genders). Focusing on the criminal legal system in particular, Jenness and Rowland (2024) recently identified a transgender criminal legal system nexus in the U.S. structured around a binary understanding of gender that produces disparities in criminal legal system contact and incarceration for transgender people, especially transgender women of color.

Housing in prison is a basic element of infrastructure that conditions interactions and the welfare of prisoners, including and especially for those who—like transgender people—are particularly vulnerable when incarcerated (Bacak 2023; Bacak, Bright, & Wilson, 2020; Beck, 2014; Coppola, 2023; Engelberg et al., 2023; Frazer et al., 2022; Jenness, Sexton & Sumner, 2019; Jenness & Rowland, 2014; Kanewske, Hattery, & Rudes, 2023; Lydon et al., 2015; Oparah, 2012). The question of where to house transgender people who are incarcerated is a flashpoint in debates about prison safety, civil and human rights, and the responsibility of prison authorities to deliver on both. In some states it has become a litigious issue¹.

PRISON PLACEMENTS AND HOUSING ASSIGNMENTS FOR INCARCERATED TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Typically, in the United States and often beyond, prison authorities place incarcerated people in prison facilities based on the incarcerated person's sex assigned at birth rather than their gender identity and expression at the time of incarceration (Cabage, 2023; Sumner & Jenness, 2014; Sanders et al., 2023). Bacak, Bright, and Wilson (2020, p. e373) identify sex-based housing determination as a key consideration in explaining "painfully widespread" victimization of transgender people in prison. However, the passage of new laws, coupled with changes in policy, have raised questions about this

1 In California, *The Women's Liberation Front (WoLF)* challenged TRADA in *Chandler v. California* (<https://www.aclusocal.org/en/press-releases/court-dismisses-lawsuit-challenging-californias-transgender-prison-policy>, last accessed on October 27, 2025). In Colorado, *Raven v. Polis*, a 2019 lawsuit challenging the state's policies in prisons that harm transgender people led to a settlement agreement that includes policy changes and new specialized housing units for transgender people in both men's and women's prisons (<https://transgenderlawcenter.org/colorado-judge-approves-groundbreaking-consent-decree-in-transgender-rights-class-action/>, last accessed October 27, 2025).



age-old practice. For example, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) in the United States, signed into law by President George Bush in 2003 became a catalyst for guidelines that require thinking anew about housing sexual and gender minorities². PREA Standard 115.42(c) requires placement decisions for transgender and intersex prisoners be made on a case-by-case basis, considering the incarcerated person’s own view regarding their safety (Malkin & DeJong 2019). More recently, The Transgender Respect, Agency, and Dignity Act (TRADA), signed into law by California Governor Gavin Newsom in 2020, specifies that:

An individual incarcerated by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation who is transgender, nonbinary, or intersex, regardless of anatomy, shall ... (3) be housed at a correctional facility designated for men or women based on the individual’s preference... (The Transgender Respect, Agency, and Dignity Act §2606(a)(3), 2021).

These and other legislative and policy measures in some states have decoupled sex assigned at birth and gender for the purposes of facility placement and housing decisions, at least at the level of policy.

In practice, how prison managers make housing decisions and where transgender people are housed varies immensely (Cabage, 2023). In an overview of the types of prison placement and housing unit assignments for transgender women in prisons in the United States, Jenness (2021) described they are currently housed almost exclusively in facilities for men (Sumner & Jenness 2014), which is largely internationally consistent (Maycock, O’Shea, & Jenness, 2025; Tait, 2023). Within men’s prisons in the United States, transgender women are generally housed in one of three ways. First, some are housed in the general population. Second, some are housed in ways that segregate them from other prisoners, for example, by being in a special housing unit designated (often unofficially) for gender and sexual minorities. Third, some are put in restrictive housing, whether as a disciplinary measure or as protective custody, which, in effect, isolates them from other prisoners (Jenness, 2024). Although researchers, advocates, and practitioners alike posit that some types of placements are better than others³, to date there is no research that systematically assesses the prison housing situations of transgender prisoners across the country, and how these affect outcomes of concern, such as safety, discipline, and access to healthcare and programs. There is very little research about the housing situations of transgender men in prison.

As debates and lawsuits continue to unfold and correctional officials continue to face challenges related to housing transgender people in feasible, safe, and constitutionally defensible ways, the need to consider the expressed preferences for housing placement communicated by transgender people is critically necessary.

EXPRESSED PREFERENCES FOR PRISON PLACEMENT AND HOUSING ASSIGNMENT

The Vera Institute of Justice, in partnership with Black and Pink National, surveyed transgender people incarcerated in state prisons in the United States and, among other things, asked respondents about their preferences for prison placement and housing assignments. In 2021-22, the survey was

2 *"Sexual minorities" generally refers to sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, and other categories) while "gender minorities" refers to gender identity (transgender, nonbinary, or intersex).*

3 *For example, Sharon Dolovich's (2011) work reveals that transgender women and gay men housed in a designated unit, the K6G Unit, in the Los Angeles County Jail report feeling safer there rather than elsewhere in the jail.*

sent to 597 eligible people in state prisons and yielded a 47% response rate (n = 280 across 31 states) (for details on the survey and measurement of gender categories, see Chesnut & Peirce, 2024). Most respondents identified as transgender women (73%), with other respondents identified as transgender men (9%) or gender nonconforming and nonbinary (18%). The respondents' specific choices and wording for their gender identity varied. The sample is diverse. Almost half of the respondents (46%) are white, about a quarter are Black (24%), 14% are Hispanic/Latinx, 11% are Native American, and about 5% multiracial or a member of another racial group. The mean age of the respondents is 44 years old. A plurality of respondents has a high school degree or GED (35%), more than a fourth of them have "some college" (29%), and a fifth of them (20%) did not graduate from high school. Forty percent of the respondents made less than \$10,000 a year prior to being incarcerated, a simple majority (52%) engaged in commercial sex at some point in their lives, and 44% have a disability. The mean age at first arrest is 19 years old, the mean age at first incarceration is 22 years old, and the mean number of lifetime arrests is 22. Mean time on current sentence reported was 26 years, while mean time served on current conviction was 14 years.

These and other demographics were reported for the entire survey sample (n = 280) to provide overall context. In the following analysis, the focus is on preferences expressed by those who affirmatively identified as either transgender women (n = 205) or transgender men (n = 26) in their survey responses. The survey asked about respondents' placement preferences in four ways, each of which captures a different dimension of residential living in custody: type of prison, type of housing unit, type of sleeping arrangement, and being housed with other transgender people.

Type of Prison. The survey respondents were asked "If it were your decision, which type of facility would you prefer to live in while serving your time"? The response categories were "facility for men," "facility for women," and "facility for men and women."⁴ As reported in Table 1, the majority of

4 "Facilities for men and women" are typically arrangements due to temporary housing needs, such as a natural disaster, and are omitted from the analysis due to their rare occurrence.

Table 1: Type of Prison Preferred, by Gender Identity

	Preferred Prison Type		
	Women's Prison	Men's Prison	Total
Gender Identity			
Trans Women	135 (70%)	57 (30%)	192 (100%)
Trans Men	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	25 (100%)
Total Valid Sample*	150 (69%)	67 (31%)	217* (100%)

Source: Advancing Transgender Justice survey, 2021–2022

*Only respondents who identified as either transgender women or transgender men are included in this table (n = 231). Of those, four respondents who reported preferring to live in prisons designated for men and women are not included in this table. Ten blank responses are omitted.



transgender women who responded to the question would prefer to live in a facility for women (70%), and nearly a third of them (30%) prefer to be in a men’s facility. As for transgender men, the majority indicate a preference to live in a women’s facility, but the sample for transgender men is very small (n = 25). Ten of these respondents indicated a preference to be housed in a prison for men, which is surprising as other research underscores the security risks transgender men face in prisons for men.⁵

Type of Housing Unit. The survey respondents were asked about their preferences for particular types of housing units. Specifically, they were asked “If it were your decision, what kind of housing unit would you prefer to live in while serving your time”? The response categories were general population, protective custody, mental health unit, solitary confinement, medical unit, drug treatment unit, and other (e.g., substance abuse treatment units or units for people convicted of sex offenses). Roughly half of both transgender women (49%) and transgender men (58%) who answered the question would prefer to be in a general population housing unit. Not surprisingly given the literature on the reliance on the use of solitary confinement generally in prisons in the United States (Digard, Vanko, & Sullivan, 2018) and specifically to manage transgender prisoners (Jenness & Rowland, 2024; Manson, 2019), about nine out of ten of the respondents (89%) reported having spent time in solitary confinement, but very few respondents (.5% for transgender women and 4.2% for transgender men) indicated an interest in being in solitary confinement. In contrast, 16% of transgender women and 17% of transgender men expressed a preference to be housed in protective custody.

Type of Sleeping Arrangements. The survey respondents were asked about their preferences regarding their “sleeping arrangements,”⁶ as follows: “All else equal, what type of sleeping arrangement would you prefer to live in while serving your time?” The response categories were single cell, double cell, dormitory, and something else. The most common response was a preference for single cell sleeping arrangements (47% of transgender women and 48% of transgender men). The second most-preferred sleeping arrangement type was a double cell, including 38% of transgender women and 28% of transgender men.

5 This finding contrasts with Rossi’s (2024) work, which involved interviewing 15 transgender men housed in eight prisons in England and Wales. Fourteen of these interviewees reported preferring to serve their sentence in facilities (“estates”) for women and none of them expressed an intent to apply to be held in a facility for men.

6 The present survey built on previous work published in *Coming Out of Concrete Closets* (2015), including using the phrase “sleeping arrangements” (Lydon et al. 2015).

Table 2: Type of Housing Unit Preferred, by Gender Identity

	Preferred Housing Unit Type						Total
	General Population	Other ¹	Protective Custody	Mental Health	Medical	Solitary	
Gender Identity							
Trans Women	98 (49%)	49 (24%)	33 (16%)	17 (8.5%)	3 (1.5%)	1 (0.5%)	201 (100%)
Trans Men	14 (58%)	2 (8.3%)	4 (17%)	2 (8.3%)	1 (4.2%)	1 (4.2%)	24 (100%)
Total Valid Sample*	112 (50%)	51 (23%)	37 (16%)	19 (8.4%)	4 (1.8%)	2 (0.9%)	225* (100%)

Source: Advancing Transgender Justice survey, 2021–2022

*Only respondents who identified as either transgender women or transgender men are included in this table (n = 231). Six blank responses are omitted.

¹Other¹ types of housing units included substance abuse treatment units and units for people convicted of sex offenses.

Table 3: Sleeping Arrangement Preferences, by Gender Identity

	Preferred Sleeping Arrangement				Total
	Single Cell	Double Cell	Dormitory	Other	
Gender Identity					
Trans Women	94 (47%)	77 (38%)	16 (7.9%)	15 (7.4%)	202 (100%)
Trans Men	12 (48%)	7 (28%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	25 (100%)
Total Valid Sample*	106 (47%)	84 (37%)	19 (8.4%)	18 (7.9%)	227* (100%)

Source: Advancing Transgender Justice survey, 2021–2022

*Only respondents who identified as either transgender women or transgender men are included in this table (n = 231).

Four blank responses are omitted.

Table 4: Expressed Preferences for Living with Other Trans People, by Gender Identity

	Prefer to Live with Other Trans People		
	No	Yes	Total
Gender Identity			
Trans Women	39 (19%)	160 (80%)	199 (100%)
Trans Men	4 (16%)	21 (84%)	25 (100%)
Total Valid Sample*	43 (19%)	181 (80%)	224* (100%)

Source: Advancing Transgender Justice survey, 2021–2022

*Only respondents who identified as either transgender women or transgender men are included in this table (n = 231).

Five blank responses and two 'unsure' responses are omitted.

Housing with (Other) Transgender People. The survey respondents were asked to address a question designed to understand their preference for living in proximity with other transgender people (as opposed to living in general population). Specifically, it asked "If it were up to you, would you prefer to be housed with other transgender and gender nonconforming people while incarcerated"? A strong majority of both transgender women (80%) and transgender men (84%) said yes, while 19% of transgender women and 16% of transgender men said no.

Alignment Between Actual Experience and Preferred Housing Arrangement. The findings reported thus far lead to an important question: to what degree are transgender people residing in prisons and housing environments that align with their expressed preferences? As reported in Figure 1, about half of the transgender men (48%) and a third of the transgender women (31%) are living in a prison facility that aligns with their expressed preference. When the focus is on housing units, more than half of the transgender women (55%) and more than a third of transgender men (39%) are living in their preferred type of housing unit. In contrast, less than half of the transgender women (41%) and transgender men (22%) have sleeping arrangements that align with their expressed preference. A majority of transgender women (68%) and transgender men (57%) have alignment when it comes to their preference for being housed with other transgender people who are incarcerated. The largest disparity between the two groups is in alignment in sleeping arrangements (19% difference) and the smallest disparity is in preference to be housed with other incarcerated transgender people (11%).

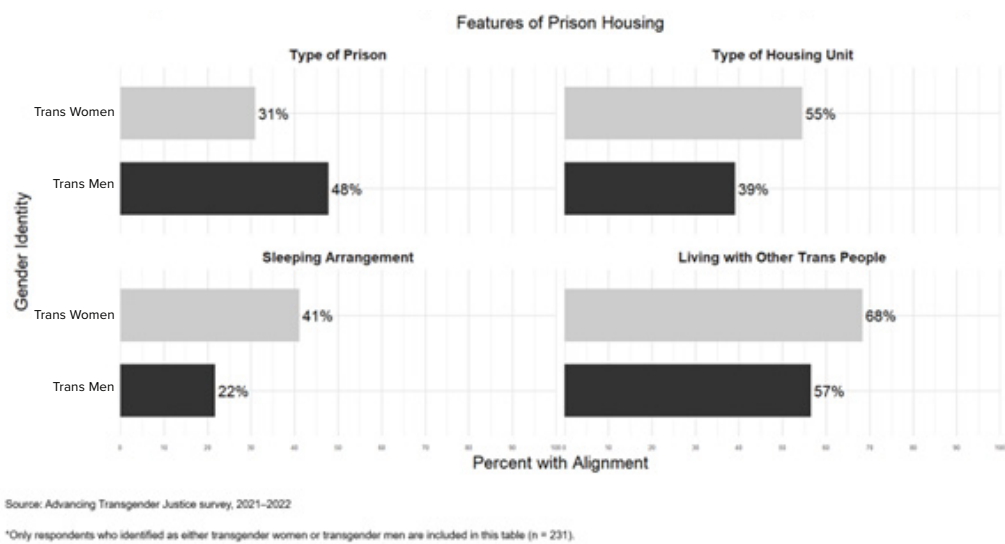


Figure 1: Alignment Between Prison Experience and Expressed Preferences, by Gender Identity

A Point of Comparison. Findings from a study that involved face-to-face interviews with over 300 transgender women in California’s prisons for men in 2008 provide a point of comparison (Jenness, Sexton, & Sumner, 2011). In that work, conducted over a decade earlier, transgender women housed in 27 prisons for men were asked “In general, would you prefer to be housed in a prison for women or a prison for men?” A majority of transgender women in California prisons (64.9%) expressed a preference to be placed in a men’s prison rather than a women’s prison, despite fear of victimization and sexual assault. In contrast, 35.1% reported a preference to be housed in women’s prisons, often referencing their identity as a woman and their affinity with other women.

Comparing the two studies above signals a shift in a key finding about expressed preferences for type of prison (i.e., a shift from a preference for men’s prisons to a preference for women’s prisons). This shift raises a host of questions about the differences between the studies, including when, where, and how they were conducted, and what samples were used. Also, there were changes in “the rights landscape” for transgender people, both inside and outside of carceral settings, and the changing legal policy environment. Some state correctional agencies are adjusting practices in the wake of lawsuits by transgender people and their advocates, citing safety and dignity concerns; many states rely on policies requiring a case-by-case assessment (Cabage, 2023). More recently, the executive order signed by President Trump on January 20, 2025 eliminates the option to identify as transgender in federal prisons, much less request a transfer to a women’s facility⁷. These are seismic changes in the topology of policy and, presumably, practice related to housing transgender people in prison.

7 The federal Executive Order “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” restricts how federal agencies, including prisons, collect and use data related to sex and gender by mandating that federal forms requiring an individual’s sex should list only “male or female” and “shall not request gender identity.” To quote the national press, “Trump Bars Transgender Women from U.S. Prisons for Female Inmates” (Dewan and Harmon 2025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In “Orange is the New Black,” Sophia Burset was released from prison. Her time in prison, however, was marked by mistreatment by staff and prisoners alike; stays in solitary confinement, purportedly for her own protection; interpersonal conflicts with other prisoners and prison staff; and problematic access to healthcare, including access to hormone therapy. Perhaps less obvious to the typical viewer, she defied trendlines by experiencing incarceration in a women’s prison in the first place. Moving forward to 2025, the hazards and harms that transgender people face in prison in the United States and often beyond continue to be well-documented, but the larger context in which they unfold has changed. The likelihood of a transgender person being placed in a facility that aligns with their gender identity, however, now depends on which state they are incarcerated in, how much a person persists in their request, and ultimately, judicial intervention. Even in states with laws enabling people in prison to transfer to a facility that aligns with their gender, the process is arduous, and approvals are case-by-case and rare. The high-profile rollbacks on these rights at the federal level put extra attention and political pressure on state governments or individual prison authorities who manage these requests and decisions.

There is no single formula for ensuring safety and dignity for transgender people serving time in prison systems that continue to operate with a reliance on sex-segregated facilities and on a gender binary. First, some transgender people would prefer to transfer to a facility that aligns with their gender identity, while others would not. We know some of the reasons for this given by survey respondents, mainly transgender women, including safety (see Chesnut & Peirce, 2024 for qualitative comments from the survey). We know far less about the reasons underlying the divergent preferences among transgender men. More research is needed that focuses on transgender men (for more along these lines, see Sumner and Sexton, 2015). Generally, however, incarcerated transgender people attempt to determine which facility might feel (relatively) safer and more accepting and/or may offer better access to medical care, social acceptance, and support.

This article highlights how the specifics of a person’s housing situation are layered, from type of prison, to type of housing unit, to sleeping arrangements, and proximity to other transgender people. Transgender people in prison, like other prisoners, assess the benefits and downsides of various arrangements depending on their individual circumstances and their perceptions of alternatives. The contrast in preferences regarding living in general population settings versus in a restrictive housing setting is informative. In many prisons, these are the only choices, and some people opt for the hardships of isolation in order to escape the dangers of other people, while others opt for the social connection opportunities along with the risks of group living. Moreover, it is telling that a strong majority of both transgender men and transgender women would prefer to be housed with other transgender people, perhaps indicating a longing for space that combines social acceptance for transgender people with meaningful protection (for more along these lines, see Sexton and Jenness, 2016).

Despite the political attacks on the rights of transgender people in the U.S. and transgender prisoners in particular, advocates, policymakers, and networks of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people continue to push for better policies and better implementation of existing policies. A key element that cuts across existing legislation, including PREA and TRADA, is the premise that incarcerated people must have meaningful input into decisions about their housing situation and safety provisions. They

have crucial knowledge about their own circumstances and they are entitled to having input on such important decisions. This is not a new idea; research shows that meaningful input from incarcerated people about prison conditions and culture matter greatly for outcomes related to legitimacy and reduced future infractions (Barry et al., 2016, Shanahan et al., 2023).

The findings presented here demonstrate that people have divergent preferences and that their actual experiences of housing arrangements in prison likely shape these. While prison managers need clearly documented policies, these should explicitly allow for a range of options, without resorting to options that are known to be harmful, such as solitary confinement. Some countries, like Canada and Argentina, are further ahead on imagining and institutionalizing these options (Butcher, 2023; Hebert, 2020), even as the gender binary restricts housing choices in prisons in most of the world (Maycock, O'Shea, & Jenness, 2025).

Correctional leaders in the United States and beyond, along with researchers, lawyers, and advocates who work with them, should take bold steps to develop a range of safe housing options for transgender people. Likewise, their assessment processes should genuinely engage with transgender peoples' expressed preferences for where they reside while incarcerated. The cost of remaining committed to the status quo, especially as the political landscape becomes even more fraught for transgender rights generally, is too high. For transgender people, being truly seen and heard by institutions that govern their lives can mean the difference between safety and danger, between affirming care and systematic abuse, and, in some cases, between life and death.

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PRISONS BEYOND THE BINARY: REIMAGINING CORRECTIONAL PRACTICE FOR TRANSGENDER AND GENDER-NONCONFORMING PEOPLE IN CUSTODY

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Abstract

Contemporary prison systems remain largely structured around cis-normative, binary assumptions of gender, with architecture, management, and everyday practices organised around and between 'male' and 'female'. However, the increasing recognition of gender diversity poses emerging and substantive questions for correctional policy and practice. This paper examines responses to such challenges in a range of jurisdictions within which prison systems have moved past the gender binary in some way. Drawing on emerging research and practice this paper argues that a shift toward individualised, rights-based approaches is essential to reduce harm, improve safety, and uphold gender-affirming dignity. Moving beyond the binary is not only a symbolic gesture toward inclusion, but a practical necessity for the legitimacy and humanity of modern correctional institutions.

Keywords: Gender diversity, Prison systems, Correctional policy and practice, Rights-based approaches

Introduction

Prison systems remain some of the most enduring gendered institutions (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2014; Maycock, 2020b; Maycock et al., 2024; Pemberton, 2013). From its physical design to its administrative procedures, prisons have long been organised through the cis-normative, binary categories of 'male' and 'female'. Correctional systems across the world typically separate people according to sex assigned at birth, assume stable gender identities, and reinforce binary gender norms through uniforms, staffing arrangements, program design and everyday routines. This binary practice and infrastructure have appeared self-evident since the inception of the modern prison, being foundational to the development of the prison systems internationally. However, growing recognition of gender diversity in social, medical, and legal contexts has exposed the inadequacy of binary models in responding to the lived realities of incarcerated people as well as prison staff.

The experiences of transgender, non-binary and other gender-diverse (Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming, (TGNC)), people in custody reveal the everyday harms of this binary order, that go beyond being placed in the wrong parts of prison systems (Maycock, 2020b). TGNC people often find themselves misclassified, misgendered, or subject to unsafe and isolating placements. While transgender rights have gradually entered correctional debates, non-binary and other gender-nonconforming people remain largely invisible in research, data collection, and policy design. Their experiences sit at the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, race, and mental health, generating vulnerabilities that existing systems are ill-equipped to address.

This paper explores the question of what it means for prisons to "go past the binary." Rather than advocating an immediate de-gendering of entire correctional systems, the argument advanced here is that incremental, evidence-informed reforms can progressively unsettle binary assumptions across key operational domains—classification, accommodation, health care, privacy, and staff culture. Drawing on international examples, the analysis highlights both the promise and the practical limits and challenges associated with such reforms. Ultimately, moving beyond the binary in prison practice is not simply about accommodating minority identities, but about rethinking the ethical and organisational foundations of carceral experience itself.

Brief review of justifying literature

Prison systems have conventionally been designed by and for men (Rafter, 1985a). Rafter (1985b) traced the development of women's prisons, demonstrating that it adhered to two distinct paradigms. Within the US, from a separate area for women, women's detention facilities developed out of men's prisons. Women were also placed in separate institutions, which paradoxically marked the beginning of an ongoing history of maltreatment. Rafter suggests that the criminal justice system has historically given female people in prison only partial justice by tracking racial and geographical differences in these two parts of institutions across time.

Binary gender divisions are largely omnipresent in the prison architecture (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2014; Maycock, 2020b; Pemberton, 2013). These assumptions persist in the classification and management of prisoners today. Admission forms routinely require individuals to tick "male" or "female," and electronic data systems rarely provide options beyond these categories. Custodial assignments typically follow genital-based criteria or the sex recorded on legal documents. Such



rigid systems erase the existence of those who identify outside the binary or whose bodies do not align neatly with administrative categories. Non-binary prisoners may be housed according to staff assumptions about their appearance, sometimes without consultation, or pressured to declare themselves as either male or female to enable bureaucratic processing. As Pemberton (2013) argues, the prison's gender order is maintained not only through policy but through the everyday micro-practices of surveillance, language, and spatial segregation that continually reproduce the binary.

The consequences of the gender binary organisation of prisons are profound. International evidence indicates that transgender and gender-diverse people face heightened risks of violence, sexual assault, and self-harm in custody (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2014). Many are placed in solitary confinement purportedly for their own protection (Arkles, 2008; Coppola, 2023), yet isolation inflicts well-documented psychological harms. Health care access is often contingent on medical or legal proof of gender identity, excluding many non-binary persons whose identities do not correspond to clinical transition pathways. The binary logic of imprisonment thus produces both physical and ontological vulnerability.

Within this context, this paper begins to map significant emerging shift in the organisation of prisons around gender, although in this instance the examples below respond to gender diversity going past the pre-existing binary.

International examples of parts of prisons that go past the gender binary

The examples outlined below, go beyond policy documents and theoretical consideration, they are actual physical units and wings of prisons in operation specifically to house transgender people in prison (other gender diverse people are rarely considered or included in these spaces). The examples below differ significantly by context: voluntary vs. mandatory placement; newly created units vs. repurposed wings; proximity to other units and staffing arrangements vary significantly. Cumulatively, the emerging evidence (while currently relatively limited), suggests that dedicated transgender wings often trade one problem (risk of assault in general population) for other issues (isolation, visibility, adjacency to other units, resource competition). Importantly none of these examples yet offers robust publicly available data on how much safer or more beneficial these units are for the transgender persons themselves (or how they compare to alternative housing models).

Brazil

Since around 2009 several Brazilian states and prison administrations began to experiment with physically segregated spaces often termed LGBTI+ wings, galleries or pavilions where transgender women (and sometimes other gender/sexual minorities) are grouped together rather than placed in the wider male population. Academic research and field interviews with transgender women and 'travestis' in Brazilian prisons (Ferreira & de Camargo, 2024), document these practices as a mixed practical response: such wings can reduce immediate threats from mainstream male populations and enable peer mutual aid, but they also tend to reproduce stigma, limit access to work and programs, and vary widely in quality between institutions.

England

At HMP Downview in England, E wing was opened specifically for transgender people in 2019. E-Wing

provides a concrete example of a repurposed women's-estate wing used in a transgender specific way. On the ground this looked like a physically separate cell block used to manage placement and risk rather than to integrate transgender prisoners into mainstream female wings. The HMP Downview case illustrates how a "transgender unit" in practice can be an administrative solution to difficult allocation decisions and can produce forms of separation that transgender people themselves and observers find problematic. Importantly no local transgender organisations consider this unit as desirable or beneficial.

Greece

Korydallos Women's Remand Prison has a transgender unit. The Council of Europe's CPT documented the establishment of a small transgender unit within Korydallos Women's Remand Prison during its 2022 ad-hoc visit. Inspectors described refurbished cells and a distinct section for transgender women, noting improved living conditions compared with some earlier ad hoc placements elsewhere (e.g., Corfu prison). The CPT qualified its finding by emphasising the need for a formal policy framework on searches, staffing and healthcare, but the practical reality in Korydallos is clear — a physically demarcated unit that houses transgender people in prison, with observed improvements in conditions but continuing questions about protocols and integration into prison life.

Italy

Italy's plans to establish a dedicated transgender prison wing in 2010 marked an unprecedented moment in correctional practice. The unit, located at the Pozzale facility near Florence, was created within what had previously functioned as a women's prison. It was designed to accommodate over thirty transgender people in prison, offering an environment that was intended to provide greater safety and dignity than placement in male prisons. Initially, Italian authorities presented the initiative as a pioneering step toward inclusion, providing access to medical care and social programs consistent with gender identity. However, despite the progressive rhetoric, the unit didn't eventually open and now transgender people in prison are held in informal specific wings across prisons in Italy. The Pozzale prison itself was eventually closed, and the dedicated TGNC wing did not continue elsewhere formally.

Iran

For many years, investigators, survivors and human-rights monitors have described a distinct "transgender ward" in Evin in Teheran (commonly referred to as Ward 240). This functions as a physically separate section of the prison with long corridors of cells and very limited daylight and exercise. Accounts from former detainees and NGO field reports portray Ward 240 as an institutional site of segregation: people branded as gender-nonconforming or same-sex attracted were located there, often experiencing overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions and restricted movement (<https://www.peace-mark.org/en/articles/103-4-en/>). Recent reporting around the June 2025 Israeli airstrike on Evin, which reportedly destroyed parts of the prison's trans wing and left many trans detainees missing or presumed dead, has also drawn renewed attention to Ward 240 and to longstanding descriptions of inhumane conditions within it.

Thailand

In March 2017, Thai authorities established the first prison wing specifically designated for TGNC people within Minburi Prison in Bangkok. The initiative was framed by officials as a response to



increasing numbers of TGNC people in prison, and was presented publicly as a measure for “better management” rather than a human rights reform. Activists and advocacy groups in Thailand expressed concern that the creation of this separate wing was motivated more by administrative convenience than by the safety or dignity of those incarcerated. Conditions in the TGNC unit reportedly mirrored those in the rest of the prison, with little evidence of specialised healthcare, access to gender-affirming treatment, or training for correctional officers. Moreover, segregating TGNC prisoners often resulted in further social isolation and limited access to education or work programs. Nonetheless, the establishment of the Minburi wing marked a significant institutional acknowledgment of gender diversity within Thailand’s carceral system, with other another TGNC wing now open in Pattaya prison.

U.S.

In the US there was previously a transgender specific Unit at the Rikers Island Jail Complex in New York that opened in 2010 but is due to be closed. Rikers has often been cited as an example where a discrete housing unit for transgender detainees was opened that housed up to around 30 transgender women. This was intended as a voluntary, safer alternative to the male general population or protective solitary housing. Implementation, however, was unstable with the unit’s fortunes fluctuating with leadership changes. Beyond Rikers, several U.S. County jails and state prisons have set up protective housing pods or administrative segregation units that are effectively transgender specific in practice. Some units are voluntary dorm-style groupings, others are more isolating protective-custody cells.

Challenges and Limitations

It is important to recognise the diversity with the transgender and gender diverse community, this diversity maps onto different expectations and demands around where TGNC people want to be housed within prison (Brömdal et al., 2023; Maycock, 2020a). A survey conducted by the Vera Institute (Chesnut & Peirce, 2024) of 280 currently incarcerated transgender people in state prisons across the US, suggested:

Many [participants] called for units designated specifically for transgender people and/or for the option for transgender women in men’s facilities to transfer to women’s facilities—but not everyone would choose either of these options.

Therefore, if TGNC spaces in prison are to progress, such spaces must be created in alignment to TGNC community expectations and needs in prison. Additionally, and the fact that within many of the examples above, changes in policy and the practice of placement within parts of the prison system not labelled ‘male’ and/or ‘female’ have happened *to* and not *with* TGNC people within prison settings. In the examples outlined above, there is little evidence that community engagement or consultation has taken place in the establishment of the new wings, reflective of approaches within the wider policy landscape around gender diversity in prison.

The movement toward greater inclusion of gender diverse people in some prison systems, faces multiple obstacles. Within a wider context of the rolling back of transgender rights in some jurisdictions (cf. TGEU’s Trans Rights Index and Map 2025), institutional conservatism and public

scrutiny create strong disincentives for experimentation. Correctional systems are risk-averse bureaucracies that equate safety with standardisation; diversity is often perceived as a threat to order. Media sensationalism around trans prisoners has further politicised the issue, narrowing the space for nuanced reform.

Staff culture and training remains pivotal. Without attitudinal change among frontline officers, policy reform risks remaining purely symbolic. A significant Canadian study (Johnston et al., 2022; Ricciardelli et al., 2020) and a wider scooping review (Daken et al., 2024) reveal that staff uncertainty and fear of making mistakes often lead to avoidance or over-correction in dealing with TGNC people in prison. Comprehensive training programs that combine legal knowledge, empathy building, and exposure to lived experience could mitigate this.

Legal frameworks can also constrain change. In many jurisdictions, legislation mandates the segregation of male and female prisoners, leaving limited room for gender-neutral or mixed housing. Where legal reform is politically unviable, administrators have resorted to ad hoc solutions, such as “protective custody” units or single-cell placement. These arrangements, though intended to ensure safety, frequently reproduce isolation and stigmatization.

Data limitations present another barrier. Few correctional agencies systematically collect information on gender identity beyond the binary, making it difficult to evaluate the scale of the issue or the effects of policy change. Privacy concerns and the potential misuse of identity data add further complexity.

Resource constraints must also be acknowledged. Training programs, infrastructure modifications, and healthcare integration require funding in systems already stretched by overcrowding and austerity. Yet some of the most effective changes, revising administrative forms, amending search protocols, or procuring gender-neutral clothing are inexpensive. The challenge lies not primarily in cost but in institutional will.

Towards a Rights-Based Framework for Correctional Inclusion of Gender Diversity

Despite these challenges, a growing consensus affirms that gender diversity in prisons is a human rights issue rather than a discretionary matter of management. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) emphasise respect for dignity, non-discrimination, and individualisation. The Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (2017) extend these obligations explicitly to gender identity and expression. When interpreted together, they require correctional authorities to ensure that all persons in custody are treated in accordance with their self-defined gender identity, and that necessary measures are taken to protect their physical and psychological integrity.

A rights-based framework does not eliminate operational complexity, but it provides a potential approach for reform. It obliges States to balance safety and security considerations against the principle of equality. It also legitimises participatory policy design, where people with lived experience of incarceration contribute to shaping procedures that affect them. An initiative in Australia (Simpson et al., 2024) involving an advisory group of transgender and gender-diverse former prisoners



exemplify how participatory governance can enhance both legitimacy and practical effectiveness.

Conclusion

Historically, prisons have not only held up a gender binary, but have consolidated and reproduced it in many countries. The persistence of binary gender regimes within prisons represents both a practical and moral challenge for contemporary correctional systems. It denies recognition to those whose identities do not conform to binary categories, exposes them to heightened risks, and undermines the legitimacy of institutions that claim to uphold human rights. Yet across diverse jurisdictions, there is growing momentum toward more flexible, individualised, and rights-affirming practices.

Moving beyond the binary does not require the immediate creation of entirely gender-neutral prisons. Rather, it entails re-engineering specific domains of prison life—classification, healthcare, uniforms, searches, and staff training—so that they no longer depend on rigid gender assumptions. International experience demonstrates that such reforms are possible although it is unclear how beneficial such changes are. The further development of TGNC specific parts of prison needs careful and detailed analysis. Ultimately, to move past the binary is to reassert the principle that dignity, not anatomy, should anchor correctional practice. In doing so, prisons may take a modest but meaningful step toward becoming spaces that reflect the diversity and complexity of the societies they serve.

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THE GENDER-RESPONSIVE PARADIGM AND ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

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Abstract

The gender-responsive paradigm has driven the evolution of trauma-informed practice in corrections in numerous ways. Over the past two decades, reforms first designed to improve the treatment of justice-involved women have reshaped global correctional policy, exemplified by the influence of the United Nations Bangkok Rules on the later Mandela Rules. Gender-responsive research and practice reframed trauma from an individual problem to a systemic concern, providing correctional agencies with the tools and confidence to assess and address its effects safely. The development of the Women's Risk Needs Assessment, the Women's Correctional Safety Scales, and treatment curricula designed for women advanced this agenda, embedding trauma awareness into assessment and daily operations. Early attention to women's trauma—particularly gender-based and childhood violence—was both strategic and ethical, yielding theoretical and practical insights that now inform work with men. Additionally, the field's historic focus on risk reduction arguably obscured the centrality of trauma in pathways to offending for both genders. The commentary concludes with reflections on the new development of the Men's Risk Needs Assessment (MRNA), which extends gender-responsive insights to male populations, emphasizing trauma, health, and desistance as essential to rehabilitation. The MRNA reflects a growing recognition that gender-responsive and trauma-informed frameworks are mutually reinforcing and capable of transforming correctional policy and practice for all justice-involved individuals.

Keywords: trauma-informed practices, gender-responsive

Introduction

I can still recall when Frank Porporino was in the early years of developing *Advancing Corrections* for the International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA). At the time, I was serving as Editor-in-Chief of *Criminal Justice and Behavior* and as a board member of the International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology (IACFP), an organization closely aligned with ICPA. Through IACFP, I attended my first ICPA conference in Melbourne, Australia, and in many ways, I “grew up” professionally alongside both ICPA and *Advancing Corrections*, having now spent over two decades in academic criminology.

As contributors to this special issue can attest, the corrections field has undergone profound positive change in policy, practice, and research. It has been inspiring to witness the inclusion of people with lived experience in policy discussions; the adoption of desistance frameworks to reduce crime and improve lives; greater attention to the health and well-being of all justice-involved individuals, including staff; and, within my own academic sphere, major advances in improving outcomes for women in the justice system.

I highlighted some of the developments in the United States (U.S.) in the eighteenth edition of *Advancing Corrections* (Salisbury & Foster, 2024), which marked the fifteenth anniversary of the United Nations (U.N.) Bangkok Rules (U.N., 2010). These Rules enhanced human-rights protections for women in custody and those serving non-custodial or pre-trial sentences (Huber, 2016). Although their implementation has not been fully realized (e.g., Van Hout et al., 2023a), global efforts to promote them continue. For an overview and critique, readers may consult Penal Reform International, Barberet and Jackson (2017), and Van Hout et al. (2023a, 2023b).

What few may realize is that the Bangkok Rules helped pave the way for the Mandela Rules, adopted five years later in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). According to Dr. Barbara Owen (personal communication, November 13, 2025), a key research consultant to the U.N., the Bangkok Rules “were a stalking horse to test the world’s appetite for revising the norms and standard document from the 1950s.” Indeed, provisions such as Rule 48(2)—which prohibits the use of restraints on women during labor and childbirth—did not exist in the 1955 Standards and exemplify how gender-responsive reforms influenced broader policy.

This historical progression demonstrates that reforms initially aimed at improving the treatment of women often yield systemic benefits. The prohibition of shackling during childbirth, for example, has prompted correctional agencies to reconsider restraint policies for all medically vulnerable individuals, including those with disabilities. Such ripple effects illustrate how gender-responsive innovation can drive broader humanitarian change across correctional systems.

Driving the Trauma Conversation through the Gender-Responsive Lens

As a junior scholar, it was not easy explaining to correctional executives twenty years ago why trauma-informed practices (Harris & Fallot, 2001) were essential, even for female populations. Line staff were even harder to persuade. The prevailing attitude was to avoid the subject entirely—better to keep trauma “out of sight and out of mind.” Even those sympathetic to the prevalence of victimization among justice-involved people feared that acknowledging it would induce harm both emotionally and operationally. This hesitation, though often well-intentioned, effectively silenced the



issue.

The gender-responsive movement helped dismantle that silence. We now recognize that if no one in the system safely invites clients to explore what happened to them and how those experiences may have shaped their behavior, such issues will never be addressed. Gender-responsive researchers and advocates provided correctional agencies with both the rationale and the skills to assess and address trauma safely and to help educate that trauma is a systemic concern, rather than an individual one. The Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA; Van Voorhis et al., 2010) exemplifies this shift. As one of the only validated risk/needs assessment instruments that trains non-clinicians to conduct trauma-informed interviews, it empowered practitioners to ask difficult questions about trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a structured, compassionate way; and it has been doing so for over twenty years—a once unthinkable practice. Mainstream correctional authors now recognize the groundwork laid by gender-responsive scholars (Fretz & Bogue, 2023), though the WRNA is still often omitted from contemporary discussions despite its effectiveness and impact supported by twelve validation studies, including a recent validation in the United Kingdom (Pemberton et al., 2025).

Other innovations reinforced this transformation. The Women's Correctional Safety Scales (Owen et al., 2017) guided staff in cultivating emotional and physical safety within women's prisons, while curricula such as *Helping Women Recover*, *Healing Trauma*, and *Moving On* provided trauma-responsive programming grounded in empowerment and relational theory. These gender-specific tools—supported by funders and reform advocates—pushed trauma-informed practice into mainstream correctional discourse in the United States.

Importantly, the decision to begin with women was strategic as well as ethical. Justice-involved women's exceptionally high exposure to gender-based and childhood violence made their needs urgent, yet the ultimate aim was always inclusive. The architects of the gender-responsive paradigm in the U.S.—Patricia Van Voorhis, Barbara Owen, Barbara Bloom, Stephanie Covington, Marilyn Van Dieten, Phyllis Modley, Maureen Buell, Andie Moss, among others—envisioned that lessons learned from women's experiences would eventually inform practices for men. Although early efforts deliberately centered women to correct longstanding neglect, we knew that trauma shaped both male and female pathways to offending and that staff trauma also required attention. Women's trauma, particularly that experienced in childhood, is deeply intertwined with substance use, mental health, and unhealthy intimate relationships—all key predictors of criminal behavior (Van Voorhis et al., 2010). Recognizing these as criminogenic needs rather than mere responsivity factors represented a major theoretical advance. Moreover, we helped agencies understand that it would be unethical to drive up women's risk levels based on psychosocial and neurobiological needs beyond their control and that they were most crucial from a treatment perspective. This work continues because there is so much more to do, and it seems the issue is always on precarious ground especially for the women.

Risk and its Role in Keeping Childhood Trauma Out of the Conversation

In my view, the field's obsession with risk reduction is one of the main reasons the criminal justice field ignored or overlooked the large body of research showing that childhood maltreatment is a defining, though not deterministic, factor in both women's and men's pathways to crime (Saxena & Messina, 2021; van der Put & Ruiter, 2016). While childhood trauma manifests differently across gender, it plays an important role for both. Boys and girls experience different forms of violence:

girls are more likely to suffer violence within the home, whereas boys are more likely to experience it in public settings (Council on Criminal Justice, 2024; Salisbury & Crawford, 2025). Gender norms of masculinity and femininity, along with neurobiological differences, also contribute to these distinctions (Klabunde et al., 2017).

The field historically discounted trauma because dominant criminological and correctional theories either dismissed it outright (except perhaps for general strain theory; Agnew, 1992) or labeled it a static, historical factor irrelevant to “here and now” interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 1994; Fritzon et al., 2021). Others argued that trauma was not *directly* related to offending or recidivism and therefore was only relevant to how we should deliver services (general responsibility), not why people offend (Andrews & Bonta, 1994).

But what if we asked clients directly: *Do you think your early experiences contributed to why you are here today?* Many might answer yes. They might recognize how childhood experiences led them toward substance use, aggression, or unhealthy peer groups. People are inherently curious about themselves and it likely does not matter to a client whether his trauma was *causally related* or had an *indirect effect* on his offending behavior. Many may want to understand why their lives unfolded as they did. Whether or not trauma is statistically predictive of recidivism, for someone living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex PTSD, it is a crucial therapeutic target. Most readers I suspect would agree. But the discipline has a way of always turning us back to the concept of risk, which continues to silence the needs of survivors.

From gender-responsive evidence, we know that safely addressing trauma and its relationship to substance use, emotional regulation, and relationships leads to improved outcomes and lower recidivism among women (Gobeil et al., 2016; Summers et al., 2025). There is no reason to think men would not benefit as well. Although masculinity norms may make disclosure more challenging, acknowledging trauma can improve men’s emotional and physical health—both of which are increasingly linked to reduced recidivism. Teaching clients that childhood trauma was not their fault, while holding them accountable for present behavior, is a reasonable and humane balance. Encouragingly, more correctional leaders now seem open to this perspective and understand that it is culturally and operationally wise to create safety in whatever ways we can, not just security.

Conclusions and Reflections

There now appears to be enough political will, professional curiosity, and openness for correctional agencies to address men’s trauma and victimization, even when these issues are not classified as “criminogenic needs” (Fretz & Bogue, 2023). Many of my recent professional discussions reflect this shift. Over a year ago, a U.S. state department of corrections that had implemented the WRNA with women for over a decade asked me to develop a comparable tool for men. Leadership wanted to understand the prevalence of trauma and PTSD among male populations in their system.

At first, I hesitated. But I quickly realized how much work remains to be done in understanding and responding to men’s trauma—and how progress in this area can also benefit the women in men’s lives. This prompted the development of the Men’s Risk Needs Assessment (MRNA), which is now being piloted and validated.



In creating the MRNA, I also incorporated measures long missing from traditional risk/needs assessments, such as physical pain, traumatic brain injury, and the ability to spend time alone without technological distractions. Additional scales explore key elements of desistance—generativity, identity change, meaning, purpose, and hope for the future.

My hope is that we continue to learn from gender-responsive innovations. By grounding trauma-informed practice in the lessons learned from justice-involved women, we can also enhance well-being and promote desistance among men. Ultimately, gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches are mutually reinforcing frameworks that, when applied together, offer the best chance of improving lives and transforming correctional systems for all.

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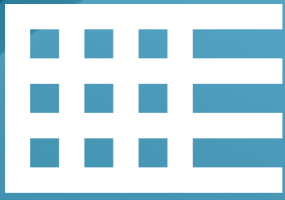
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About the Author

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TECHNOLOGY

BEYOND EFFICIENCY: PUBLIC VALUE MAXIMISATION AND THE ETHICS OF DIGITAL REHABILITATION

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Abstract

This article is a culmination of our scholarship and engagements that intersects with practitioners and policy makers from across the world. Our recent work with the United Nations' Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) culminated in a report focusing on digital rehabilitation (UNICRI, 2024). We evaluated current practice and policy that focused on the intersection of rehabilitation and digital. Fundamental to this were important rights-focused and ethical principles to ensure digital creates no harm and is a key tool to adapt, enhance, and transform rehabilitation and human flourishing. The goal of the report was to provide practical advice and guidance about the ethical principles that should guide the use of digital rehabilitation in prisons, and how to plan for the development, implementation, and continuing provision of digital re-sources to support rehabilitation.

The digitalization of justice-led rehabilitation has been incremental and has proceeded faster in some jurisdictions and in some rehabilitation domains than in others, but it is undeniable that digital technologies are becoming a viable core element in justice-led rehabilitation. What is being created here is a form of digital public infrastructure that is part of the wider process of the digitalization of government, sometimes referred to as the e-government (Homburg, 2018). In this article we want to reflect on some of the implications of this from a public value perspective, and propose a model to ensure digital reform maximises the public value in this sector.

Keywords: digital; rehabilitation, public value, ethics



Background

In this article, we examine digital transformation in penal settings through the broader lens of Public Value Maximization (PVM), a *"strategic management framework for public sector managers"* that argues public sector organisations should aim to create services, social outcomes, and benefits that together constitute "public value" (O'Flynn & Alford, 2009, p. 172). Ideas about public value provide a way to bridge the gap between the need for "efficient and procedurally correct services" and *"the engagement of citizens in developing public services and policy."* Our focus here is on the civic value that derives from the digital public infrastructure that is being created in penal systems, and our goal is to set out some ideas that will support the public value creation process and inform the governance of emergent digital public infrastructure (DPI). Recently scholars have provided a conceptual framework that has helped us critically reflect on the digital rehabilitative enterprises (Muzzucato et al., 2024). This provides a justification for the need for ethically informed digital design and practice, especially in the context of rehabilitation. It also emphasises the importance of countering what many fear to be the ubiquitous harms of technology (Zuboff, 2015) that can arise within penal systems, such as the amplification of punishment and neglect of human rights. We therefore set out key guiding principles for practice and policy in light of expedient digital growth in our penal services.

Shaping the Digital Transformation in Penal systems

The digitalisation of justice-led rehabilitation represents more than a technical evolution; it is a reconfiguration of the power relations that structure penal life. As Ross et al. (2024) observe, digital reforms are not neutral instruments but socio-technical processes that both reflect and reshape institutional cultures, values, and hierarchies. What is being built under the banner of digital transformation is a new form of *digital public infrastructure*—one that carries the potential either to extend surveillance and bureaucratic control or to cultivate empowerment and reintegration. As Muzzucato et al. (2024) caution, when digitalisation is pursued primarily for efficiency—through cost-saving automation or data-driven monitoring—it risks hollowing out the very *public value* it seeks to deliver. Drawing on Zuboff's (2019) insights into instrumentarian power, digital systems in justice-led contexts can easily become architectures of behavioural control, embedding asymmetries of visibility and authority that constrain agency rather than expand it. Similarly, the phenomenon of *techno-drift* (Powell et al., 2018)—where technological capability begins to dictate organisational priorities—illustrates how the pursuit of innovation can displace human and ethical judgement. To counter this, the development of digital rehabilitation must be understood as a civic and relational endeavour; one that balances the operational needs of institutions and their people (Van de Steene & Knight 2017) with broader societal imperatives of fairness, inclusion, and legitimacy. Conceived in this way, digital rehabilitation becomes not a mechanism of containment but a foundation for digital citizenship and civic renewal within and beyond the prison walls. Otherwise, the rehabilitative value is quickly extinguished.

Challenges in Traditional Rehabilitation

Traditional rehabilitation approaches in prisons have often struggled to adapt to contemporary social and economic realities. Limited resources, inconsistent access to education and vocational training, restricted expert support, swelling caseloads, and the persistence of punitive cultures within institutions have undermined rehabilitative efforts. Moreover, the exclusion of justice-involved people from digital life not only entrenches inequality but also leaves them unprepared for the demands of a digitally mediated society, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and reoffending. Reisdorf and

Rikard (2018) demonstrate that digital exclusion compounds existing social disadvantages, limiting the capacity of formerly incarcerated people to rebuild autonomy and engage in civic and economic life. Similarly, Seo (2023) highlights how digital literacy and mentoring initiatives for formerly incarcerated women foster agency, digital competence, and social reintegration. Gurusami (2019) extends this critique, arguing that the structural conditions of punishment—racialised surveillance, gendered control, and institutional disinvestment—shape how digital and rehabilitative tools are experienced and contested. Taken together, these studies highlight that digital inclusion is not a peripheral concern but a central pillar of contemporary rehabilitation, essential to ensuring that justice-led systems promote equity, agency, and social participation.

Strategic Opportunity for Reform

The convergence of digital transformation and rehabilitative imperatives creates a strategic opportunity for reform. The digital transformation of penal systems is creating a particular form of digital public infrastructure that directly affects users (justice involved people, justice practitioners) and indirectly affects the people who interact with them (service providers, family). There is a responsibility on penal systems to do this in a way that produces something of enduring value.

Digital rehabilitation in prisons and probation must be recognised not as a service add-on but as the creation of a *digital public infrastructure*. As Ross et al. (2024) argue, digital transformation in penal systems cannot succeed if it merely digitises existing bureaucratic routines; it must instead reconfigure institutional practices around societal outcomes and public value. By embedding public value goals—such as dignity, equity, and democratic participation—into the design of digital rehabilitation systems, services can move decisively beyond surveillance and control towards empowerment and reintegration. This requires confronting what Powell et al. (2018) describe as *techno-drift*: the gravitational pull for technology to dictate priorities and drive data-exploitation in the name of efficiency. To resist this drift, digital rehabilitation should be grounded in ethical and civic principles that ensure technology serves people, not vice versa. Eaves & Rao (2024) provide an evidenced model that grounds human focused attributes to DPI. Identifying the operational needs of institutions and their staff is essential (Van de Steene & Knight, 2017), but it is equally vital to recognise wider *societal needs* in the form of public value—supporting fairness, inclusion, and civic legitimacy. As Muzzacato et al. (2024) emphasise, digital systems in public service should be judged by their contribution to collective well-being. Establishing digital rehabilitation as public infrastructure means designing platforms, contracts, and governance frameworks that deliver transparency, interoperability, and accountability as democratic obligations, ensuring that justice technologies are not tools of containment but instruments of civic renewal.

From Surveillance to Empowerment: The Strategic Opportunity of Digital Rehabilitation

Digital transformation in prisons is not value-neutral. As Zuboff (2015) warns in her discussion of the *Big Other*, digital infrastructures can either empower or dominate. She asserts that "*Instrumentarian power replaces the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior*" (p.20). If digital rehabilitation is designed primarily for control, it risks becoming another form of surveillance that entrenches inequality and disempowerment. Yet, if guided by public value principles, digital systems can instead nurture autonomy, inclusion, and accountability. This demands a deliberate design approach—one that resists the extractive tendencies of surveillance capitalism and instead reimagines penal settings as sites of ethical, future-oriented digital citizenship.



The UNICRI report (2024) reinforces this point by urging systems, in this case prisons, to adopt ethical principles—legality, privacy, normality, proportionality, equality, and agency—in all digital needs assessments. Embedding these principles ensures technology serves rehabilitation rather than undermines it. Muzzicato et al. (2024) frames digital infrastructures as tools for generating “common good outcomes” such as dignity, fairness, and democratic participation. Taken together, these perspectives reveal a clear strategic opportunity: to harness digital transformation not simply for efficiency or control, but to maximise public value and prepare justice involved people for meaningful participation in a digital society.

Digital rehabilitation matters because it directly addresses the digital exclusion that exacerbates cycles of reoffending and social marginalisation (Riesdorf & Rikard, 2018; Seo, 2023). Access to and use of digital tools is no longer a privilege but a precondition for full participation in modern society. Without it, incarcerated individuals are released further behind, reinforcing structural inequalities and undermining rehabilitation efforts. Muzzicato et al’s (2024) “common good outcomes” help us to move to fair and decent rather than failing to extend cementing Zuboff’s (2015) idea of *instrumentarian* power, where technology is used only for control. Inaction therefore not only denies justice involved opportunities for growth and reintegration but also widens digital divides, leaving justice systems complicit in deepening inequality rather than pursuing the public value outcomes they are entrusted to deliver.

Public Value Functions

Mazzucato et al. (2024) define what is ‘public’ about digital public infrastructure. One key mechanism for framing this is *function*, as opposed to (technical) *attributes* that value efficiency and scalability over explicitly serving people. However, functional views of digital, celebrate outcomes that are ‘*directly associated with normative values, such as social value, economic value, capabilities, human rights and essential needs*’ (p11). This perspective is of direct value to the enterprise of penal reform because it centres outcomes of democratic merit. This framing can foster quality of life, healthy social relations and community, capabilities and also economic inclusion. In terms of value creation these functional qualities present a viable template for positioning digital in penal spaces as the right kind of trajectory for decision making, development and implementation. The process of public value maximisation is to be understood as an iterative and collaborative process. In doing so common good outcomes can drive public value such as dignity, equity, democracy, accountability and resilience.

Human Rights Focus

Digital rehabilitation must be grounded in a rights-based framework to prevent technology from becoming another instrument of punishment. Alignment with international standards such as the Nelson Mandela Rules are crucial to ensure imprisonment should not strip individuals of their fundamental rights. By embedding human rights into digital design, prison systems, for example can ensure that technology fosters opportunities for growth, inclusion, and dignity, rather than reducing rehabilitation to surveillance and control.

Public Value Focus

Muzzicato et al. (2024) remind us that “*the purpose of digital innovation is not efficiency alone, but the maximisation of public value.*” Applying this insight to penal settings means evaluating digital rehabilitation by the extent to which it generates common good outcomes. In practice, this means

asking whether digital systems contribute to reducing recidivism, strengthen trust, and prepare individuals for digital citizenship. Without a public value focus, technology risks being deployed narrowly for efficiency or coercion; with it, digital rehabilitation can instead become a shared societal investment that benefits both justice involved people and the communities to which they return.

Ethics and Accountability

Ethics and accountability are essential to counter the risks of opaque systems, behavioural prediction, and unchecked data collection that Zuboff (2015) identifies in her analysis of surveillance capitalism: resulting in (mal)adaptive behaviours. UNICRI (2024) emphasises that transparency, privacy, and proportionality are non-negotiable if digital tools are to serve legitimate rehabilitative goals. Embedding accountability requires independent audits, ethical review boards, and mechanisms for justice involved people to understand and challenge how digital systems shape their journeys. As Muzzucato et al (2024) insist legitimacy of *digital services* need to be transparent, participatory, and aligned with civic democratic values.

Table 1 summarises key public value functions as highlighted by Muzzucato et al., (2024) and their alignment to the design of digital rehabilitation. It provides a conceptual bridge between ethical principles and operational design, highlighting how justice digital infrastructures could embed common good outcomes.

Table 1: Common Good Outcome Design Principles

Common Good Outcome	Design Drivers
Dignity	Systems align with and ensure individual autonomy, respect, and worth.
Equity and Fairness	Systems directly challenge disparities and address systemic inequalities.
Democracy and Participation	Systems empower users with agency and voice.
Accountability and Transparency	Systems follow transparent methods for scrutiny and redress.
Resilience and Sustainability	Systems adapt, endure, and serve future generations.

How Public Value Maximisation Applies to Justice-led Digital Rehabilitation

Public Value Maximisation, as Muzzucato et al. (2024) argue, is about ensuring that *public sector digital infrastructures* (like prison systems) maximise benefits for society, not just efficiency for institutions. Building on the insights of Ross et al (2024), who show how the techno-social landscape of penal systems is shaped by institutional culture, values and technology design, a digital strategy for rehabilitation must go beyond plug-and-play platforms and instead engage intentionally with the human, organisational and cultural dimensions of change. Their research highlights how justice-led service delivery applications are not simply technical artefacts but are embedded within bureaucratic logics, power-relations and public perceptions. Therefore, to operationalise public value maximisation in prisons and probation we need to: co-design digital tools with justice-involved people and staff; specify ethical, inclusive and accessible user-experience criteria in contracts; ensure procurement frameworks require privacy, interoperability and transparency; and embed governance and evaluation



mechanisms that interrogate how digital rehabilitation contributes to societal outcomes (rather than just institutional efficiency). In effect, the digital strategy must treat technology as a socio-technical intervention whose success depends on aligning digital infrastructure, culture, workforce capacity and civic legitimacy. In the carceral context, especially for digital rehabilitation, it is advisable to consider the following:

Shift from Institutional Goals to Societal Goals

Traditional prison systems have often been dominated by narrow concerns with security and cost control. However, as Muzzucato et al. (2024) argue, the purpose of digital innovation in the public sector is not efficiency alone, but the maximisation of public value. In the context of prisons, this means asking how digital rehabilitation can serve wider societal goals such as safety, inclusion, dignity, equity, and democracy. The UNICRI report (2024) reinforces this by emphasising that rehabilitation must be guided by principles of proportionality and equality, ensuring that technological interventions foster healthy reintegration rather than simply extending institutional control.

User-Centred Design: Treating Justice Involved as Citizens-in-Transition

One such approach we would recommend is that trustworthy digital infrastructures must be participatory and directly aligned with foundational democratic values (Muzzucato et al., 2024). By involving justice involved individuals in the design of rehabilitation programs is not optional but central to public value creation. A central tenet of public value maximisation is that citizens should be regarded as co-creators of services. This implies that justice involved people must be treated not merely as people with convictions, but as citizens-in-transition who require tools to rebuild autonomy and agency. UNICRI (2024) stresses that that must guide digital rehabilitation, ensuring that individuals actively participate in their own rehabilitative journeys. Co-production, for instance, partnering with justice involved people in designing digital learning pathways or therapeutic interventions, reflects Muzzucato et al.'s (2024) call for participatory digital infrastructures that deliver dignity and fairness as common good outcomes.

Transparency, Accountability, and Trust

Muzzucato et al. (2024) also argue that legitimacy in digital infrastructures depends on transparency and participatory accountability. They also argue that transparency is not an add-on but a democratic obligation in digital systems, ensuring that power is exercised in accountable and contestable ways. For digital rehabilitation, this means establishing clear policies on data use, strong protections for privacy, and open and participatory mechanisms for oversight. Recent recommendations published by the Council of Europe set out important policy and practices guidance on the use of AI in prison and probation settings (CoE 2024). UNICRI (2024) echoes this by identifying privacy and normality as critical principles in the governance of prison technologies, to prevent the erosion of rights. Trust can only be built when justice involved people and the public alike can see how digital programs are evaluated, how success is measured, and how safeguards protect against exploitation or harm.

Reducing Inequality

One of the most pressing challenges in prisons is the risk of deepening digital inequalities. Public value maximisation, as Muzzucato et al. (2024) frames it, is concerned with reducing disparities and ensuring fairness in the provision of public services. They explicitly link equity to PVM stressing

that systems must “reduce disparities and address systemic inequalities.” In line with this, UNICRI (2024) highlights equality as a cornerstone principle for digital rehabilitation, warning that without deliberate effort, digital systems risk reproducing or worsening existing disadvantages. Ensuring equal access to devices, digital literacy training, and rehabilitative opportunities across all gender, age, and social groups is therefore critical to ensuring that digital rehabilitation delivers equitable outcomes.

Long-Term, Sustainable Outcomes

Public value frameworks emphasise sustainability: digital infrastructures should not only meet immediate needs but also build capacities that endure. For penal systems, this means digital rehabilitation should aim beyond short-term achievements, such as course completions, to focus on long-term outcomes that strengthen reintegration and even better, desistance. UNICRI (2024) spotlights the importance of agency and normality, which together suggest preparing justice involved people with transferable digital skills, access to telehealth and mental health supports, and pathways into digital employment and civic participation. In Muzzucato et al.’s (2024) terms, maximising public value requires ensuring that digital rehabilitation contributes to resilience and future-oriented societal benefits, not just institutional efficiency.

Implementing these recommendations requires embedding them into everyday practice across penal settings. Digital maturity assessments help staff understand where their organisation stands and where investment is needed; ethical frameworks ensure that digital tools support rehabilitation rather than control; and skills programmes equip both staff and people in their care to use technology confidently and safely. Piloting innovations and evaluating outcomes provides important evidence for what works (and what doesn’t), while building trust with justice involved individuals, staff, and communities ensures that digital rehabilitation is seen as legitimate and fair. Ultimately, this approach creates public value by reducing inequality, strengthening reintegration, and supporting safer societies. As Muzzucato et al. (2024) argue, digital infrastructures should be judged by the extent to which they produce common good outcomes such as the dignity to support their children, have fair access to education or employment, and understand accountability and responsibility. By adopting these practices, practitioners not only strengthen rehabilitation but also deliver public value by assisting to the enterprise of human flourishing and enhancing community safety.

Conclusion

Penal digital transformation offers an unprecedented opportunity to align technology with the principles of public value, but it also poses profound ethical and political challenges. If left unchecked, the logics of efficiency, surveillance, and data extraction risk reshaping rehabilitation into a system of digital containment rather than empowerment. To counter this, investment in ethically informed, evidence-based innovation is urgent. Services must adopt governance frameworks that resist *techno-drift*, challenge exploitative data practices, and foreground dignity, fairness, and civic participation. Our experience working with professionals and policymakers globally reinforces that digital reform succeeds only when it is grounded in public value creation, for people and what they need, and designed as part of a democratic digital public infrastructure. Penal services have the opportunity—and responsibility—to ensure that digital transformation enables human flourishing, reduces inequality, and strengthens communities. Ethical, participatory, and transparent digital rehabilitation is not just good practice—it is a public good.

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DIGITALISING THE HEART OF PRISON LIFE

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Abstract

This contribution examines how the growing digitization of prisons reconfigures proximity, the correlational 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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ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association

COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

BELONGING, DESISTANCE AND CORRECTIONS

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Abstract

This short paper explains the development and importance of the concept of tertiary (or relational) desistance, which relates to securing acceptance and belonging in a community after criminalisation and punishment. The paper presents evidence from a range of recent studies that have studied tertiary desistance empirically, before going on to discuss the implications for correctional policy and practice.

Keywords: Desistance, rehabilitation, re-entry, reintegration, corrections

Introduction

In the last 25 years or so, evidence about how and why people desist from offending has grown rapidly, and that evidence base has begun to inform the development of criminal justice policy and practice in many jurisdictions, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. Previously, we tended to describe approaches as 'evidence-based' only on the basis of evaluative evidence of their effectiveness. Now, desistance research has helped us understand not only whether or not a policy or an intervention 'works', but also *how and why* desistance happens, with or without any correctional intervention (for a summary of these debates and of this evidence, see McNeill et al., 2012).

The desistance literature has also stimulated discussion of how we should measure movement away from offending, through desistance, towards the ultimate outcome of successful social integration. While reconviction rates remain one important metric, increasingly, it is being argued that more attention should be paid – in research, policy and practice -- to means and markers of social integration, such as positive employment and education outcomes, secure housing, and better health and wellbeing (cf. Ager & Strang, 2004, 2008; Kirkwood & McNeill, 2015; McNeill, 2021). Achieving these outcomes seems very important not just in securing longer term desistance from crime (cf. Laub & Sampson, 2003), but also in helping people enjoy a life that is good and productive for them, and that makes a contribution to the wellbeing of others.

These arguments are reflected in important distinctions that have been made between primary, secondary and tertiary desistance (also commonly referred to as act, identity and relational desistance) (cf. Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; McNeill 2014, 2015; McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). In simple terms, primary (or act) desistance refers to the absence of further offending behaviour; secondary (or identity) desistance relates to changes in self-concept and identity associated with leaving the label 'offender' behind; and tertiary (or relational) desistance refers to securing acceptance and belonging within a community; it is about how one is seen by others and 'how one sees one's place in society' (McNeill, 2015: 201). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) add further nuance by distinguishing between micro-level, meso-level and macro-level aspects of tertiary (or, in their terms, relational) desistance. These refer in turn to the roles in securing acceptance and belonging of inter-personal relations (micro), community relations (meso) and socio-structural dynamics (macro). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) also note that while primary, secondary and tertiary desistance are certainly inter-related, they do not necessarily follow a linear sequence. For example, rather than behavioural change triggering changes in identity and belonging, it may be acceptance in a new social group that triggers a change in self-understanding which triggers a change in behaviour. Figure 1 represents these non-linear interactions.

In recent years, empirical evidence about the importance of tertiary (or relational) desistance – and of securing social integration – has emerged from many different jurisdictions. In this short paper, I briefly review some of this evidence and then ask what its implications might be for correctional services (for a more extended discussion, see McNeill and Schinkel, 2024).

Tertiary Desistance: The evidence so far¹

Villeneuve, Dufour and Farrall (2020) draw on the findings of a scoping review on 'Assisted Desistance

¹ This section of the paper is an abridged version of part of McNeill and Schinkel's (2024) paper, re-used with permission from the editors and the authors.

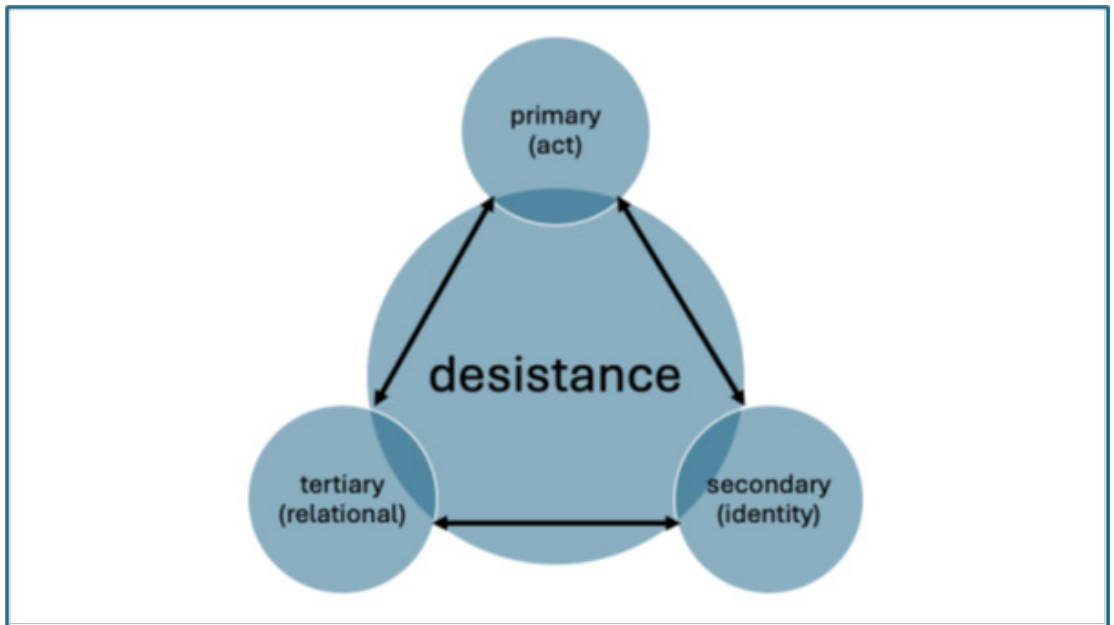


Figure 1: Three dimensions of desistance

in Formal Settings' to argue that the notion of tertiary desistance may help us understand practice mechanisms that can support change efforts:

'Positive feedback in the form of staying committed, encouraging change, acknowledging successes, working with, seeing would-be desisters as 'citizens' (not offenders), all emerge as components of assisted desistance. Those components are consistent with the definition of tertiary desistance proposed by McNeill (2014, 2016)... Formal change agents can help would-be desisters rebuild meaningful intra- and inter-personal ties thus contributing to bridge the gaps between 'offenders' and wider society' (Villeneuve, et al., 2022: 96).

So, while professional helpers may not themselves be in a position to provide the belonging and social acceptance required for tertiary desistance, they can play an important role at the micro-level in supporting and sustaining change and in helping people move towards social integration.

In a Dutch study of men's experiences of parole supervision, Doekhie, et al., (2018) arrived at somewhat similar conclusions. About one-third of the men interviewed reported receiving some form of recognition for their desistance efforts from their parole supervisor; and this recognition could be powerful. As one respondent reported:

'Isaac: She is the only person who believed in me. (...) She showed me she was not just a PO [parole officer], but a person [...] She gave me confidence not to do stupid things. Because I will make it on my own, but it's hard to believe it yourself. You have a label, so relapsing is easy. Hanging in there is the hard part. And she motivated me "don't blow it! Think about what you want and what you want is what you are going to do!"' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 509).

Here, as the authors note, the parole officer's recognition of Isaac's potential and of his efforts to change helps him to recognise and to trust himself to become the person he aspires to be, thereby also strengthening his identity desistance. These positive experiences, however, were not the norm: most parolees in the study experienced supervision as being mainly surveillance-oriented and not very helpful for desistance, but where officers like Isaac's were seen as 'mentors... [who] used their discretionary power to adjust conditions, creating space for trial and error' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 491), their influence was notable.

Ugelvik (2022) also examines the role of correctional staff and others in supporting tertiary desistance, drawing on findings from the Oslo Re-Entry Study (ORES). His analysis focuses on the 'transformative power of trust', particularly within the context of risk-oriented penal institutions that tend to construct people as untrustworthy. Drawing on several examples, he concludes that:

'The experience of being trusted can lead to hope and the belief that a better future is possible, post-release. Trust that is acted upon can therefore be seen as a practical and specific way for individuals to experience being recognized as fellow human beings, and not just as offenders. From such a perspective, trust can be an important part of the process leading to tertiary desistance' (Ugelvik, 2022: 635).

Ugelvik (2022: 635) suggests that trusting relationships not just with professionals, but also with family, friends and (new) colleagues are built slowly through the desistance process in an active process of 'negotiation between desisters and their social environments'. The potency of trust in supporting desistance may arise at least partly because criminalised people so rarely receive the recognition that trust confers.

Gålnander's (2020) Swedish respondents fared less well. His was a prospective longitudinal study that followed the desistance processes of 10 women all of whom had long histories of involvement with street crime related to substance use issues. As Gålnander (2020: 1307) notes, '[a]ll ten women had spent decades as outsiders, segregated and excluded from mainstream society'. Most had grown up in poverty; many had been in the care of the state as children and/or had been imprisoned. They had little experience of education or employment. Most had post-traumatic stress disorders; in five cases this was related to repeated violent victimisation by intimate partners. In other words, at the outset of the study, these women were a long way from experiencing belonging in mainstream society. As one woman put it: 'I feel like I don't even know how to be – I mean, what do they talk about, normal people?' (Gålnander, 2020: 1307). Yet, partly because of strained or non-existent relationships with their families, they were compelled to attempt to move in that direction, making stigma management a major concern.

One of the main ways the women tackled this problem was by keeping secrets; by avoiding discussions of their pasts. Such was the gendered stigmatisation that they had experienced (and that they feared) that they were unable to mobilise their recovery or desistance as an asset in finding a community in which they might be accepted, even celebrated, as a (typically male) 'wounded healer' (McNeill and Maruna, 2007).

Ultimately, Gålnander (2020: 1316) concludes that:

'...anticipation of further stigma stemming from internalization of multidimensional stigma in relation to their pasts restricted or even prohibited some of the women from interacting with mainstream society... the women were convinced that little to no good could come of displaying discreditable information when approaching conventional society. This made them avoid socializing, thereby isolating themselves from mainstream society.'

Gålnander's work helps us understand why and how the gendered (and therefore structural) dynamics of stigmatisation create major obstacles to even attempting far less securing belonging within a new community. For the women in his study, tertiary desistance seemed a remote prospect.

Rutter and Barr (2021) draw similar conclusions from a comparison of their two independent narrative studies of women's experiences of desistance in northern England: the stigmatisation of criminalised women as offenders, 'bad' women and mothers, *and* as victims meant that it was difficult for them to see themselves and be seen in any other way, limiting the extent to which they could achieve tertiary or relational desistance.

Barr and Hart (2022) take these arguments further, suggesting that 're/integration' into conventional society is often neither desirable nor possible for criminalised women. In particular, they contest the sometimes uncritical promotion of tertiary or relational desistance in ways which effectively responsabilize women (for changing themselves, their social relations and their lives) while denying them the structural support they need and deserve. They also criticise desistance scholars for failing to adequately critique the ways in which the prison and the wider criminal justice system often frustrate and obstruct desistance.

Similar arguments about the importance of structural contexts emerge from Gormally's (2015) research on youth gangs in Glasgow (Scotland). She stresses how, in seeking to 'retire' from gang involvement, it is crucially important for her participants to be recognised by those around them, and to have access to other identities and roles within the local community in order to achieve long-term desistance. She highlights how the macro-level of tertiary or relational desistance is important in shaping people's journeys – arguing that policy makers should be careful not to label all groups of young people socialising as gangs and that there should be greater investment in youth services, intergenerational programmes and opportunities for education and employment. Giving people access to alternative sources of identity at a younger age might allow for earlier desistance from street fighting – the type of offending behaviour most associated with these gangs.

More promisingly, in a very different context and with a very different population, Fox (2015) describes what *is* possible in terms of community inclusion, even for acutely stigmatised people, when community members and criminal justice agencies are willing to play an active part in creating the right conditions for reentry. Researching Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in Vermont, USA, Fox found that volunteers, by being willing to help with practical needs, by providing feedback and by sharing their own struggles, were able to help the core members see themselves beyond their offence, thereby counteracting the punitive and negative messages that exist on the macro-level of society and that produce and reinforce stigmatised identities. As one core-member said:

'They kind of like helped me to see that there's more than just ... the way that I see myself or



the way that I see that the world sees me because it's not all there is' (Fox, 2015: 90).

Importantly, sharing moral space also led to accountability, rather than a risk-based focus or control, and there was a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy that core members could become a force for good in their communities.

This notion – of progressively enabling people to become community assets – also recurs in Albertson and Hall's (2019) study. They apply a social capital lens to tertiary desistance, examining how a project for military veterans in recovery from addictions allowed them to build increasing relationships and have positive impacts beyond their immediate group. While the basis for the project's work was building relationships with people in a similar situation (mutual aid in group meetings), graduated opportunities were built upon this foundation. Participants could become involved in reaching out to other agencies to give talks, in other forms of civic engagement, in volunteering with other groups and in representing the group at community events. They could also become involved in seeking to influence decision-making at a local and national level. These were described as steps towards generativity (Maruna, 2001) and the restoration of the veterans' citizenship. In later work based on the same research (Albertson & Albertson 2023), these steps towards greater social capital are mapped against the different levels of relational desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016): from the micro (relationships between group members), to the meso (linking with other services and volunteering in the community) to the macro (input into regional and national service delivery decision making).

Taken together, these studies reveal not just the complex relationships between identity change and social reaction, but also the dynamic interactions between micro-level acceptance and recognition, much rarer meso-level opportunities for and experiences of community engagement, and macro-level structures that either generate or, more commonly, frustrate these opportunities. Crucially, they also suggest how (social) structure and (personal) agency interact in these processes, creating different relational possibilities for differently situated people (cf. Farrall & Bowling, 1999). For example, the women in Gålnander's (2020) study seem to have internalised their gendered stigmatisation in a way that makes the building of new social relationships an inherently risky project and one from which they tend to shy away. In effect, they have been relationally disabled or incapacitated by the gendered violence they have experienced; not just interpersonal violence at the hands of men, but also the symbolic and systemic violence attendant on their criminalisation *as women*. The experiences of the men in Ugelvik's (2022) study, by contrast, are very differently gendered. Buoyed by the development of trusting relationships with correctional staff, they are prepared and enabled to take these relational risks (for example in seeking, securing and sustaining employment). Indeed, in many cases, they enjoy the rewards of disclosing a criminalised past: crucially, a past that others are willing to consign to the *past*. In Fox's (2015) study, even those convicted of sexual offences – a highly stigmatised and excluded group – find inside the structures of CoSA a safe space to negotiate both relational connection and the identity change that it enables, even within a wider social climate of hostility and rejection.

In sum, while all of these studies attest to the importance of recognition, trust, acceptance and belonging within processes of desistance, taken together, they also reveal just how diverse desisting people's experiences may be. Their prospects are shaped not just by their own personal and

institutional histories but also by social structures and by cultural and community dynamics that play out very differently for different people in different contexts. It is also notable that many of the interventions and interactions discussed in these studies focus on the micro-level of recognition and trust from other individuals, with attempts to intervene on the meso- and macro-level less common.

Towards belonging: A role for corrections?

In the longer paper on which I have drawn here, Marguerite Schinkel and I also discuss findings from some of our own (separate) research studies, which tend to demonstrate just how severe the obstacles to belonging in mainstream society may be for people who have been repeatedly criminalised (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Comparing these findings with studies of people migrating and seeking asylum, we explore how difficult securing belonging can be when the foundational resources on which it depends (i.e., civil rights, personal security and safety, linguistic and cultural competence, social capital and connections) are unevenly available (cf. Bhatia & Canning, 2020).

As Davis, et al., (2018) note, people in such circumstances face 'contested belonging': '[b]elonging becomes a kind of Goffmanian stage where identities are performed and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are enacted' (p1-2). Such scholars thus draw attention to very complex dynamics of belonging. They note that it is both *multi-scalar* (meaning that contradictory positionings -- as included or excluded -- can co-exist in the same environment) and *multi-locational* (meaning that a person can identify with many different communities and identities at the same time). They explore 'emplacement practices' that evolve in pursuit of belonging; these are, in an important sense, 'practices of home-making' (Blunt & Dowling, 2006: 196), and they depend not just on the efforts of those trying to make a home, but also on the hospitable or hostile reactions of those around them (cf. Urie, et al., 2019).

What does this all mean for corrections? Perhaps the single most important insight that emerges from work on tertiary desistance is that seeking to 'correct' or rehabilitate the individual in prison or on supervision will not be enough to secure the kinds of integration on which longer-term desistance depends. Even if we choose to neglect human rights or justice-based arguments about the importance of seeking such integration, the desistance literature suggests we may struggle to reduce reoffending if we neglect it.

It follows then that correctional services might need to think not just about how they assist desistance in micro-level interactions between their staff and those in their care, but also about how to enable desistance-supporting meso-level interactions with families and communities. Even then, there is no escaping the power of social structures to constrain or enable desistance – and that suggests that the leaders of correctional services need to advocate (with others) for collaborations across government department portfolios and with civil society partners to influence and affect the social contexts where people find – or fail to find – acceptance and belonging.

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About the Authors

Fergus McNeill is Professor of Criminology and Social Work at the University of Glasgow. Prior to becoming an academic in 1998, Fergus worked for a decade in residential drug rehabilitation and as a criminal justice social worker. His research projects and publications have focused mainly on institutions, cultures and practices of punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration. As well exploring how increasingly knowledge about desistance from crime might re-shape rehabilitation and reintegration (both within and beyond criminal justice), Fergus's work has increasingly used creative and ethnographic methods to better understand how criminal justice is experienced, both by those subject to it and by those whose job is to try to realise it in practice. From January 2026-December 2030, he will lead a major 5-year study, funded by the European Research Council's Advanced Grants scheme, of 'Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Europe' (RaRiE), working with colleagues in the Universities of Leiden (Miranda Boone and Hilde Wermink) and Oslo (Thomas Ugelvik). Fergus's 2018 book, 'Pervasive Punishment: Making sense of mass supervision', was the winner of the European Society of Criminology's book prize. His next book, co-edited with Mary Corcoran and Beth Weaver, 'Generative Justice: Beyond crime and punishment', is due for publication by Bristol University Press in January 2026.



Marguerite is a senior lecturer in Criminology and a member of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. She joined the University of Glasgow in October 2013 as an ESRC Future Leader Research Fellow. In the past, her research has focused on the meaning of long-term (PhD) and repeated short-term prison sentences (post-doc) for those who undergo them. She found that long sentences





have to be accepted in order to cope with them, and are sometimes given transformative meanings in order to explain a positive future. Persistent short sentences, on the other hand, are not individually meaningful, but people serving them come to feel they belong in prison and that they have wasted their lives. Marguerite has also studied the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on punishment in Scotland, as co-stream lead on criminal justice, part of a wider research project at the University of Glasgow. Her monograph '*Being Imprisoned*', based on her PhD, was published in 2014. More recently, Marguerite has worked with an artist and Modern Studies teachers to develop a graphic novel and learning resource based on her research: *A Life In Pieces* - SCCJR.

Before starting her PhD, Marguerite worked as a support assistant in L'Arche Vancouver, as a mental health support worker in Edinburgh, and as a researcher, including for the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland.

FROM SURVEILLANCE TO SUPPORT: ENABLING HOPE IN PROBATION

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Abstract

This article explores the role of hope in probation practice, drawing on a qualitative study of hope in probation, we reflect on key considerations for modern correctional policy. We start by arguing that whilst hope can be understood as a psychological construct it can also take moral and political forms that can shape correctional legitimacy for both practitioners and people on probation. If probation services want to truly be institutions of hope then we suggest that it is these more social forms of hope which they should focus on.

Keywords: probation, hope, correctional policy, legitimacy



Introduction

In recent years, the concept of hope has gained traction in criminological and correctional discourse, although it remains an underexplored dimension of effective probation practice (Phillips et al., 2025). Crucially, hope does appear to be associated with individual-level change towards desistance (Farrall et al., 2014), suggesting that finding ways of increasing hope may yield benefits. Within probation, hope is primarily recognised as a psychological resource to be nurtured although a number of theoretical perspectives conceptualise it socially. In these latter conceptualisations, different forms of hope shape the way individuals engage with supervision, envision their futures, and navigate the constraints of the criminal justice system. In this article we reflect on the role of hope in probation, drawing on a qualitative study of hope in the probation context. We examine how hope is conceptualised, constrained, and cultivated in everyday correctional practice and, in doing so, contribute to a broader conversation about the values and principles that should underpin modern correctional policy.

Probation occupies a unique space in the correctional landscape. It is often positioned as a more humane alternative to incarceration, although its practice is frequently shaped by managerialism, risk aversion, and bureaucratic imperatives that have led to increasingly pervasive forms of punishment in the community in recent years (McNeill, 2018). These tensions have led to a form of supervision that prioritises technical compliance over substantive engagement (Phillips et al., 2025; Robinson & McNeill, 2008), often at the expense of the relational and transformative work that practitioners aspire to deliver, and which cohere with their own professional value base (Grant, 2016). When analysed through the lens of hope, supervision in its current form is shown to be about surveillance and control, rather than support and empowerment. In this article we show that when practitioners are able to work relationally, creatively, and with discretion, hope can be nurtured.

Through interviews, focus groups, and co-produced methodologies, our study explored how hope is experienced, expressed, and enacted within probation. Participants spoke of institutional hopes - such as completing a sentence or avoiding recall - but also of deeper, transformational hopes tied to identity, relationships, and future aspirations (Seeds, 2022). Crucially, they also articulated radical and collective forms of hope: the ability to imagine futures beyond the criminal justice system, and the importance of solidarity and community in sustaining belief in change.

Theoretically, the article draws on a range of frameworks to illuminate these findings. Snyder et al.'s (2002) cognitive theory of hope offers a psychological lens, while Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy, Lear's (2008) radical hope, and Seeds' (2022) deep hope provide more expansive, political and ethical perspectives. These frameworks challenge dominant narratives of responsibilisation, which place the burden of change on individuals while ignoring the structural conditions that constrain their lives (Albertson et al., 2022).

The remainder of this article focuses on a study of hope in probation that was carried out in England and Wales. The Probation Service in England and Wales is responsible for supervising all people who are subject to probation, primarily serving three types of sentence. Firstly, Community Orders are periods of supervision in the community imposed for offences which do not pass the 'custody threshold'. Community Orders require people on probation to undertake a number of proscriptive and prescriptive activities (such as complying with curfews, doing community service or attending

rehabilitative programmes). The Probation Service also supervises people who are sentenced to a Suspended Sentence Order – this is, legally, a custodial sanction but one which is suspended for up to two years. SSOs come with a number of conditions and requirements, similar to Community Orders, but with the added threat that non-compliance can result in the original custodial sentence being activated. Finally, the Service supervises people upon release from prison. Again, people are subject to a number of conditions and non-compliance is dealt with via recalls to prison. In total, the Service supervises around 250,000 people at a given time; around three times the number of people in prison in England and Wales.

Conceptual Frameworks: Reframing Hope in Correctional Practice

To understand the role of hope in probation, it is essential to move beyond narrow psychological definitions and engage with broader conceptualisations that treat hope as a relational, ethical, and political force. Dominant models in correctional psychology, such as Snyder et al's (2002) cognitive theory of hope, frame it as a goal-oriented mental process. According to Snyder et al., hope involves two key components: agency (the motivation to pursue goals) and pathways (the perceived ability to identify routes to those goals). This framework has been influential in rehabilitative interventions which emphasise personal rehabilitation – i.e., ones that encourage individuals to set goals, build self-efficacy, and envision positive futures – over more social and moral forms of rehabilitation.

While Snyder's model offers valuable insights, it risks reducing hope to an individual trait or a measurable asset that can be cultivated through cognitive restructuring. In the context of probation, this can lead to responsibilising narratives where individuals are expected to 'think their way' out of structurally embedded disadvantage thus overlooking the social, emotional, and institutional conditions that shape people's capacity to hope. When hope is treated as a psychological resource, it can become another burden placed on those under supervision by being a proxy for a sign of compliance, a performance of progress, or a tool for risk management.

To counter this, we draw on Freire's concept of critical hope, which emerges from his work on pedagogy and social justice. For Freire, hope is a political stance rooted in the recognition of oppression and the belief that transformation is both necessary and possible. Critical hope allows practitioners and service users to name systemic injustices while still adhering to an ethics of care within the system (Dominey & Canton, 2022). Critical hope is the hope of the teacher who refuses to give up on students, or the probation officer who bends bureaucratic rules to meet human needs.

Complementing Freire's work is Lear's notion of radical hope, developed in response to cultural devastation. Lear describes radical hope as the capacity to orient oneself toward a future that cannot yet be fully imagined; a form of hope that persists even when existing frameworks of meaning have collapsed. In probation, radical hope surfaces when individuals envision lives beyond the criminal justice system, despite repeated setbacks, entrenched processes of marginalisation and systemic barriers.

Finally, we incorporate insights from criminological scholarship on collective hope (Braithwaite, 2004), which emphasises the social nature of hope. Collective hope is nurtured in peer support networks and forms of practice that resist isolation and individualisation. In probation, collective hope challenges the dominant logic of responsibilisation by foregrounding interdependence and co-



production.

Taken together, these frameworks offer a more expansive understanding of hope in correctional practice. They shift the focus from individual psychology to social context and from risk management to more relational ways of working. In doing so, they provide a foundation for reimagining probation as a site of ethical engagement and human flourishing.

Methods

The empirical foundation of this article is drawn from a qualitative study involving interviews with current and former probation practitioners, current and former service users as well as policy actors, and allied professionals. The study employed interviews, focus groups, and co-produced methodologies to explore how hope is generated, constrained, and enacted within probation contexts. In total, we conducted 47 interviews and one focus group with people connected to probation in England. Participants included people currently or formerly under probation supervision, current and former probation practitioners, and individuals working alongside probation (i.e., charities, advocacy groups, and faith-based support services). The findings reveal a complex landscape in which hope is present but not necessarily in the most ideal way. Participants felt that probation *should* be focused on supporting people to have and achieve hopes but there was also a consensus that in its current form in England and Wales, a set of organisational factors inhibit the development of what Seeds (2022) terms 'deep hopes'.

Findings

Participants described a range of hopes, which can be broadly categorised into three types: institutional, transformational, and radical/collective. Institutional hope was the most commonly expressed and often centred on sentence completion, avoiding breach or recall, and "getting through" to the end of an Order and period of license. These hopes were typically shaped by the procedural and risk-focused nature of supervision. For many, the goal was simply to comply with conditions and exit the system with minimal disruption. While understandable, this form of hope is limited in scope and seems to reflect a desire for survival over transformation.

In contrast, transformational (deep) hope involved aspirations for personal change, rebuilding relationships, securing employment, or becoming a better parent. These hopes were more future-oriented and emotionally resonant, often tied to identity reconstruction and desistance. Participants spoke of wanting "a normal life," "to be seen as more than an offender," or "to be a role model for my kids." These hopes came across as fragile and contingent especially for those still under supervision and they were talked about as being dependent on access to support, trust in practitioners, and the ability to navigate systemic barriers. There was also a sense that probation should be able to play a role in these types of hopes by supporting people to 'travers[e] an unmapped terrain towards a future that is not known' (Seeds, 2022: 241). Importantly, transformational hope was often undermined by the rigidity of probation processes, high caseloads, and a lack of meaningful engagement. Some participants described how they started probation with a belief that probation would help them achieve these deeper hopes, but that these were quickly 'drowned' out by a tick box culture. Similarly, probation practitioners – especially those who had chosen to leave the service – expressed views that the managerial culture which they saw as endemic in the Service made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to work with people on probation around achieving deep hopes.

Whilst our initial analysis - presented in Phillips et al. (2025) - painted a generally negative picture of probation, we were conscious that there were still positive stories in our data. Participants did have examples of how probation could facilitate peoples' deeper hopes and practitioners were able to say how they still found hope in their work.

Thus, beyond these individualised hopes, our analysis uncovered expressions of the more social forms of hope mentioned above. Radical hope, as theorised by Lear, emerged in moments where participants imagined futures beyond the criminal justice system. Examples here related to people talking about futures that were not yet fully formed. This form of hope was evident in stories of persistence despite repeated setbacks, and in the refusal to be defined by past convictions or institutional labels. Collective hope, meanwhile, was rooted in relationships with peers, mentors, community groups, and occasionally with probation staff. This kind of hope was nurtured through acts of solidarity and shared recognition of the challenges that people on probation face in trying to move on from harmful lifestyles. Participants described how hope was sustained "shoulder to shoulder," through informal networks and relational practices that resisted isolation and responsibilisation.

Practitioners also reflected on their own experiences of hope, often in relation to the constraints of their roles. Many spoke of the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) involved in maintaining belief in change amidst bureaucratic pressures and risk-focused cultures (Phillips, 2011). Some described small acts of resistance - bending rules, prioritising relationships over paperwork, or celebrating incremental progress - as expressions of critical hope. Participants also talked about how naming systemic barriers helped them to still find hope in their work. These moments were often described as the most meaningful aspects of their work, even if they were not formally recognised or rewarded.

Taken together, these insights challenge dominant narratives of probation as a purely technical or risk-management enterprise. They reveal hope as a dynamic and contested practice that is shaped by institutional logics but also enacted through relationships and acts of resistance. In doing so, they underscore the need to reframe probation as a space where hope can be cultivated, not just monitored. Crucially, however, this type of practice was seen as being undervalued by the Service which prioritized quantitative measures of success and risk management approaches. This is not to say that probation practitioners and providers should not be concerned with risk – that is central to what probation is trying to achieve and important in terms of allocating resources. However, our participants felt that, as currently constituted, the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of risk and away from relational work.

Barriers to Hope

Despite the potential of hope to transform correctional practice, our analysis reveals a range of systemic and cultural barriers that inhibit its cultivation within probation. These barriers are embedded in the organisational structures, policy frameworks, and professional cultures that shape everyday supervision. Thus, reform will not be easy but we would argue that understanding these obstacles is essential for reimagining probation as a space where hope can be meaningfully enacted.

One of the most pervasive barriers is managerialism, which has reshaped probation into a performance-driven service focused on risk management and compliance. The most common theme across our interviews was participants describing a "tick-box culture" in which practitioners are

incentivised to meet targets rather than build relationships. This emphasis on technical compliance - attending appointments, completing assessments, avoiding breach - often comes at the expense of substantive engagement. As one practitioner noted, "It's not about what's meaningful, it's about what's measurable." It seemed to us that this shift has narrowed the scope of probation work, reducing opportunities for relational practice.

Closely linked to managerialism is the dominance of risk aversion in probation policy and practice. The prioritisation of public protection has led to increasingly rigid supervision regimes, where discretion is curtailed and practitioners are discouraged from taking relational or rehabilitative risks. Several participants spoke of a culture of fear. For practitioners, this was a fear of making mistakes, or of being blamed for serious further offences, whilst for people under supervision, there was a fear of being breached or recalled. This climate, we would argue, stifles innovation and undermines the trust and flexibility required to support hopeful change. For service users, this risk-focused approach translated into a perception that probation is all about surveillance and control, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Another significant barrier is resource scarcity, particularly in the wake of austerity and the erosion of community services. Practitioners described how the disappearance of local support networks such as housing, mental health, addiction services had left them with inadequate tools to respond to complex needs. As one participant put it, "All I can offer is contact - human contact - and even that's rationed." Without access to meaningful interventions, probation risks becoming a hollow institution, unable to support the structural conditions necessary for hope. For service users, this scarcity reinforces the sense that change is difficult and unsupported.

The emotional toll of probation work also emerged as a barrier to hopeful practice. Practitioners spoke of burnout, disillusionment, and the struggle to maintain belief in change amidst bureaucratic constraints. Some described coping strategies that involved distancing themselves from service users or avoiding deep engagement. Whilst these strategies are understandable, they risk further eroding the relational foundations of what we understand as good quality probation practice (Robinson et al., 2014). Meanwhile, service users described feeling dehumanised by the system, treated as risk categories rather than people with potential (Hannah-Moffat, 2005). This mutual disaffection seemed to create a cycle in which hope was being 'drowned out'.

Finally, institutional distrust was a recurring theme. Many service users expressed scepticism about probation's intentions, viewing it as punitive rather than supportive. This distrust was often rooted in past experiences of being let down, misrecognised, or sanctioned for what were perceived to be minor instances of non-compliance. In such contexts, expressing hope or imagining a better future felt risky. As one participant reflected, "Why would I share my hopes with someone who might use them against me?"

Together, these barriers illustrate the structural and cultural conditions that constrain hopeful practice in probation. They highlight the need for reform that goes beyond individual interventions and addresses the systemic logics that shape correctional work.

Enabling Hope

While probation systems often constrain hope through managerialism and risk aversion, our data also reveal pathways for cultivating hope. Enabling hope in correctional practice requires more than individual optimism which, in the words of Vaclav Havel is 'merely the conviction that something will turn out well'. Rather, our analysis suggests that it demands structural and cultural shifts that allow practitioners and service users to imagine and pursue better futures together. This section outlines the conditions and practices that support hopeful engagement in probation.

Central to enabling hope is a commitment to person-centred practice. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of being treated as individuals rather than risk categories. When practitioners took time to understand people's lives, aspirations, and challenges, service users reported feeling seen, heard, and valued. These interactions fostered trust and opened space for future-oriented thinking. One participant described how a probation officer asked what they wanted from supervision and helped them pursue a meaningful activity – importantly, this transformed their view of probation from punitive to supportive and this garnered a more hopeful outlook as well as more legitimacy in the eyes of the probationer. These small relational gestures were often described in terms that implied they were more meaningful than formal interventions.

We also identified discretion as a key enabler of hope. Practitioners who exercised professional judgement such as bending rules, prioritising relationships, or resisting bureaucratic pressures said they were more able to support service users in ways that standardised procedures could not. These acts of ethical refusal, while risky in managerial cultures, were described as expressions of critical hope: a refusal to accept the system's limitations as inevitable. Discretion allowed practitioners to respond to complexity, honour individual narratives, and support incremental progress. It also enabled them to challenge deficit-based framings and recognise the strengths and potential of those under supervision.

Co-production was also identified as a hopeful practice. When service users were involved in shaping their supervision plans, contributing to programme design, or advising on policy, they reported feeling empowered and respected. Co-production reframes probation as a collaborative endeavour rather than a top-down imposition. This form of practice aligns with collective hope by fostering shared ownership of change and recognising the expertise of lived experience. Participants argued that probation should routinely involve service users in decision-making, not only to improve outcomes but to restore dignity and legitimacy.

Beyond individual relationships, community-based models were seen as vital to enabling hope. Participants spoke positively about probation delivered through hubs, peer-led initiatives, and partnerships with local organisations. These settings offered holistic support, reduced isolation, and created opportunities for connection. They also allowed probation to be embedded in the communities it serves, rather than operating as a distant bureaucratic arm. Community engagement was described as generative in that it produces hope through shared imagination and collective action.

Finally, strengths-based approaches were repeatedly cited as essential. Rather than focusing solely on risk and deficits, practitioners who recognised and built on people's capacities were more likely to foster hope. This included celebrating small wins, encouraging creativity, and supporting personal



goals. Strengths-based practice aligns with the Good Lives Model (Ward et al., 2007) and other desistance-oriented frameworks, but participants stressed that it must be embedded in everyday interactions, not reserved for specialist programmes.

To sum up, enabling hope in probation requires a shift from surveillance to support. Whilst this has much in common with what McNeill (2006) has termed a desistance paradigm for probation practice, what we suggest here is more collaborative, is underpinned by principles of solidarity and has a keener eye on structural barriers to change than other models of practice have tended to have. Put simply, when viewed through the lens of hope, probation should not (just) be a mechanism of control, but a space where people can reconnect with possibility, purpose, and community.

Conclusion

This article has argued that hope should not be a peripheral concern in correctional practice but a central concept that shapes how probation is experienced, delivered, and understood. Drawing on empirical data and a range of conceptual frameworks, we have shown that hope in probation takes multiple forms such as institutional, transformational, radical, and collective. Each of these forms of hope reflect different orientations toward change and say something different about what probation is trying to achieve.

The empirical data make clear that hope is routinely constrained by the structural conditions of probation. Managerialism, risk aversion, resource scarcity, and cultures of fear and distrust all work to suppress hopeful practice. When probation is reduced to surveillance and technical compliance, it loses its capacity to support meaningful change.

To move forward, probation must be reimagined as a caring institution that enables human flourishing rather than simply managing risk. This means embedding hope structurally: through policy that prioritises rehabilitation, training that supports relational work, and investment in community-based resources that allow people to build lives beyond the system. In a correctional landscape often dominated by control, containment, and austerity, hope offers a counter-narrative that is rooted in ethics, possibility, and transformation. By taking hope seriously, probation can become more than just a mechanism of supervision and control.

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RACE, GENDER, AND THE REALITIES OF REENTRY: EQUITY-CENTERED INNOVATIONS FOR SUPPORTING RETURNING CITIZENS

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of race and gender as fundamental to reentry, drawing on Black feminist theory and new empirical research. The discussion identifies persistent barriers in employment, housing, health, and family life for Black men, Black women, and other marginalized groups. Key innovations, including trauma-informed care, peer mentorship, and equity-focused policy reform, are highlighted. Actionable recommendations support practitioners and policymakers in building collaborative, culturally responsive, and structurally transformative reentry systems. Centering equity and lived experience is essential for achieving justice and successful reintegration for all returning citizens.

Keywords: Reentry, Black feminist theory, intersectionality, equity-centered policy reform



Introduction

On any given day in the United States, more than 1.9 million people are held in jails and prisons. This figure highlights how incarceration remains deeply structured by longstanding racial and gender inequalities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2025; Prison Policy Initiative, 2025). Black Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites, and Black women also experience imprisonment at much higher rates compared to other groups (The Sentencing Project, 2023; Prison Policy Initiative, 2025). Together, these numbers reveal that hundreds of thousands of marginalized men and women are released each year, often returning home to face barriers that can disrupt family reunification and community ties (Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Reentry should not be viewed only as the conclusion of a sentence. Instead, it is a complex and prolonged process, often shaped by discrimination, trauma, and changing social expectations (Browning, Miller & Spruance, 2001; Collins, 2000; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020; Williams, 2019). Many in the field now recognize that typical programs, designed without attention to race and gender, often miss critical intersections, resulting in the significant needs and unique strengths of diverse groups being overlooked (Leverentz, 2014; Morash, 2010; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

This article draws on significant research, practitioner expertise, and the lived experiences of returning citizens to examine how race and gender shape reentry. By focusing on persistent barriers and recent innovations, it provides actionable lessons for practitioners, supporting the development of systems that ensure successful reintegration is possible for all.

Historical and Policy Context

The roots of contemporary reentry challenges are grounded in the rise of mass incarceration during the late twentieth century, shaped by punitive policies that disproportionately targeted communities of color and people living in poverty (Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2016; Middlemass, 2017). Historical analysis shows that as criminal justice shifted from social welfare to policing and sentencing, patterns of exclusion reflected and reproduced both racial and gender hierarchies (Hinton, 2016; Travis, 2005). Black feminist and intersectional scholarship has further underscored that these policy harms are never experienced in isolation. Black women, mothers, and LGBTQ+ individuals often encounter additional forms of surveillance and collateral damage (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Richie, 2012).

Beyond the individual, incarceration has reshaped family life and community structure. Researchers demonstrate that entire neighborhoods, especially those with concentrated disadvantage, bear the generational weight of disrupted family ties, reduced civic engagement, and diminished intergenerational mobility (Comfort, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Current reforms, including efforts at decarceration, have begun to address some of these imbalances. Yet, persistent disparities show that deeply embedded policies and social attitudes continue to make reentry significantly harder for Black men and women and for other marginalized groups (Western, 2018).

These historical trends remind us that effective reentry practice requires more than technical assistance. Practitioners and policymakers must recognize that each returning citizen's experience is shaped by these broader legacies, making equity a central concern for any agenda that aims to produce genuine reintegration and transformation.

Review of Key Evidence and Theoretical Approaches

Decades of research confirm that reentry is not a uniform experience. Outcomes are shaped by factors such as race, gender, family context, health status, and the broader social and legal structures that influence people's return home (Richie, 2012; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Black feminist analysis and intersectional theory encourage practitioners to acknowledge how multiple aspects of identity intersect to form patterns of disadvantage and resilience. Concepts such as "motherwork" and "spoiled identity" highlight the complex challenges that individuals face as parents and partners within the criminal legal system, drawing attention to the importance of context (Collins, 2000; Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Gurusami, 2019).

Reentry for Black women and men is frequently marked by concurrent struggles to secure employment, housing, and health care, while persistent stigma and extended surveillance from agencies and communities further complicate reintegration (Gurusami, 2019; Richie & Martensen, 2013; Pager, 2003; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Qualitative research shows that the experiences of mothers vary not only by gender or race, but also by geography and community context. For instance, Gurusami (2019) describes how formerly incarcerated Black women develop and employ collective, hypervigilant, and crisis-oriented strategies to maintain parenting roles amid systemic racism, supervision, and child welfare scrutiny. Easterling and Feldmeyer (2017) document that rural white mothers can encounter forms of stigma and spoiled identity as a result of their incarceration, with social exclusion becoming particularly acute in communities where such events are seen as a dramatic departure from the norm. At the same time, legal scholarship points out that courts and policies reinforce racialized and gendered ideals of motherhood, which complicate reentry and make family reunification more difficult (Roberts, 1995).

For fathers, reentry presents its own complex set of challenges. The child support system, as shown by Battle (2019), is a key site where policies and court practices often label non-custodial men, especially men of color, as "deadbeat dads." This labelling sharpens shame, creates feelings of exclusion, and complicates men's efforts to restore healthy family life and community engagement after incarceration.

A broad field of empirical studies indicates that discrimination, exclusionary policies, and limited culturally responsive support are persistent barriers for reentering individuals (Browning, Miller, & Spruance, 2001; Leverentz, 2014; Williams, Wilson & Bergeson, 2020). Black men often face economic insecurity and institutionalized racism, both of which undermine employment transitions and reinforce the strain of masculine identity after prison (Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019). For women, the process of coming home involves navigating histories of trauma, ongoing threats to family unity, and legal risks that put child custody in jeopardy (Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

Research demonstrates that the effects of these challenges are seldom contained to the individual. Longitudinal evidence shows the impact of exclusion and instability in reentry on children, families, and entire communities (Comfort, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010;). Programs and interventions closely aligned with lived experience and tailored to address race, gender, and context consistently yield better outcomes in health, employment, and reduced recidivism than generic models (Lattimore et al., 2010; Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008). Theoretical frameworks from Black feminist thought and



intersectionality continue to illuminate how overlapping systems of inequality shape the realities of reentry. These perspectives underscore the necessity for policies and interventions that are profoundly responsive to complexity and that transcend incremental changes to yield meaningful outcomes (Collins, 2000).

Realities of Reentry: Persistent Barriers

Employment Discrimination

Access to employment is one of the most significant hurdles for people returning from incarceration. Many individuals encounter outright discrimination during job searches, and background checks or licensing bans in specific industries systematically prevent people from accessing stable employment (Pager, 2003; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019). For Black men, these barriers are intensified by the intersection of racial discrimination and the stigma of a record, creating a persistent gap in both hiring and job retention. For women, particularly Black and Latina women, reentry into caregiving and service jobs remains tenuous as employers may doubt their trustworthiness or fitness for such roles (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019).

Housing Instability

Safe, affordable housing is a significant barrier. Formerly incarcerated people are often excluded from public housing, and private landlords regularly refuse to rent to individuals with convictions, leaving many homeless or reliant on unstable group living situations (Lee & Wildeman, 2021; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). Studies show that when people lack stable housing upon release, risks of recidivism and poor health outcomes increase significantly (Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008; Williams & Bergeson, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Mothers, particularly those seeking reunification with their children, face the additional burden of meeting stringent housing requirements set by child welfare agencies (Gurusami, 2019).

Health Challenges

Incarceration increases the prevalence of chronic disease, mental health disorders, and substance use issues among affected populations (Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008; Williams, Bergeson, & Wilson, 2020). Upon reentry, health insurance challenges and uncoordinated care often result in lapses in medication or therapy, with serious consequences for well-being. Black and Brown people face especially sharp health disparities, which are exacerbated by both systemic neglect and a lack of culturally competent services (Williams & Bergeson, 2019; Western, 2018).

Family and Community Strain

The disruption caused by incarceration reverberates through families. Children of incarcerated parents may be placed with relatives or in foster care, and family reunification is often slowed by poverty, unstable housing, and ongoing social service involvement (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Black mothers encounter deeply ingrained stereotypes about being neglectful or unfit, adding pressure and surveillance during reunification efforts (Gurusami, 2019; Roberts, 1995). Fathers face distinct challenges with child support and legal supervision, sometimes labeled “deadbeat dads” and cycled through punitive enforcement systems that do little to stabilize family bonds (Battle, 2019).

Systemic Policy Barriers

Many of the most enduring obstacles stem from policy and structural inequity. Restrictions on voting, ineligibility for government benefits, and limited professional or educational licensing opportunities create a civic landscape in which many returning citizens cannot achieve full participation (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2003; Richie, 2012). These collateral consequences intersect and compound, burdening individuals and communities and structuring a reality in which meaningful second chances remain elusive for Black and Brown communities most affected by mass incarceration.

Best Practices and Innovations

Culturally Responsive Services

Effective reentry programs prioritize culturally and gender-responsive care, tailoring approaches to the lived realities of returning citizens. The Women's Prison Association (WPA) in New York, for example, offers gender-specific trauma counseling, housing support, job training, and parenting assistance. WPA's approach emphasizes cultural humility, community engagement, and flexible case management, which is especially important for Black and Latina mothers who face layered surveillance from social services and legal systems (WPA, 2025; Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Pre-Release and Community-Based Support

Research demonstrates that reentry is most successful when services begin before release and follow participants into the community. The Fresh Start Program by STRIVE delivers intensive case management, one-on-one peer mentoring, and job placement with ongoing support during transition (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010; Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2013; STRIVE, 2024). The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) employs a transitional jobs approach, which includes immediate, paid work and personalized job coaching. Evaluations show that CEO participants are significantly more likely to find employment and reduce recidivism, with outcomes being strongest when support begins within three months of release (CEO, 2025; Pager, 2003; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

Family Reunification and Parenting Interventions

The Family Reunion Program in New York enables approved parents and children to spend extended, home-like visits together, supporting healthy bonds during reentry. Parenting Inside Out is an evidence-based curriculum implemented in prisons and communities, building parenting skills and supporting reunification for parents who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Family-centered transitional housing and kin contact support, highlighted in both the Milwaukee County Community Reintegration Center and national peer-mentoring models, also bolster reunification for mothers and fathers resuming caregiving roles (Browning, Miller & Spruance, 2001; Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Parenting Inside Out, 2024; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Advocacy and Systemic Change

Peer mentoring models, such as those developed by the Alliance for Community and Justice Innovation (ACJI), pair individuals with lived experience to support newly returning citizens, reduce isolation, and facilitate engagement with services (ACJI, 2024). Research by Sells et al. (2020) links this mentorship to improved employment, housing, and behavioral health outcomes. Large-scale system reforms, such as "ban the box," expungement initiatives, and expanded access to Pell



Grants, are advocated by coalitions like Reentry 2030. These efforts integrate practitioner insights, research, and the lived experience of returning citizens to address barriers across policy, housing, and employment landscapes (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002; Reentry 2030, 2025).

Collectively, these innovations demonstrate that reentry success relies on multisector partnerships and robust, evidence-based support. Centering the voices of returning citizens and responding directly to their intersecting challenges provides a foundation for lasting recovery and stronger, more inclusive communities.

Applied Policy and Practice Recommendations

Practitioners and policymakers must recognize that meaningful change in reentry practice starts with centering equity and intersectionality. Organizations should adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive service models. This includes ensuring that staff receive ongoing training in cultural humility and that program design is grounded in the realities of clients' racial, gendered, and family experiences (Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019; Morash, 2010; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Collaboration across fields is essential; correctional agencies, healthcare providers, housing authorities, and community-based organizations should work together in sustained partnerships to address the housing, behavioral health, and parenting needs of returning citizens (Lee & Wildeman, 202; Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2013).

Continuous data monitoring is critical. Agencies should track and publish outcomes disaggregated by race, gender, and geography. These outcomes should encompass not only recidivism but also housing stability, employment quality, health improvements, and family reunification. Staff training must be ongoing, clearly tied to client feedback, and paired with evaluation tools that use both quantitative and qualitative research to assess gaps and highlight innovative solutions (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019).

Advocacy to remove structural barriers remains vital. Practitioners can partner with legal, housing, and employment advocacy groups to advocate for expanded expungement opportunities, fair hiring legislation, increased access to public housing, and policy changes that facilitate reunification and mobility for parents (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002; WPA, 2025). Reentry programs should also make a formal commitment to integrating peer mentorship, drawing on the expertise of formerly incarcerated individuals to provide practical guidance and hope (Battle, 2019; CEO, 2025; Sells et al., 2020).

Above all, agency leadership and frontline practitioners should prioritize the input and agency of returning citizens. This involves creating formal structures for participant leadership, using flexible service models, and building intentional coalitions informed by the latest research. This collaborative and responsive approach is necessary for closing equity gaps, transforming systems, and building healthier communities.

Conclusion

Reentry remains a central challenge in the criminal justice system and a defining issue for communities that are disproportionately affected by incarceration. Current research and practice show that successful reintegration requires a strong commitment to racial and gender equity, trauma-

informed care, and culturally responsive programming. The barriers faced by Black men, Black women, and other marginalized groups are complex and deeply rooted in policy, history, and social attitudes (Gurusami, 2019; Pager, 2003; Williams, Spencer, & Wilson, 2020;).

Practitioner innovations and collaborative models demonstrate that real progress is attainable. When agencies focus on providing tailored supports, fostering community partnerships, promoting client involvement, and advocating for reform, they help enable real change for individuals and families. These approaches point to new possibilities for closing equity gaps and building communities where returning citizens can reclaim agency and begin to heal and thrive.

The need for change is urgent, and sustained action is necessary. Integrating evidence-based practices, supporting policy transformation, and centering lived experience ensure that the promise of meaningful second chances becomes a reality. Equity-focused reentry is essential for genuine justice and for the health and well-being of communities everywhere.

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Williams has published widely on intersectionality, race, and social justice, co-editing key works such as *Black Males and the Criminal Justice System*, *Abolish Criminology*, and *Survivor Criminology*. His fieldwork includes studies in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, where he examined the relationship between police institutions and Black communities following nationally significant cases of police violence.

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Recognized as a national voice on justice reform, Williams has been quoted in major news outlets including the New York Times, Newsweek, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and NJ.com. His ongoing scholarship seeks to reimagine the meaning of justice by centering equity, community healing, and the lived knowledge of those most directly affected by state and structural violence.



ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

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REHABILITATION

LIFE SKILLS, PURPOSE, AND HOPE: MAKING RE-ENTRY SUCCESSFUL

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Abstract

The Uganda Prisons Service oversee 269 prisons within the country. The prisons, although housed in a Low-Income-Country, are structured to provide opportunities for prisoners to grow, learn skills, and prepare to re-enter society as law abiding contributing members of their communities. In the current article, we speak to how the service accomplishes their objective, highlighting their low recidivism rate of 13.4% in 2025, the diverse programs offered, and how these programs are enacted. We then explain how it is possible to do more with less resources and tight budgets, highlighting how the service invests in all the available human resources – including people who are incarcerated – to give all value, purpose, and hope.

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Introduction

The recidivism rate in Uganda is low, among the lowest in the world, with a rate of 13.4% (Nsimenta, 2025). Many may believe the rate is due to the conditions of confinement deterring recidivism, given overcrowding is over 360%, sleeping is restrictive in space, and the food never changes as those incarcerated eat the same simple meal twice a day, every day, all year (Mbandlwa, 2024). Despite challenging conditions, as we evidence, recidivism is low in Uganda for many progressive reasons, ranging from the life skills learned, to the discipline, to the educational opportunities, to rehabilitative initiatives, to the relationships emergent between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, and, perhaps most predominantly, due to how prisoners have purpose in prison, which equates to hope. In the current article, we speak to how the Ugandan Prisons Service (UPS) prepares those incarcerated for their return to society as law-abiding productive civilians and provide considerations for how all prison/correctional services internationally can best serve those incarcerated, recognizing how doing so further supports all staff.

Literature Review and Context

UPS is responsible for 269 prisons across 19 regions in Uganda (see: <https://www.ugandaprisons.go.ug> for the service's history). There are, as of January of 2025, 78,700 prisoners, 14,021 staff, and many babies in the prisons for women. For example, at the women's facility in the Kampala Extra Region, in November of 2025, there were 52 babies housed with their mothers. Of the prisoners, 51.8% are convicted, 47.4 are remanded into custody, and 0.8% are debtors (i.e., owing money) (data drawn from unpublished statistics from UPS). Further, staff live in barracks with their families on prison campuses, which are very modest (i.e., one room, 3 meters squared in size for Junior Ranking Officers). Conditions of confinement are strained due to overcrowding, for instance, the wards are overpopulated leaving little room for sleeping (i.e., each male prisoner has 45 inches squared to sleep). The mothers sleep with their babies, and women share bunk beds, sometimes three to a bunk. Yet, prison is far from what these conditions would suggest. Rather conditions being the "reason" or the "deterrent for returning to prison" resulting in a recidivism rate of 13.4%, perhaps the low rate is a consequence of how UPS invests in life skills and empowers prisoners and staff to grow, to have purpose, and to learn. Indeed, literature long supports how deprivations and harsh punishments do not deter crime (Chau, 2010; De Courson & Nettle, 2021; Kawachi et al., 1999; Lippke, 2011; Tullock, 1974). Further, conditions in UPS are not the consequence of deprivations or punitive orientations, they are because Uganda is a Low-Income Country (LIC), among the lowest of LICs in the world, thus, they do their best with the resources they have.

Admission with Purpose

At admission, when being received in a UPS facility, prisoners are not just assessed for risk and needs. Beyond medical testing for infectious disease, they are asked about their history, their skills, their criminality too, but the focus on is who they are – who they were prior to their incarceration and what they did as (or if) a contributing member of society. The prisoners are told they will be safe, and the prison will be their home. They are directed toward positions in the prison – basically, whatever their occupation was on the outside, they will do the same inside. And if they are with limited skills or occupational experience, they can acquire education and skills inside.

Using education as an example of giving prisoners purpose, we note how there are schools within prisons. Although the Head Instructor is a staff member, the principal and teachers are all prisoners—

the importation of the prisoners' skills and who they were - their person - into the prison. Here, qualified prisoners serve as teachers (given staff shortages), who are to prioritize their teaching during their incarceration. The schooling available starts at primary one, with many prisoners going home with diplomas to their name. Select educational opportunities, beyond a high school diploma, are limited to convicted long-term prisoners (as time is required for completion). For example, post-secondary education is offered at the Kampala Extra Region (i.e., the Luzira prisons complex), thus the Mbarara Prison Complex offers classes from primary one to senior six, then interested prisoners are transferred to the Luzira Complex for postsecondary education. To highlight, at the "Mbarara Main Prison Inmates Schools", a whiteboard on the wall baring the aforementioned schools' names outlines the school's objectives in stating:

Motto: Education for self-rehabilitation and social transformation.

Vision: The best responsive and rehabilitative inmate education in Africa.

Mission: To provide a holistic and rehabilitative inmate education that enhances social re-integration and contributes toward reduction in recidivism.

Further, agreements are in place with at least one university in Uganda for prisoners to acquire certificates, diplomas, or a degree. Further, there is an agreement with the University of London that enables prisoners, with interest, to acquire a Law Degree. Thus, education is largely run by prisoners, for prisoners, with many graduates and advanced degrees being achievable and this model is widespread across the many opportunities available at UPS for skill development and growth, some of which we now turn to discuss.

Opportunities

Rehabilitative opportunities are ingrained in the UPS mission, "to contribute to the protection and development of society by providing safe, secure, and humane custody of prisoners while placing human rights at the centre of their correctional programs," and goal, "... the transformation of every prisoner into a responsible, law-abiding, and economically productive citizen" (see: www.ugandaprisonsgo.ug). Thus, there is a focus on vocational training that draws on life skills to support rehabilitation and reintegration success for people incarcerated. The intention is to "transform" prisoners into "productive" citizens through "programming" while overcoming the challenges plaguing the service, like overcrowding, infectious disease, etc. To demonstrate, we outline select programs below, beyond the skills prisoners bring into prison, to evidence skills that can be acquired in prison. There are many more opportunities for skill development than those noted, from basket weaving, to cooking, to intelligence provision, positions of leadership (i.e., ward leader), even security roles. The consistent element to all programs and opportunities is how, beyond skills being transferrable when a prisoner leaves prison, they also provide prisoners with funds and, where possible, start-up supports (i.e., seeds, a sewing machine). Thus, what starts in prison continues post-release. In addition, prisoners are supported by a rehabilitation and reintegration officer, whose role is to connect prisoners with relatives to maintain their supports in the community and connection in preparation for their eventual release and to help them be accepted back into their community or society more broadly.

Agriculture and Livestock. The agricultural programs train and involve prisoners in the production of food, including vegetables, maize, sunflower, cotton, etc., while also teaching seed multiplication production at prison farms. The livestock program trains prisoners in rearing and managing animal



farms, including cattle rearing and piggery, included is developing an understanding of how manure supports agricultural. Further, these programs prepare prisoners to engage in subsistence farming, which is a pathway to sustainable living at re-entry that also supports the Ugandan economy.

Carpentry. The opportunities to learn carpentry and joinery at UPS are extensive. Prisoners make furniture (i.e., tables, chairs, beds, shelves), a lot of which is used in UPS offices and schools. Further, they make furnishings (i.e., pews, alters) for churches and other establishments, with a store front in Kampala where furniture for residential and commercial use is available for purchase or order. The furniture is sold to others as an earning opportunity for prisoners and UPS, thus supporting economic development.

Tailoring and Shoemaking. Prisoners can learn both tailoring and shoemaking in all UPS prisons, with the Luzira Prisons Complex housing the largest program with the most equipment. Prisoners tailor all uniforms and craft all shoes worn by prisoners and staff. Shoes and leather products are also sold to citizens. However, these activities do not occur in sweatshop type facilities, instead they happen around tables often in open courtyards. The skills support prisoners, including with funds post-release, and provide cost saving to UPS. Although there remains a need for more tailoring machines in UPS prisons, a skilled prisoners may be given sewing machines to use as start-up capital at release.

Counseling Services: Provided and Received. Counseling services are available to support prisoners (and staff) with mental health needs, life needs, and even to process their living conditions or health diagnosis. Both staff and prisoners offer and receive counseling services from both prisoners and staff. Prisoner with tenure inside also provide help to new prisoners as mentors while they assimilate into the prison society. Prisoners skilled and interest in counseling can acquire a counseling certificate from Makerere University.

Religious Services. Prisoners, staff, and visitors, from all dominations, lead and/or receive religious prayers and services. In some prisons, unique praying spaces exist for different faiths (i.e., Church of Uganda, Catholicism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Pentecostalism, Muslim, Hindu). Spirituality is ingrained in Ugandan culture and practice, thus provides comfort and guidance for pro-social living as a law-abiding citizen. Associated with religious services is also music, which also occurs independently with song, dance, blowing, etc.

Waste management. As a valued skill in Uganda, prisoners are trained in waste management to reduce the volume of accumulated waste via sorting, etc. Reusable waste is repurposed into resources such as animal feeds and brockets as a source of energy.

Salon. Hairstyling and barbering are essential skills, which enable talented stylists and barbers to earn a living post release in any community. Hair styling and barbering also help prisoners feel presentable and confident in their appearance.

Sport. Sport, games, and exercise are used to keep prisoners fit, healthy, and to occupy their minds. Sports are not simply afternoon causal exchanges. Instead, there are different leagues in which prisoners can participate (some they must try out for to be on a team) with tournaments. For example, at Mbarara Main Prison, an institution that houses men, there is a 14-team football league. The league

is run by a president, prisoners try out for the teams, of which 12 teams are healthy prisoners, one team is composed of prisoners with health conditions, and one team is staff. These teams compete in three tournaments a year (i.e., Easter Cup). The football is competitive and entertaining, while teaching sportsmanship and teamwork.

Practices, Policies, Considerations, and Future Research

Uganda is an LIC. Our central takeaway—our core message—here, is that no matter what a prison service has for resources much can be done because the most valuable resources present are the humans, those incarcerated and those working within the facilities. Thus, UPS invests in their people, all their people. They do much with very little, thus making the most of all they have. The process of giving prisoners responsibilities, even those equivalent to what they did on the outside, is an act of humanity, providing people with purpose and thus hope throughout their incarceration. This process also supports staff, who do not see people simply sitting and suffering. They see prisoners engaged, proud of their accomplishments, and advancing. Knowledge and skills remain the only attributes prison can never strip away, and UPS embraces and empowers people through education and opportunities.

Further, how these activities are accomplished and learned is not through hardship, chains, or punitive expectations. It is not uncommon to see a group of men laughing around a table in the sun crafting shoes, or people enjoying the salon, or in large room doing carpentry. A walk across a courtyard, if a visitor was to show interest in the weaving, would have different men bringing selected baskets, the ones they are most proud of, to demonstrate their craft and handiwork. There is pride. Staff take pride too. The football games are competitive, and one easily witnesses heated moments become deflated and teamliness thrive. The audience enjoys the game, likely as much as the players, and the coaches and president are always present. The prisoner teams will also play against the staff team, and the staff team will play teams external to the service (i.e., the military team). The staff and prisoners are not in opposition. The staff are helped and support by prisoners to manage the staffing crisis which is only exacerbated by overcrowding. The prisoners are viewed as people with purpose and abilities and called upon to maintain order and structure. The result is very low incidents of violence in Ugandan prisons, much desistance, and low recidivism.

After a sentence is complete, given the UPS does not have a parole or probation structure, former prisoners, now civilians, can and often do return to the prisons to continue to support those inside. In our experience, a former prisoner attended an event at a prison complex just recently where all three authors were involved. The individual was welcomed by all. He was now a civilian and respected as such, the visit even provided a serendipitous opportunity to reconnect with a staff member, a prison officer, who addressed him as “my son” and was instrumental during the former prisoners early days of remand for helping him assimilate. Such experiences may be unheard of in the North or West, despite how instrumental they are in rehabilitation. Former prisoners staying in contact with different staff post release is not uncommon in Uganda. All of these examples show humanity, even if the Mandela Rules are not yet fully enacted, and ensure a prisoner is always a citizen and person in their own right too. A person first, a prisoner last.

Thus, any service, no matter what the budget, the fiscal constraints, the challenges, can do more with less. To start, services can recognize the human resources – all of them. Give the prisoners roles and

purpose. Provide structures where they are responsible for their home – the prison at present is their home, thus treat and perceive the prison as such. Provide ways for prisoners to support each other, meet each other's needs, and to support staff, to remedy select challenges arising from overcrowding and staff retention (and recruitment) challenges. By making the most of what is available, giving prisoners responsibility, and they become a functioning society and learn the discipline associated with pro-social living as a contributing member of society. Purpose deters from acts of violence, reduces the aggression that results from frustration of having little to do or having a small window of time compromised by lockdowns or other complications. Further, investing in all within the prison provides opportunities for people to grow and development, to discover elements and skills within themselves they did not know were even possible. Doing so ensures pride, self-confidence, and encourages, even supports, re-entry success.

Conclusion

We need more research in the global south, and particularly in LICs, to infuse into international knowledge about diverse processes that “work” for prison services. There is empowerment in learning how to do more with less, and in ensuring people re-entering society are best equipped to do so, always feeling personally fulfilled by their achievements. Life skills cannot be unlearned, and empowering individuals in prison with skills provides opportunities post-release as well as when inside. Further, recognizing a prisoner as a person is the embodiment of humanity, it provides prisoners with purpose, and doing so gives hope and supports staff and prisoners alike.

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**IS REHABILITATION A HABIT OF THE HEART?
PUBLIC OPINION AS CORRECTIONAL CULTURAL CAPITAL**

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Abstract

Rehabilitation is an American habit of the heart—a core cultural orientation that has existed since the founding of the penitentiary in the 1820s. Using an autobiographical approach, we confirm this thesis by citing surveys we conducted from 1979 to the present. Although punitive, the public supports rehabilitation as an important goal of prisons, favors programming for criminals, and universally approves of treatment for juvenile offenders and early intervention for at-risk youths. They also endorse policies to include, rather than exclude, offenders from the community (e.g., rehabilitation ceremonies, expunging criminal records, reducing collateral consequences). This habit of the heart is a significant cultural resource for practitioners and policy reformers who can use public opinion to justify offender treatment as democracy at work.

Keywords: correctional policy, Cullen and Jonson, habit of the heart, public opinion, rehabilitation

This essay makes a simple but profound point: Americans support rehabilitation. They always have, and they always will. Tellingly, the inventors of incarceration in the 1820s called their new institutions “penitentiaries,” not prisons (Rothman, 1971). In the face of social Darwinism and claims that a dangerous class of immigrants threatened the nation at the turn of the 20th century, Progressives designed a justice system that embraced the rehabilitative ideal, not incapacitation (Platt, 1969; Rothman, 1980). After World War II, optimism abounded as reformers labeled their work “corrections” and their facilities “correctional institutions” (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). To be sure, rehabilitation was critiqued and often pushed aside as a penal harm movement subsequently gripped every state in the nation, yielding mass incarceration that flourished from 1975 to 2010 (Cullen, 2022; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Zimring & Hawkins, 1991). Still, though powerful, this punitive thinking and practice were not hegemonic (Listwan et al., 2008). Criminologists fought valiantly against them (Cullen, 2005). And let’s not forget that Canadian psychologists—such as Don Andrews, James Bonta, and Paul Gendreau, to name but a few—documented that treatment worked and developed the RNR model that shaped correctional practice in the United States and beyond (Andrews et al., 1990; Bonta & Andrews, 2024; see also Cullen, 2013).

More than this, commentators mistakenly assumed that the growth of punitiveness in the United States meant that rehabilitation was “dead” (Allen, 1981; Cullen et al., 1988). It was not. For more than four decades, virtually every public opinion poll showed that Americans can walk and chew gum at the same time: They want to punish the wicked *and* to save the wayward. Even in the most punitive of times, Americans in poll after poll expressed support for treating offenders. This empirical reality leads us to conclude that *rehabilitation is a habit of the heart*.

First used by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1835-1840/1969), this concept was popularized by Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985) in their classic sociological treatise carrying the title, *Habits of the Heart*. Both de Tocqueville and Bellah et al. were searching for answers to the same questions: “How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live? Who are we, as Americans?” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. vii). Their challenge was to capture the essence of the nation’s character: What is it that makes us distinct? These core, immutable beliefs and orientations, which are expressed in opinion and behavior daily, are our “habits of the heart.” De Tocqueville and Bellah et al. identified individualism as the dominant national habit. Rehabilitation is a habit of this sort as well because a large swath of Americans believes in “corrections”—that offenders are redeemable and thus that it is important for the state to provide treatment opportunities. Put succinctly: It is un-American to be against rehabilitation.

Because this issue has defined our careers (especially that of Cullen), we will tell the correctional habit-of-the-heart story through the conduit of autobiography. Cullen entered graduate school in 1972 and took his first job at Western Illinois University in 1976. By historical accident, his career intersected with the attack on the rehabilitative ideal, Martinson’s (1974) nothing works claim, and prolonged mass incarceration (for a personal account, see Cullen, 2013). Jonson came to the University of Cincinnati to study with Cullen and received her doctoral degree in 2010. Since that time, they have collaborated extensively (having nearly 70 works in print), with Cullen now serving as Tonto to her Lone Ranger or as Robin to her Batwoman.

The autobiographical lens means that we will focus on our publications. However, the conclusions



we draw from our writings are supported by extensive reviews of extant public opinion studies (see Cullen et al., 2000; Jonson et al., 2025; Jonson et al., 2013; Siegal et al., 2016). A quick Google search will reveal contemporary studies, often using national samples, confirming our thesis (see, e.g., Blizzard, 2018; BSG, 2024). We will cite one example. A Marquette Law School Poll reported that 74.1% of Wisconsin voters stated that “rehabilitating offenders and helping them to become contributing members of society” was “very important” or “absolutely essential” (O’Hear & Wheelock, 2016, p. 48). The percentage was higher for Democrats (83%) but still high for Republicans (72%).

Finally, this essay is jointly written. For convenience and to retain an autobiographical focus, we use the first person when describing the contributions of Cullen. Our story starts with his early involvement in the issue of rehabilitation, which occurred many years before Jonson entered academia and their collaboration emerged.

Two Challenges

Early in my (Cullen’s) career, remaining a treatment advocate faced two daunting claims: (1) Rehabilitation did not work, and (2) rehabilitation was anti-democratic because the public wanted to get tough with crime. As noted, the Canadians were instrumental in delegitimizing Martinson’s (1974) nothing works doctrine (see also Palmer, 1975). Gendreau and Ross’s (1979) “bibliotherapy for cynics” article provided solid evidence that treatment programs were effective (see also Gendreau & Ross, 1987). A 1990 meta-analysis by Andrews et al. published in *Criminology*—of which I was a coauthor—further demonstrated that interventions worked that complied with principles of effective intervention (see also Bonta & Andrews, 2024). Google Scholar reports this article has been cited more than 4,100 times, making it one of the most cited publications in the history of the field. Mark Lipsey chipped in with his meta-analyses revealing the poverty of nothing works thinking (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Equally important, scholars held punitive programs and sanctions to the same empirical standard. Did they work? No, they did not. Whether it was boot camps, intensive supervision community probation, or scared straight programs, the results were dismal (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Cullen et al., 1996). Jonson played an important role in discrediting the punishment response with her 2010 dissertation—a meta-analysis showing the null or criminogenic effects of custodial sanctions. Her writings with Daniel Nagin and me publicized and extended these findings (Cullen et al., 2011; Nagin et al., 2009). More recently, she joined with my research team to confirm these results with an updated meta-analysis (Petrich et al., 2021).

My (Cullen’s) role was more prominent in addressing the second challenge: Using survey data to demonstrate that the American public endorsed rehabilitation. The first step was to admit the obvious: As my career unfolded in the last quarter of the 20th century, the public was becoming more punitive and policies reflected these sentiments (Cullen et al., 2000; Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019). For example, Gallup historical data show that in 1966, more Americans opposed (45%) than favored (43%) the “death penalty for a person convicted of murder.” By the mid-1970s, however, a sea change had occurred: Those favoring capital punishment had risen to 66%. This figure would reach 80% in 1994, before plummeting to 53% today (Brenan, 2023; “Death Penalty,” 2025; Hannan et al., 2023). Similar trends pertain to the percentage of the public favoring harsher courts (Hannan et al., 2023). But again, advocating that criminals be punished did not blind people to the wisdom of rehabilitating offenders following their conviction. This sentiment was the habit of the heart—an ingrained cultural belief

in reforming offenders that could withstand even a five-decade get-tough movement. My job was to produce evidence that this was the case.

I started this mission in 1979. While at Columbia University, I wrote a theoretical dissertation under Richard Cloward. The good news was that I learned to think and this work was later published as a book (Cullen, 1984). The bad news was that my empirical skills were amateurish, as my early research showed. Self-financing a mail survey, I polled 200 residents of nearby Springfield, Illinois. Only 74 responded, making a definitive study impossible. I doubt any reputable journals would have been anxious to publish the survey's findings, but I had a good place to report them: my book, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Cullen & Gilbert, 1982, Table 7.1). The results were instructive. Almost 9 in 10 respondents agreed that "criminals deserve to be punished because they have harmed society" (p. 259). Americans were punitive. But 9 in 10 also believed "that criminals should be given the chance to be rehabilitated," and 3 in 4 stated that "rehabilitating a criminal is just as important as making a criminal pay for his or her crime" (p. 259). These findings were not a methodological artifact of a small convenience sample. They captured an empirical reality that would be repeated in future surveys, including those today.

My next enterprise, with Greg Clark and John Wozniak, was to analyze high-quality data—the "Texas Poll" that surveyed samples of 1,000 to 2,000 multiple times between 1977 and 1982 (Cullen et al., 1985). I would engage in a similar study, with the same results, many years later, entitled "Rehabilitation in a Red State" (see Thielo et al., 2016). In the late 1970s, more than 80% of Texans favored capital punishment and about three fourths felt the courts were "too easy." Not too surprising. But rehabilitation was also a habit of their heart. About 8 in 10 stated that rehabilitation was a "very important" function of prison and of community corrections. The surveys also asked about specific programs—employment assistance, education, vocational, and counseling and psychological counseling. Nearly 9 in 10 Texans believed that these interventions were "very important" or "important" (Cullen et al., 1985, p. 20, Tables 3 and 4).

In my final year in Macomb at Western Illinois University—the Spring of 1982—I undertook another self-financed study, this one up the road in Galesburg. Recall that Illinois was a Republican state at this time (Jim Thompson was governor), and the rural counties in west central Illinois were not liberal oases (as was Boston, my hometown). Was rehabilitation a habit of the heart even in the midst of cornfields? It was. For this project, I had the good sense to read Don Dillman's (1978) classic book on surveys and to follow his "total design method" (as I would do on subsequent surveys). The response rate was 73% ($n = 156$). The results did not change. Punitive sentiments were revealed in responses to 13 "punishment items," but support for offender treatment was manifested in responses to 19 "rehabilitation items." The respondents rejected the idea rehabilitation "does not work" and had allowed criminals "who deserved to be punished to get off easily." Eight in 10 stated that prisoners should be given a "chance to be rehabilitated" (Cullen et al., 1988, pp. 307–308, Table 1).

When I moved to the University of Cincinnati, I also moved my research site from rural Illinois to urban Ohio. With graduate students who would become major scholars and academic administrators, I conducted three such surveys: (1) a 1986 survey of Hamilton County (Cincinnati) and Franklin County (Columbus) (Cullen et al., 1990); (2) a 1995 replication of the Hamilton County study (Sundt et al., 1998); and (3) a 1996 survey of Ohio (Applegate et al., 1997). Support for rehabilitation was very high in the



1986 study in both Cincinnati and Columbus, but a decade later had fallen noticeably when Cincinnati area residents were surveyed. Support for treatment was still manifest (e.g., a majority favored expanding prison programs and thought that rehabilitation was “helpful” for nonviolent and juvenile offenders) (Sundt et al., 1998, p. 437, Table 4), but the downward trend troubled me. Were these results outliers or a harbinger of things to come? Perhaps they were due to the fact that Hamilton County was a Republican stronghold. But another possibility existed: Might the get-tough movement have finally taken its toll? Was support for rehabilitation weakening? No, it was not.

The 1996 state of Ohio survey allayed my concerns. Led by Brandon Applegate, this survey used three different types of questions to probe support for rehabilitation: (1) the public’s preferred emphasis or goal of prisons; (2) 10 policy statements; and (3) support for treatment when judging a factorial vignette (Applegate et al., 1997). In each domain, support for rehabilitation was strong. Some examples: When asked what “should be the main emphasis in most prisons,” rehabilitation (41.1%) was chosen ahead of “protect society” (31.9%) and “punish” (20.3%); 82% also rated rehabilitation as a “very important” or “important” goal of prisons. More than 8 in 10 respondents agreed that adult offenders in the correctional system should be rehabilitated. And nearly 9 in 10 in the factorial survey stated that they supported “the use of rehabilitation with Gary/Lisa” (Applegate et al., 1997, pp. 245–248, Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

My run of studies concluded with a 2001 national poll (n = 349) (Cullen et al., 2002). The verdict, so to speak, was clear: The American public strongly endorsed offender treatment. Once again, the respondents believed that rehabilitation (55%), not protect society (25%) or punishment (14%), should be the “main emphasis” of prison. And 87% stated that rehabilitation was “very important” or “important.” Ten Likert-type items were rated. Support for treatment was high, with the public stating that it was a “good idea” to provide treatment for offenders who are in prison” (92%) and “who are supervised by the courts and live in the community” (88%) (Cullen et al., 2002, pp. 136–137, Tables 7.2 and 7.3).

One other feature about this national study merits notice: Support for juvenile rehabilitation and for early intervention for at-risk youngsters was virtually universal. Saving kids is indisputably a habit of the heart (see Cullen et al., 2007). Thus, when asked about the goals of juvenile prisons, 97% of the sample stated that rehabilitation was important. On what should be the main emphasis of prisons in a forced-choice question, 80% of the sample chose rehabilitation versus protect society (8%) and punishment (8%). Seven questions were asked about intervening with parents, with Head Start, and in schools. Nine in 10 Americans favored these programs (Cullen et al., 2002, pp. 138–139, Tables 7.4 and 7.5).

These results are not idiosyncratic. In studies that contain items comparing results by offenders’ age, support for juvenile rehabilitation is always much higher than for adults (Applegate et al. 1997; Cullen et al., 1990). A number of my coauthored surveys, conducted in individual states over three decades, show pronounced advocacy for both the reform of young offenders and for early intervention to prevent crime (Applegate et al., 2009; Cullen et al., 1983; Cullen et al., 1998; Moon et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2003; Piquero et al., 2010). Let me share just three illuminating findings. First, in a 1998 Tennessee study, 1 in 10 respondents (11.8%) reported volunteering for a program for at-risk youths and one third (33.7%) would consider doing so. This same sample supported a range of intervention

programs (Moon et al., 2003). Second, in another Tennessee study in 1997, three fourths of the sample preferred to spend tax dollars on identifying at-risk youths and rehabilitating them versus one fourth on building more prisons (Cullen et al., 1998). Third, in a 2005 Pennsylvania survey, three fourths of the respondents answered “true,” as opposed to “false,” to these two statements: (1) “Juvenile offenders can benefit more from rehabilitative treatment than adult offenders” (77.2%); and (2) “Juvenile offenders are more likely to become adult criminals if they are sent to jail than if they get rehabilitation in juvenile facilities” (74.2%) (Piquero et al., 2010, p. 295, Table 1).

For the first three decades of my career, I probed public support for rehabilitation in the bleakest years of the get-tough mass incarceration movement. Even when punitive sentiments skyrocketed (Enns, 2016), my coauthored surveys repeatedly showed that Americans supported rehabilitation, especially for wayward children but for adults in prison as well. These findings persist today (see Siegel, 2016). In fact, my recent surveys, many with Cheryl Jonson, reveal the power of this habit of the heart to endorse a range of policy initiatives seeking to reform and extend human dignity to offenders. We consider this research next.

A New Sensibility

In 2009–2010, state and federal prisons populations—for the first time in nearly 40 years—stopped growing. The mass incarceration era was over, not just because the number of people behind bars shrunk but because public punitiveness declined precipitously and a “new sensibility” emerged favoring more progressive policies (Burton et al., 2025; Cullen, 2022; Cullen et al., 2023; Hannan et al., 2023; Jonson et al., 2025; Petersilia & Cullen, 2015; Pickett, 2019). These developments are all consistent with advancing the rehabilitative ideal.

Thanks to Angela Thielo (2017), my then-doctoral student who alerted me to the survey company YouGov, I abandoned Dillman’s total design method. I did not miss stuffing envelopes and licking stamps, tasks essential to hard-copy mail surveys! It was a luxury to hire YouGov to field methodologically elite opt-in surveys designed by my research team (Graham et al., 2021). Notably, in a 2017 YouGov survey ($n = 1,000$), Thielo et al. (2019) confirmed findings from earlier studies (reviewed above). The stability in support for rehabilitation—regardless of time period, survey method, or quality of sample—was remarkable. Thus, two thirds of the respondents (65.8%) stated that rehabilitation should be the main emphasis of prisons or was the second most important goal (p. 9, Table 1) (see also Sundt et al., 2015). More striking, almost 9 in 10 respondents (88.7%) agreed that it was “a good idea to provide treatment” to offenders under community supervision. Furthermore, 72.4% agreed that “rehabilitation programs should be available even for offenders who have been involved in a lot of crime” (Thielo et al., 2019, p. 10, Table 2).

Using national YouGov samples (mostly), we also found widespread belief in the redeemability of offenders, including Black individuals convicted of crime and/or in prison (Burton, Cullen, et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2023). The data also revealed strong public support for justice policies aimed at including, rather than excluding, offenders from the community: rehabilitation ceremonies (Butler et al., 2020); reducing collateral consequences (Burton, Burton, et al., 2020); expunging criminal records (Burton et al., 2021); providing problem-solving courts for people with special needs (e.g., addiction, mental health) (Thielo et al., 2019); and giving those serving long sentences for serious crime, who manifest



reform, a “second look” in which judges can reduce time in prison (Hannan et al., 2023; Smith, Cullen, et al., 2025). Relatedly, Americans favor extending reproductive rights, including access to abortion, to women imprisoned in states that ban abortion (Smith, Graham, et al., 2025).

Conclusion: Rehabilitation as Correctional Cultural Capital

We live in an age of public opinion polls (Igo, 2007). For practitioners and policymakers seeking to reform corrections and intervene more effectively with clientele, it helps to have the public on your side. In fact, they are. Although punitive to a degree and concerned about public safety, Americans are open to virtually any reasonable policy that offers offenders the chance to earn redemption. Rehabilitation is a habit of the heart that is universally available to be evoked. Phrased differently, it is correctional cultural capital that can be used to justify progressive policy and practices as democracy at work. The American public wants its justice system to be more than a machine that inflicts pain and suffering. As reformers have argued for 200 years, our task at hand is more ambitious; it always involves saving the wayward.

Appealing to the public will—to democracy—is both an honest and shrewd rationale for implementing correctional reform. In most instances, making a case for an initiative rests on a three-legged stool, two of which are showing that the initiative works (reduces offending) and is cost-effective. The third leg is that the intervention is supported by the public. Opponents of change are at a decided disadvantage when advocates can cite polls revealing strong public backing. This essay’s value is in alerting its audience to the enduring progressive orientation of Americans—something unlikely to change in the future (Lee et al. 2022). Just remember: Rehabilitation is a habit of the heart.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest to declare.

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PUNISHMENT THAT STILL WORKS? NORWAY'S CHALLENGING AND CHANGING CORRECTIONAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

Whilst often seen as a penal role model, Norway's correctional landscape is undergoing significant changes and faces some major challenges. This article gives an overview of these challenges and changes, using a newly-published policy document entitled *Punishment that works—implementing sentences for a safer Norway* to illustrate some key aspects of contemporary correctional practice around resourcing, sentence content, staffing levels and expertise, geographical coverage, mental health, and gender. The article concludes with two specific lessons regarding use of electronic monitoring and correctional salaries, as well as an overarching observation that practical issues like competitive salary and appropriate staffing are closely bound up in the cultural aspects of empathic and understanding leadership, respect for others, and knowledge-based practice.

Keywords: Norway; penal policy; correctional practice; electronic monitoring; mental health

Introduction

Norway has long been a reference point for people interested in improving correctional practice. Even as far back as 1901, it was observed that Norway's new penal code had "attracted a lot of attention far beyond our country's borders, and the general consensus seems to be that it's a reform effort so grand in its design and so solid in its implementation that no contemporary equivalent from any other country can be identified" (Hagerup, 1901: 4). More recently, we have seen vigorous scholarly debate on the nature and extent of Norway's 'exceptional' status when it comes to penal policy and practice (e.g., Pratt & Eriksson, 2014; Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). It is, though, fair to say that the Norwegian Correctional Service has strong ambitions for a humane and progressive approach to punishment, and that such ambitions have led to Norway being seen as a site of best-practice and as a place to travel for correctional inspiration (e.g., the Scandinavian Prison Project, the Amend program at UCSF¹).

The 2007 policy document *Punishment That Works—Less Crime—a Safer Society* gave a comprehensive account of these ambitions and provided a strategic foundation for contemporary correctional practice. It has also received research attention, including having its English summary published in *Federal Sentencing Reporter*. One of the key principles in the document is the principle of normalisation. Described as the 'lodestar' of penal policy and practice, the principle has, according to Engbo (2017), two forms: defensive (the retention of as many legal rights from normal life as is possible within the confines of a prison) and proactive (an active normalisation of both living conditions and prisoners themselves). The document also launched a 'resettlement guarantee' that built on the principle of normalisation, whereby "the government recognises an obligation to assist convicted offenders to have activated the rights they already have as Norwegian citizens". I have elsewhere (Todd-Kvam, 2022) argued that there are two distinct logics underpinning the emphasis on rehabilitation work in this document: a pragmatic logic (rehabilitation is the smart thing to do) and an ethical logic (it is the right thing to do).

Major challenges

The populist-right Progress Party entered government for the first time in 2013, gaining control of the justice ministry. Norway's reputation as a penal-welfare bastion appeared to be under significant threat. However, the compromises inherent in coalition government meant that many of the Progress Party's populist-punitive policy ambitions remained unrealised, and a wholesale and dramatic punitive turn did not take place. The desire to cut taxes and reduce the size of government did, though, affect the penal field through major budget cuts labelled 'de-bureaucratising and effectivising'. Lack of resources has limited engagement with people subject to punishment (Anderson & Grønning, 2017; Koffeld-Hamidane et al., 2024; Todd-Kvam, 2020) and increased levels of isolation (Norwegian Parliamentary Ombudsman, 2019).

The challenges facing the Norwegian Correctional Service have been acknowledged in a new policy document published in June 2025, entitled *Punishment that works—implementing sentences for a safer Norway*. As the title implies, this document aims to carry forward the 'comprehensive approach' of its predecessor. The authors recognise that:

The staffing situation in the correctional service is a cause for concern. One in four newly

1 See also joint work with Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Czech Republic through the Norway Grants programme.

qualified prison officers leave shortly after completing their training, and an increasing proportion of employees are approaching retirement age. A tight labour market makes it challenging to replace those who leave. The workload of those who remain is increasing further, partly because more prisoners are convicted of more serious crimes, and the proportion of prisoners with mental health problems, suicide attempts and self-harm is increasing. The extent of violence and threats between inmates and against employees has increased. Female inmates in particular can find themselves in a difficult situation in prison. The state has been convicted of human rights violations on several occasions (p.8).

In addition to these prison-specific challenges, the new *Punishment that works* also refers to a broader political-economic challenge facing Norway – that an ageing population will limit availability of welfare services in the future.

Major changes

Along with these challenges, there are important ongoing *changes* in Norwegian corrections. The prison has long been the hegemonic form of penal sentence in Norway and a focal point of research and media attention. There is now, though, a major reshaping of Norway's correctional geography underway. This development is not because of changes in sentencing practice, but rather because a large proportion of those receiving short prison sentences now serve their time at home under electronic monitoring. A key inflection point in this process occurred in 2018, when for the first time more people serving a penal sentence did so in the community than in prison (Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet, 2021). In addition, both the number of people serving a community sentence under probation supervision and the number released from prison on probation have dropped by over a third in the last decade (Kriminalomsorgen, 2023). These are major changes to

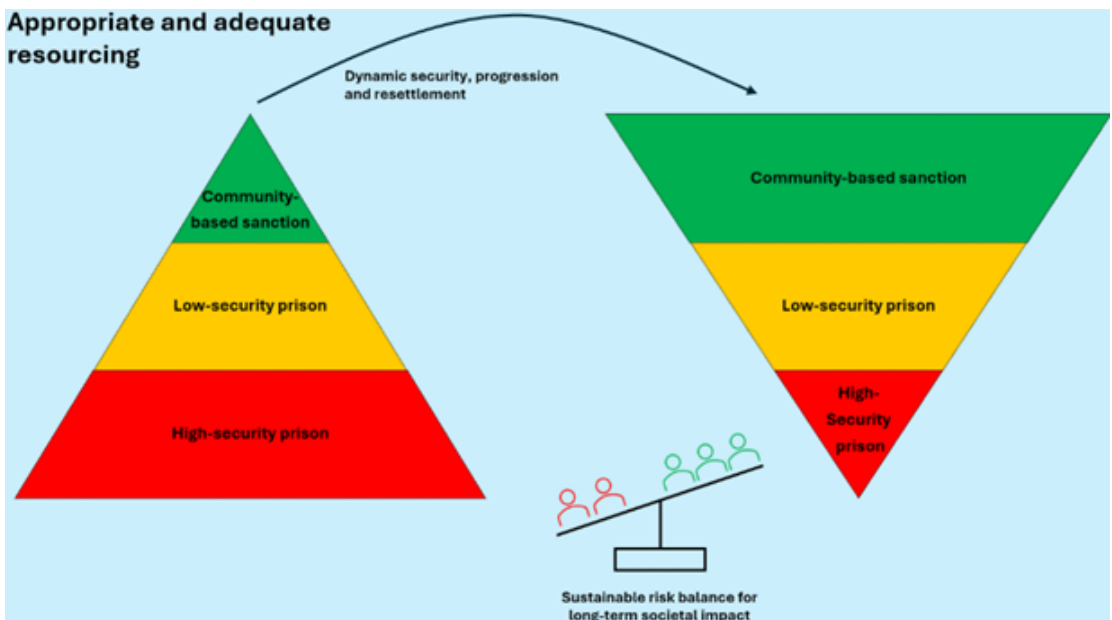


Figure 1: The shift in the serving of sentences in Norway. (Source: Directorate of Norwegian Correctional Service, 2024).

the way punishment is organised and implemented. Indeed, the Norwegian Correctional Service now envisage a full paradigm shift, moving from a system that has been dominated by high security prison places towards a system which supports much greater use of community-based sentence implementation:

This paradigm shift is, as Figure 1 shows, framed in terms of both resourcing levels and balancing of risk.

Punishment that works – implementing sentences for a safer Norway

Resourcing and risk are important themes in the new Punishment that works, which makes a range of policy commitments, including:

Future corrections will be more resource-efficient

Prisons in Norway have two security levels – high security and lower security (as well as some wings with particularly high security levels and half-way houses). High security prison places are significantly more expensive than lower security. Under current regulations, the correctional service has limited opportunity to differentiate the use of different security levels based on actual needs because the legislation includes a presumption in favour of placing convicted persons in high security. *Punishment that works* notes potential advantages to changing these regulations, allowing greater scope for a specific assessment of the level of security required in each individual case, based on a risk assessment. The government also propose to assess whether there is a need for additional security levels and other differentiated security measures.

The policy document affirms that:

Implementing sentences outside prison is cheaper than imprisonment and is accordingly both resource-efficient and socio-economically profitable [...] The Government therefore believes that the development whereby more people can serve their sentences outside prison is both right and important. This ensures that convicted persons are able to maintain their education and employment to a much greater extent than if the sentence had to be served in prison. Short prison sentences that result in persons being removed from an educational programme or professional activity should be avoided as far as possible. (p. 88)

The ambition is to expand the use of electronic monitoring, both 'front-door' (i.e., serving entire shorter sentences at home) and 'back-door' (i.e., that electronic monitoring will become the rule for people towards the end of their prison sentence).

Meaningful and appropriate sentence content that prevents crime

In Norway, the principle that it is the deprivation/restriction of liberty itself that constitutes punishment remains important. Convicted persons should not, as a rule, lose other civil rights. There are plans to consider making changes to the rules regarding prison leave for education and employment, making it easier to access these outside of prison. There is also an ambition to modernise the range of activities offered in prisons, including by strengthening opportunities to acquire relevant vocational skills, and ensuring that work in prisons is more closely aligned with educational programmes offered elsewhere. The opportunity to acquire relevant digital skills,

avoid digital exclusion and for prisoners 'to take greater responsibility for their own lives' is also emphasised.

Strengthened staffing and expertise in corrections

As mentioned above, the Norwegian Correctional Service faces workforce challenges in the form of reduced staffing levels, high sickness absence, and turnover among newly qualified employees. This creates further issues with increased workloads and reduced time to engage with prisoners. This is a challenge to Norway's emphasis on relational and rehabilitative work in prison.

In response to this challenge, the current government have increased correctional service funding and ramped up recruitment of new prison officers. The document also included a proposal to change the training regime for prison officers from a two-year, salaried, programme to a three-year bachelor's degree without salary. This is intended to enable reprioritisation of resources towards training larger numbers of staff, increasing salaries for qualified officers, and to increase the competence and expertise of trained officers. The document also suggests that this change may increase the status of a career in the correctional service.

In addition, a new decentralised training programme is being launched, where students can train at a range of 'training prisons' across Norway. This programme will be a combination of online and classroom-based teaching.

Corrections throughout the country

The principle of proximity in the Norwegian Correctional Service means that convicted persons, as far as possible, are imprisoned in a prison close to their place of residence. The purpose of this principle is to preserve ties to family, work, and the local community.

However, a significant number of prison buildings are in poor condition and require considerable maintenance. Many prisons also have structural limitations that make it difficult to counteract isolation and provide satisfactory activities for incarcerated individuals. The government plans to build new/replacement prisons in Oslo and in several other regions (expansion of electronic monitoring is also highlighted as contributing to the proximity principle).

Better care for people with mental health problems

There has been a trend towards a larger proportion of incarcerated individuals having mental health problems (Bukten et al., 2024). More people in prison have been convicted of serious violent and sexual offences, more are serving longer sentences, and the proportion of older inmates is greater than before. Those in prison are both more challenging and more vulnerable, with greater needs in terms of treatment and support. Prison officer training does not adequately cover the competence requirements of this changing group, particularly in relation to mental health and substance abuse issues.

One recent innovation for particularly vulnerable individuals is the introduction of jointly-run units that are a formal cooperation between specialist mental health services and the correctional service. *Punishment that works* suggests examining the need for more such units, including a unit at the planned new women's prison.



Non-discriminatory implementation of sentences regardless of gender

The conditions for women in prison in Norway have been long-criticised. The extra vulnerability of women in prison is well-known internationally, and Norway is no exception. The document acknowledges that whilst women make up only about 5% of the prison population, a stark 75% of suicide attempts and 65 % of self-harm cases in 2023 were carried out by incarcerated females. In addition, the use of restraint beds on females has been a long-running problem, and the risk of isolation is higher than for men (Sivilombudsmannen, 2020).

The need for better competence regarding women's health, experience of sexual violence, and mental health is acknowledged and it is proposed that this be included in officer training and further education. *Punishment that works* also highlights an existing recommendation for establishing a national centre for the implementation of sentences for women, in addition to three or four smaller women's units in the rest of the country.

Overall, *Punishment that works* contains a significant number of ambitious proposals for regaining lost ground in Norwegian corrections, particularly with respect to prison officer training and retention and rebalancing the system away from high-security prison places. There are, in my view, some weaknesses as well. The long-running problem of so-called 'punishment debt' (Todd-Kvam, 2019) is acknowledged without much in the way of concrete action being proposed. The new document is, perhaps, less ambitious here than its predecessor. A second, perhaps slightly unfair, critique is that *Punishment that works* focuses on the correctional system, but many of the most difficult issues it addresses (mental health problems, poor conditions for women) have root causes elsewhere in the system and in society.

Key lessons from these challenges and changes

Regarding what we can apply from Norway's latest policy thinking in a broader context, one lesson is on the potential of electronic monitoring. Run by the correctional service itself (not outsourced), this approach to incarceration appears to have potential as an alternative to unconstructive, often debilitating short prison sentences, which can cause more harm than good. There are, though, potential downsides with net-widening (Andersen et al., 2020) and turning people's homes into prisons that must be considered in how such programmes are designed and implemented. The relational and intersubjective aspects of combining care and control need to be prioritised here as much as in other carceral contexts.

The issue of salaries is also worth reflecting over. A brief informal comparison shows that average Norwegian correctional officer salaries are somewhat lower than those in the United States relative to respective median salaries (594,000NOK vs. 640,000NOK and \$58,000 vs. \$60,000²). Given Norway's reputation as producing some of the best-trained prison officers in the world, this is noteworthy. It is important that salaries reflect levels of both responsibility and expertise to retain qualified and experienced staff.

Finally, I see an interesting combination of the cultural and the pragmatic here that is worth considering. When it comes to building and maintaining a well-qualified, motivated and effective correctional staff, the practical issues of a competitive salary, appropriate staffing in both numbers

2 Data sources: Statistics Norway and US Bureau of Labour Statistics.

and competence, etc. are closely bound up in the cultural aspects of empathic and understanding leadership, respect for others, and knowledge-based practice.

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BEYOND TOKENISM: INTEGRATING CONVICT PERSPECTIVES INTO EVIDENCE-BASED CORRECTIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, fields such as education, medicine, social work, and criminology/criminal justice have increasingly acknowledged the value of integrating lived experience into knowledge production and professional practice. In corrections, this trend is exemplified by Convict Criminology, which emphasizes the voices and experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in scholarly research, mentorship, and activism. Yet, integrating these perspectives faces persistent challenges, including the conflation of practitioner experience with lived experience and the demand for robust empirical evidence to justify such approaches. This paper critically examines these challenges and outlines strategies for incorporating formerly incarcerated individuals into correctional program design and policy development. It presents evidence-based frameworks for utilizing their expertise in the corrections field, offers practical guidelines for mentorship programs that bridge academic research and practitioner knowledge, and suggests methods for overcoming professionals' resistance within correctional institutions to such integration. By doing so, this paper contributes to the growing movement toward more humane, effective, and socially just correctional policy and practice.

Keywords: Convict Criminology, Convict Perspectives, Corrections Policy and Practice, Lived Experience, Mentorship

Introduction

Contemporary professional practice in many fields has experienced an epistemological shift. Expertise is no longer considered to be solely held by credentialed professionals, but valuable insights can be gained from people who have lived experience. Feminist standpoint theory, patient-centered medicine, and co-production in social services all argue that individuals with lived experience provide important knowledge (Beresford & Croft, 2004; Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Harding, 1991)¹. The dominant branches of criminal justice have also been grappling with this challenge. More specifically, the field of corrections has primarily been shaped by practitioners and academics. Convict Criminology, on the other hand, which emerged in the mid-1990s, challenges that tradition by highlighting formerly incarcerated scholars and activists as legitimate sources of knowledge (Ross & Richards, 2003; Ross & Vianello, 2019; Ross, 2024).

This paper asks a practical question: how can corrections systematically and rigorously incorporate insights of formerly incarcerated individuals (FIs) into evidence-based policy and programming? Answering that question requires acknowledging both the unique contributions of convict perspectives and the methodological, cultural, and institutional barriers that have limited their adoption. The paper situates the convict perspectives within broader movements toward co-production, summarizing known benefits, cataloging barriers, and then offers evidence-aligned strategies for integration.

Why Convict Perspectives Matter

Formerly incarcerated people (FIs) occupy a distinct epistemic position. Unlike correctional administrators, support staff, and officers who work in an institution during shifts, FIs have continuous, embodied experience of incarceration and reentry. That approach has several pragmatic advantages. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Diagnostic insight.** Many FIs are well-suited to identify operational blind spots in policies and practices that appear neutral to staff, but have harmful, cumulative effects on inmates.
- **Legitimacy and adoption.** Interventions co-designed with target populations are more likely to be accepted and sustained. Lessons from public health and social services show that stakeholder involvement improves relevance and implementation (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Israel et al., 1998;
- **Humanization and narrative correction.** Including convict voices has the potential to disrupt dehumanizing frameworks and negative characterizations of incarcerated and FI people that justify and promote punitive policies, practices, and laws, and help reframe rehabilitation and reentry as social problems requiring thoughtful solutions.
- **Desistance and reintegration.** Engagement in reform and reentry programming often supports identity transformation, an established predictor of reduced recidivism (LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001).

These contributions do not negate the need for rigorous evidence-based research and the findings

¹ Although selective examples of co-production exist in the field of criminal justice (Goldstein, 1979; 1987; Johns, et al., 2022), adoption is uneven among the different branches.

they produce; rather, they expand on what counts as evidence and attempt to improve the design, interpretation, and implementation of correctional interventions.

Key Barriers to Inclusion

Despite the potential, three persistent challenges impede the inclusion of convict perspectives.

1. Conflation of different kinds of experience. Correctional administrators, staff, consultants, and FI individuals all bring experience. But practitioner experience (focused on institutional maintenance and order) is not the same as the experiential knowledge of being forced to live (and survive) in a correctional facility. Treating them as interchangeable minimizes the distinct analytic power of convict perspectives.

2. Demand for conventional empirical evidence. Anecdotes and narratives are often dismissed as biased stories. Critics ask for randomized trials, large datasets, and objective measures. While empirical rigor is important, a false dichotomy between lived experience and other types of evidence hampers innovation. The solution is methodological pluralism: integrating participatory methods with quantitative evaluation so that lived expertise informs hypotheses, measurement, implementation, and interpretation (Harding, 1991; Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

3. Institutional resistance and stigma. Correctional cultures prize authority, control, and risk avoidance. Staff skepticism can range from procedural inertia to overt distrust, perceiving FIs as untrustworthy or as potential agitators (Gurusami, 2019). Legal and hiring barriers, as well as credentialing requirements, further constrain the meaningful participation of FIs.

Systematic Strategies for Integration

To translate convict insights into evidence-based practice, corrections should adopt approaches that utilize FIs as legitimate stakeholders at every stage of the program cycle (i.e., design, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination).

1. Participatory Program Design and Evaluation

Borrowing from Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Hacker, 2013), programs should involve FIs as co-designers and co-evaluators. More specifically, co-design workshops should be hosted where FI individuals and advisory groups help define problems, agree on appropriate outcomes, and refine interventions (e.g., Ross, Zaldivar & Tewksbury, 2015). There should be effort to train peer evaluators who are FI individuals who collect qualitative and quantitative data and participate in analysis. More use should be made of mixed methods: qualitative narratives to generate hypotheses; relevant quantitative designs to test outcomes. As experienced in other fields, CBPR can improve the relevance and adoption of new policies, practices, and laws in criminal justice contexts and align with best practices for stakeholder engagement (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

2. Institutionalized Advisory Councils and Governance Roles

Advisory councils composed of FIs have the potential to formalize participation. Effective councils:

- Have clear mandates, appropriate budgets, and clear decision-making authority.
- Rotate membership and leadership to avoid tokenization and ensure meaningful, diverse

representation (e.g., gender, race, offense type, time since release, etc.).

- Provide adequate compensation and access to training that enables meaningful contribution.
- Use justice-reinvestment structures to integrate lived experience into budgeting and priority setting (Clear, 2011); similar governance models can anchor FI input in corrections.

3. Training and Capacity Building

To bridge experiential insights and professional standards, programs should invest in capacity building. These include:

- Research and policy and practice training to participants in relevant subjects (i.e., research methods, ethics, data literacy, etc.).
- Facilitation and public speaking skills to enable FIs to co-lead staff trainings and public engagement
- Support for academic advancement (mentoring that enables the earning of academic degrees and peer-reviewed publications).
- Programs like Inside-Out (Pompa, 2013). and university partnerships demonstrate how training strengthens FI contributions as educators, researchers, and advocates.

4. Implementation-Oriented Frameworks

Implementation science emphasizes context, stakeholder buy-in, and fidelity. Including FIs as key stakeholders aligns with this approach: they help identify contextual barriers, adapt interventions to local norms, and foster sustainable adoption (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Practical Guidelines for Mentorship Programs

Mentoring (Tewksbury & Ross, 2019) bridges lived experience and formal research/practice. Effective mentorship programs should be intentionally structured to:

- Define goals and pathways to achieve them. It is important from the onset to clarify the purpose of mentorship at each stage. Is it directed at developing researchers, classroom instructors, policy advocates, or peer service providers?
- Mutual learning model. Position mentorship as reciprocal; mentors (FIs) and mentees (students, staff) teach and learn from one another.
- Provide remuneration and institutional recognition. Compensate mentors fairly, offer course credit or stipends, and include mentorship in performance evaluations. Pending their personal approval, acknowledge the individuals and organizations that assisted in any publicly shared documents (e.g., on the web, in newsletters, etc.).
- Support academic credentialization. Help mentors access continuing education, degree programs, and publishing opportunities.
- Create networks and communities of practice. Link mentors to supportive peers, funding sources, and professional associations, building appropriate in-demand career pathways for FIs.
- Convict Criminology, in particular, has a respected history of mentoring incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students (Ross, 2024).

Overcoming Professional Resistance

Reducing staff resistance requires frequent explanation regarding the goals of the tasks, rationales, and deliberate experimentation. This includes:

- Leadership buy-in. Executive endorsement legitimizes FI participation. Leaders should publicly articulate the rationale, allocate resources, and model engagement.
- Staff training co-facilitated by FIs. Joint trainings humanize experiences and creates more meaningful dialogue among participants. When staff hear accounts alongside empirical data, their skepticism tends to soften.
- Pilot projects with clear metrics. Start with small, well-monitored pilot projects that measure engagement, satisfaction, and intermediate outcomes (e.g., program retention, disciplinary incidents). Demonstrated gains create momentum.
- Policy mandates and protections. Where feasible, incorporate stakeholder participation into policy or contractual requirements to avoid ad hoc or tokenistic inclusion. Legal hiring barriers should be reviewed and mitigated through fair-chance hiring policies and role redefinition that match skills to responsibilities.

Evidence and Illustrative Findings from Convict Criminology

Members of the Convict Criminology (CC) network have contributed via scholarship, teaching, mentorship, and activism. Their collective work includes peer-reviewed research on prison conditions and reentry (Ross & Copes, 2022), op-eds and public scholarship, in-prison education programs, and advisory roles on policy panels. These activities yield several practical outcomes:

- Improved curriculum relevance in prison education and reentry programs.
- Enhanced media framing through expert commentary that challenges punitive narratives.
- Advisory contributions that inform policy deliberations at local and national levels.

While impact evaluations of these contributions are limited, the observed outcomes are consistent with broader evidence that participatory approaches improve program design, legitimacy, and uptake (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Israel et al., 1998). Nonetheless, rigorous, outcome-oriented research is still needed to quantify effects on recidivism, institutional culture, and cost-effectiveness.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The evidence base linking FI inclusion to specific correctional outcomes is uneven. Many CC activities are diffuse, decentralized, and context-specific, making standard evaluation methods difficult. Future research priorities include:

- Program evaluation. Rigorous, mixed-methods studies of FI-co-designed interventions using appropriate comparison designs.
- Longitudinal workforce studies. Tracking career trajectories of FIs engaged in research, education, and practice to identify barriers and enablers.
- Cost-benefit analyses. Estimating fiscal impacts of participatory reforms (e.g., reduced disciplinary incidents, improved reentry outcomes).
- Comparative institutional studies. Examining which correctional contexts (e.g., security level, governance structure) are most receptive to FI integration.
- Additional ethical questions: Explore the compensation, confidentiality, and potential retraumatization of FI individuals doing this work.

Conclusion

Integrating convict perspectives into evidence-based correctional practice is both an ethical imperative and a pragmatic strategy for improving policy and programming. The approach does not threaten empirical rigor; rather, it enriches the evidence base by adding situated knowledge, improving relevance, and strengthening implementation. Achieving meaningful inclusion requires institutional commitment: participatory design processes, formal advisory roles, training and capacity building, and implementation-oriented evaluation. Convict criminology demonstrates the practical value of centering formerly incarcerated scholars and advocates in research, mentorship, and policy work. To move beyond tokenism, corrections must institutionalize mechanisms that compensate and train FIs, measure impacts rigorously, and adjust professional norms to recognize lived experience as a form of expertise. Doing so advances more humane, effective, and socially just correctional systems.

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"WHAT WORKS" CREATES CONSTRUCTIVE (REHABILITATION) CULTURES!

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Abstract

"What works" identifies practices and treatments that advance outcomes for the correctional system, staff, and the individuals involved with the system. What works can be implemented by using specific treatments and practices, using incentives (over sanctions), fostering procedural justice, and creating a culture that supports growth and development. A focus on the leaders and staff that work in the correctional system is imperative to effectively implement "what works" practices and treatments.

Rehabilitation goals facilitate the use of "what works".

Keywords: rehabilitation, cultures, what works



Introduction

Since the early 1990's, researchers have identified "what works" in institutional and/or community corrections to reduce further involvement in the justice system (recidivism). The underlying theme of the "what works" research is that rehabilitation over incapacitation or deterrence is more effective in changing the behavior of offenders—which serves the greater good of public safety. In other words, if we want to reduce recidivism, then we will have to pursue rehabilitation-based treatments and practices. Of course, this is an oxymoron because, while the science points to rehabilitation, the public and politicians view correctional agencies as tools of punishment, emphasizing punishment, accountability, and retribution—the tools of punishment differ from those of rehabilitation. While it is uncertain whether punishment and rehabilitation can co-exist, it is feasible to transform punishment efforts into humane, rehabilitation-focused correctional settings (Robinson & McNeill, 2008; Ward, et al., 2022). This is doable—it should be a priority for action.

What is "what works"

Both treatment interventions and certain practices "work"—meaning that they contribute to reduced recidivism as well as to improvements in the justice culture to be more procedurally just and fair. The treatment interventions that work are cognitive behavioral therapy and interventions, therapeutic communities, contingency management, and drug courts (problem solving courts). The practices that work are use of a validated risk and need assessment tool, matching individuals to treatment programs relevant to their needs, use of incentives to shape behavior, and minimal use of sanctions. These are defined in Table 1. Collectively, these can serve to create a correctional culture that addresses the drivers of criminal behavior, assists individuals in learning new behaviors, and is fair and just (Andrews and Bonta, 2010; Taxman, 2002). That is, the punishment culture can be transformed into a social learning environment where staff serve in both a security role and as facilitators of behavioral change (Taxman, 2008). The social learning environment is beneficial to both staff and individuals in the correctional system through humane interactions that focus on positive, prosocial behaviors and attitudes.

This is a "short-list" of treatments and practices, but these are challenging in a punitive environment that considers the "clients" to be second class citizens due to their justice involvement (Viglion, Rudes, & Taxman, 2015). But the advantages are worthwhile given the benefits to staff and to individuals in the correctional system—in fact, just the benefits to staff make these even more worthwhile since they reinforce the professionalism of staff.

Why is "what works" procedurally just?

The concept of procedural justice is that individuals will obey rules and regulations if they believe these are fair and consistently applied to all individuals (Blasko & Taxman, 2018; Tyler, 2006). That is, compliance is a product of the culture or environment that ensures that the rules are equally applied. When certain people are subjected to the rules (and others are not), then it suggests that the rules are flexible and only apply to certain people. It colors the environment to be unjust and unfair, and it contributes to chaos as individuals try to "game" the system to test which and what rules will be applied to them. The certainty of when the "rules" will be applied creates a sense of fairness. In a punitive environment, certainty in the application of the rules sets the tone for what is considered preferred behavior. It increases consistency across staff by reducing discretion. It is fundamental to a social learning environment.

Incentives are Culture Changes

The correctional system assumes that order (and security) can be achieved by sanctioning certain behaviors—that is, the system is run by threats that certain behaviors will result in more punishments in the form of restrictions on behavior. The dominant theme of sanctioning as a tool to reinforce prosocial behaviors negates the reality that order can actually be created by consistency and incentives. In fact, operative conditioning emphasizes that incentives are important to define goals for individuals to achieve to get the pleasurable reward. That is, incentives identify target behaviors and/or attitudes that are considerably valuable and that are rewarded. Desirable, prosocial behaviors and attitudes are defined by placing a reward on such behaviors/attitudes and therefore it is possible to shape behaviors in this process. Punishments tend to dissuade learning desired behaviors/attitudes since the recipient cannot identify what they *should* do when the emphasis is on what they should not do (see Sloas, et al., 2019; Wodahl, et al., 2011).

Table 1: Overview of the "What Works" Findings

Table 1: Overview of the “What Works” Findings
What Works: Evidence-Based Treatments <i>Cognitive Behavioral Therapy</i> helps individuals learn skills to restructure cognition (emotions and responses), to actualize behavior to achieve pleasure, and to use techniques to address negative experiences and thoughts. The process teaches strategies for self-monitoring experiences and feelings, problem-solving by assessing options and considering benefits, and developing strategies to handle life’s challenges. <i>Therapeutic Community</i> is a therapeutic process that creates a community where individuals gradually assume more leadership roles. The goal is to help individuals learn responsibility while also mentoring or teaching others prosocial behavior. <i>Contingency Management</i> is the use of operant conditioning to reinforce positive behaviors. The goal is to reward the achievement of behaviors through social or material rewards for achieving that behavior. The process provides for swift and certain responses, which need to be clearly understood by the individual to be effective <i>Problem Solving Court.</i> A special court process that involves the use of case management by judges (with the assistance of justice and health actors) which focuses on establishing target behaviors, use of sanctions and incentives, and frequent check-ins. The emphasis is on providing treatment services to address drivers of criminal behaviors. What Works: Practices <i>Validated risk and need assessment tool</i> to identify the static and dynamic risk factors to address in treatment or other services. <i>Matching individuals to treatment programs</i> involves the use of case management to identify and place them in suitable treatments, services, educational programs, and/or employment programs tailored to their needs. <i>Minimize the use of sanctions.</i> Punishment is used to discourage negative behaviors. However, too much punishment can also lead to defiance. <i>Procedural Justice</i> uses clear, consistent decisions regarding how situations are handled. Procedural justice ensures that the decisions are uniformly applied.

The question is, what incentives are most effective? Contingency management is the science of incentives where the emphasis is only on rewarding certain key behaviors and not responding to other behaviors (see Petry, 2000; Rash, et al., 2025). By identifying the desired behaviors, one also defines prosocial behaviors. The general formula for an effective contingency management system is: 1) identify target behaviors, preferably up to three; 2) identify what incentive will be given which can be social (i.e., affirmation, increase privilege, etc.) or material (i.e., money, vouchers, gift cards, etc.); 3) identify the frequency of when the incentive will be given; and 4) ensure that the system is doable (i.e., give incentives within some period of time instead of everytime a behavior occurs). An example is three target behaviors (i.e., clean urine tests, show up at work on time, and attend treatment) which may be rewarded by extra privileges or a voucher. An important part of the system is to “reward early” meaning that when a person is exposed to the system, they should be rewarded frequently to begin to shape behavior. The frequency of giving rewards should be tapered over time, focusing on sustained behavior rather than single incidents (see Petry, 2000).

Incentives position the staff (officers) to be able to acknowledge positive behaviors. It removes the tendency to look for faults and negative behaviors, and to focus on these negative behaviors. Instead, the staff acknowledges positive behaviors, which also sets the tone for the interactions to be affirmative and upbeat—after all, who doesn’t appreciate it when small but deliberate strides are taken? Typically, the negative behavior will dissipate over time, and those who engage in negative behaviors will typically be ignored since they are not engaging in the target behaviors.

A good contingency management approach is consistent with a social learning environment because it identifies and rewards prosocial behaviors/attitudes. It is also procedurally just since everyone receives the incentives for certain behaviors/attitudes.

Respect Increases Ownership in Behavior Change

Andrews and Bonta (2010), the grandfathers of some of the “what works” literature and its transformation into the risk, need, responsivity (RNR) formulae, subtly remind the readers that what works components are better suited for a human service environment. A human service environment emphasizes trust, care, and fairness, with a focus on enhancing the well-being of individuals. Implicit in this approach is the emphasis on respect of the individual in terms of how individuals are treated and the role that they have in the system. Respect serves to help an individual understand that they are not demonized due to their criminal behavior, but rather that the punishment is an opportunity for personal growth and improvement. It also sets the tone that the individual can take advantage of the treatments and services offered for the purpose of self-improvement.

Related to this concept of respect is the emphasis on *shared decision-making* (Matejkowski, 2021). Shared decision-making is a process in which the individual and the staff jointly participate in deciding which programs, interventions, and/or services an individual should engage in. The shared-decision process involves: 1) Learn about the drivers of criminal behavior with opportunities for the individual to identify triggers or factors that affect their involvement in criminal behavior, such as reviewing the results from the risk and need assessment tool or any tools that have been used. 2) Consider all the options in terms of response, with an emphasis on identifying what options are better suited for the individual. This involves a discussion about the components of each response, how it may benefit or affect the individual, and what commitments are required to effectively engage with the option. 3) The

individual and staff person (officer) can then prioritize which options are best for the individual. This process helps the individual feel a sense of ownership over the option, which facilitates motivation to change, engagement, and overall success.

Respect and shared decision-making collectively serve to empower individuals by fostering a social learning environment by providing individuals with options regarding which treatment or service to receive, allowing them to freely discuss the pros and cons of each option. The individual feels validated and valued as well as vested in their own goals. The shared decision-making process is consistent with social learning.

Staff Wellness Is Key

Correctional work is often considered a challenging and demanding profession, characterized by a toxic environment (Chenault & Collins, 2019) marked by dysfunction, negativity, and distrust. This stems from an unhealthy culture that emanates from stress determinants, job stressors related to the job, organizational stressors resulting from structural and goal-related issues, and is further complicated by the characteristics of leaders and staff. The punishment culture is often perpetuated by low-resourced environments, poorly trained staff, ineffective leadership, distrust among leaders and staff, and limited expectations about the role of corrections (Ricciardelli, et al., 2020). A punishment environment overemphasizes accountability, where staff look for noncompliance behavior, even small infractions are identified and sanctioned, which tends to set a tone (Taxman, 2024). The fixes are easy in a rehabilitation mindset where positive goals of growth and development dominate, even for leaders and staff.

The perils of the environment create a need to explore how to transform a toxic environment into a healthy, productive environment. Adapting a rehabilitation goal as the sole purpose of institutional and/or community corrections initiates that pathway by acknowledging to the public, leaders, staff, and others that the system exists to foster desistance, and the best way to achieve this is for leaders and staff to cultivate cultures that support human development. It also means that we might need to consider the qualifications of those employed by the correctional system. In fact, Henderson and Taxman (2009) found that leaders with human service backgrounds (instead of law enforcement or the military) tend to adopt evidence-based practices and treatments. Coaching can be offered to line staff to develop skills and establish a tone that is conducive to behavioral change (Lovins, et al., 2018). In other words, techniques exist for this transformation, but they require a different attitude towards the goal of corrections.

Rehabilitation Creates A Productive Environment

Adopting the "what works" practices and treatments can be transformative. The use of these practices and treatments positions staff to focus on positive behaviors, to support the growth and development of those they are working with, and to create just and fair approaches. Incentives enhance how well "what works" works. The only purpose that facilitates what works is rehabilitation. It is within the reach of most correctional systems.

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**BETTER THAN ARRIVAL CORRECTIONS:
THE UNIVERSITY AS A PARTNER IN SYSTEMIC WELL-BEING**

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Abstract

This article advances the concept of *Better Than Arrival Corrections*, an approach that reorients the purpose of corrections from reducing recidivism to enhancing the holistic well-being of people who are incarcerated. Current systems—organized around the singular goal of preventing future offending—limit what corrections can achieve and place unrealistic expectations on agencies to solve complex social problems on their own. A well-being orientation broadens the definition of correctional success, invites new partners into the work, and creates opportunities for visible, incremental improvement in people’s lives. Universities are uniquely positioned to support this shift because they bring two strengths that few institutions possess: breadth of expertise across all dimensions of well-being, and the capacity to integrate diverse forms of knowledge—including academic, practitioner, and lived expertise—into coherent, actionable strategies. The article concludes by offering practical steps for agencies and universities to begin exploring *Better Than Arrival Corrections* and calls for an expanded, evidence-informed vision of correctional success grounded in enhancing well-being.

Keywords: Better Than Arrival Corrections; well-being; university-corrections partnership

Introduction

In prison, in an unlikely corner of the arid Arizona desert, plants and people are thriving. An undergraduate student presents her honors thesis to a group of incarcerated women, explaining how pollinators like bees and butterflies are disappearing—leaving the world with less life-giving diversity—and how the milkweed seedlings in front of them can help bring those pollinators back. A graduate student in sustainable horticulture guides a correctional officer and an incarcerated woman as they position a new garden bed for effective irrigation. And a warden and a faculty member address a group from the community—their first time in prison—in how the university and department of corrections have collaborated to create a space for education, growth, and transformation.

A seasoned member of the corrections community might approach the prison garden with skepticism and concern. *This is prison, not a greenhouse, why does the population deserve this opportunity? What about institutional safety? These tools look like weapons. Won't shared labor between staff and incarcerated women blur boundaries and compromise professionalism? Are university students at risk for manipulation and harm? What about community safety? How does any of this reduce reoffending? Does it work?*

These concerns make sense in a risk-oriented, deficits-dominated correctional system that has long been organized around the singular goal of reducing the likelihood of reoffending. But this goal of recidivism-reduction has limited corrections for several decades. The means of achieving recidivism reduction may change, perhaps even in innovative ways, but the goal remains narrow and unchanged. What if corrections were designed not simply to reduce risk, but to enhance well-being? This article advances the idea of Better Than Arrival Corrections, where the correctional system is designed to enhance the holistic well-being of people. If our correctional systems are truly serving their purpose, people should be better than they arrived to the system. Physically and mentally healthier. Free from addiction. More skilled and employable. More connected to family and community. Their well-being should be enhanced.

Reorienting the purpose of corrections in this way opens the door for expertise that extends beyond criminal justice alone. Universities, with their deep knowledge across all dimensions of well-being—physical, mental, emotional, educational, social, cultural, and economic—are uniquely positioned to partner with correctional agencies in this expanded mission. Better Than Arrival Corrections is practical, measurable, and aligned with ethical, evidence-based approaches to transforming the purpose and practice of corrections.

The Limits of Recidivism Reduction

Correctional success is usually measured as reduced recidivism. A correctional program or policy that is 'evidence-based' usually means that there is evidence to support recidivism reduction. This makes sense, as whether through deterrence, rehabilitation, or some other means, the goal of corrections is to reduce repeat criminal behavior (Cullen & Jonson, 2017). We can say our correctional system is working if people are 'corrected' such that they are not rearrested, reconvicted, or reimprisoned upon returning to society.

In the U.S., this goal initiated with the earliest penitentiaries and persisted through a variety of shifts in correctional philosophy and practice (Rothman, 1971; see also Rubin, 2019). The means may

change—increased punishment and control, or increased programming and care, or different types of either punishment or programming—but the goal remains the same. And despite all of these shifts in logic and approach, our success in reducing recidivism has not improved much. Even now, in perhaps the height of evidence-based corrections, U.S. recidivism rates in general remain stubbornly high (with isolated exceptions in certain jurisdictions) (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021; Petrich et al., 2021; cf. Bushway & Denver, 2025).

The relentless pursuit of recidivism reduction has consequences, for both the people whose attitudes and behaviors we seek to change but also for the change agents who do the work (Wright et al., 2022). Pursuing the absence of a negative outcome in a far-off future is psychologically unsatisfying; it is out of sight for people in the system and out of control for practitioners. People assessed as high-risk are prioritized to the detriment of other people who might desire change but not have the opportunity to do so. Last, pursuing correctional success in the form of making people 'not criminal' inherently assumes a starting point where people are 'criminal.' The language we use, the approaches we take, all originate with a goal to change criminals instead of empowering humans (Wright, 2024).

There are two especially detrimental components to solely relying on recidivism reduction as the goal of correctional success (Wright et al., 2022). First, it limits what we could achieve through the correctional system. It creates an artificial ceiling, where the best we can hope for is making someone 'not criminal'—what they are instead, or what they could be contributing to their families, communities, and society, is irrelevant (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). Second, it identifies the challenge as solely a criminal justice problem requiring a criminal justice solution, squarely and unfairly placing the burden on corrections. People choose to engage in crime through influence of a variety of factors—trauma, victimization, addiction, mental illness, poverty, inequality, racism, unemployment, stress, and the list goes on. Expecting people who work in corrections to overcome all these on their own does not make any sense.

Better Than Arrival Corrections

A different measurement of correctional success could be that people are better than their arrival to the correctional system (Wright, 2020). Whatever they looked like upon entry to the system, broadly defined, their time spent under supervision should make them better in the future. They could be healthier (physically and mentally), with less dependence on illicit substances, more educated, more employable, and with stronger relationships to family, friends, and community. Changing the goal in this way shifts corrections beyond the narrow pursuit of 'not criminal' and opens the door to partners with expertise and resources that matter when the challenge extends beyond a purely criminal justice problem. It also means that people who change and people who support those who change do not have to blindly pursue a future goal that is out of their sight and out of their control; they can focus on the present, with visible impact in the form of better than arrival incremental change.

Any number of strengths-based models or theories could provide the means to achieve a goal of better than arrival, especially when used in combination with deficits-based models and theories. Self-determination theory and the pursuit of what makes life meaningful, for all humans, is a particularly appealing approach (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A meaningful life is one where people are intrinsically motivated to direct their own lives (autonomy), with the urge to get better and better at something that matters to them (mastery), all in the pursuit of something larger than themselves

(purpose) (Pink, 2009). On a continuum where -1 is a miserable life and +1 is a meaningful life, the 0 could be conceived of as 'not criminal.' Moving people from -1 to 0 could mean a continued focus on programming to mitigate deficits (e.g., Bonta & Andrews, 2017) where moving people from 0 to +1 could mean a focus on programming to leverage strengths (e.g., Ward & Maruna, 2007) (Wright, 2020). Better Than Arrival Corrections means moving as many people as possible closer to +1 than where they started.

Better Than Arrival Corrections is not an alternative to recidivism reduction corrections. It is inclusive of that current approach, where 0 remains a meaningful point on the continuum. This means that traditional evidence-based approaches toward recidivism reduction can continue, but also that they can co-exist alongside strengths-based approaches. These efforts can take people beyond 0, creating prosocial, desistance-based trajectories that are also likely to keep them out of prison in the future (McNeill, 2006). Being unsatisfied with 0 means changing what correctional success looks like, inviting other partners along as part of a Better Than Arrival Corrections that empowers people to give to society rather than take from society.

The University as a Catalyst for Systemic Well-Being

The university has an important yet limited role in a correctional system oriented primarily toward reducing recidivism. Universities already contribute meaningfully through classes, evaluation research, staff training, and evidence-based programming targeting criminogenic needs (e.g., Drawbridge et al., 2018; Rudes et al., 2014; Wright & Jonson, 2018). These efforts matter, but they draw on only a fraction of what universities can offer. When the goal expands from reducing reoffending to enhancing well-being, the university becomes a far more powerful partner. Universities are uniquely positioned to support correctional systems pursuing Better Than Arrival Corrections because they bring two essential strengths that few other institutions possess.

First, the university offers the breadth of expertise needed to enhance well-being across multiple dimensions. Within a single institution, there are specialists in mental health, physical health, trauma recovery, education, architecture, sustainability, nutrition, occupational development, and community building. Through courses, internships, clinics, workshops, programs, and research, universities already support well-being at scale. These people and programs can be intentionally directed to invest in the lives and environments of those living and working in corrections.

In a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach, the university can support by contributing part of the **knowledge**—the “what”—needed to enhance well-being.

Second, the university has the capacity to integrate different forms of knowledge—academic evidence, practitioner expertise, and lived expertise—into coherent, actionable strategies (Porporino, 2025). In doing so, universities can expand what counts as evidence within an evidence-based correctional system oriented toward well-being. Many scholars have recommended that corrections “include lived experience,” noting that system-impacted people have unique insights into alternatives to traditional correctional models (Antojado, 2025; Dum et al., 2025; Earle, 2014). Yet there is little clarity on how to do this well, especially for correctional leaders. How can they meaningfully include people with lived experience in developing policies and programs? And how can they do so in ways that share decision-making without jeopardizing the well-being and safety of the people who live and



work in corrections?

One answer to this challenge is to leverage university experience in participatory action research (PAR). Over the past several decades, university-led PAR projects have included people who are formerly—and sometimes currently—incarcerated throughout the entire research process (Farrell et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2006; Haverkate et al., 2020). University Institutional Review Board protocols ensure that these projects protect lived-experience collaborators while enabling them to contribute meaningfully to solutions-oriented research. Universities have long practiced thoughtful inclusion of lived experience, and this capacity can be a resource to correctional leaders seeking to do the same.

Including lived experience, however, could risk further alienating correctional staff and deepening the “us versus them” divide between people who work in corrections and those who are incarcerated. When people who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated are empowered to share ownership of solutions, staff may feel threatened or sidelined in the process. Here again, the university can support by convening groups that rarely collaborate as equals: correctional staff, incarcerated people, students, faculty, community partners, and service providers. The university can serve as a neutral, trusted hub that brings these voices together, ensures that contributions are valued, and turns shared insights into practical solutions. In this way, universities do not simply generate knowledge; they connect it, elevate it, and help put it into practice.

In a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach, the university can support by shaping part of the **method**—the “how”—that brings diverse knowledge into practice.

An Illustrative University–Corrections Partnership

In the special issue of *Advancing Corrections* devoted to “What is Working with Women,” Klemm and Wright (2024) describe a university–corrections partnership to co-design gender-responsive practice for correctional staff. The partnership began when department of corrections leadership approached the university with a need for gender-responsive training. The university then developed a model in which academic expertise coexisted alongside the practical wisdom of correctional staff and the lived expertise of incarcerated women—all three groups sat at the same table to create the training. University faculty and graduate students gathered existing research and best practices on gender-responsive work and expanded that foundation by consulting experts from across the university (e.g., women’s studies, ethnic studies, social work). To supplement this, university researchers supported incarcerated women and correctional staff in informally surveying their peers to identify additional priorities for the training. The full team then synthesized the knowledge from these sources to determine the themes that should guide the curriculum.

The diverse composition of the design team led to innovations that would not have emerged under traditional research or training models. For example, the team concluded that gender-responsive practice would be more effective if incarcerated women themselves also learned about the principles, leading the incarcerated members to design and then deliver a peer-led workshop. University researchers trained correctional staff to deliver the final staff curriculum and ultimately transferred ownership of all content to the agency. Klemm and Wright (2024:162) conclude that “firsthand, lived experience of incarcerated women and correctional staff combined with the empirical science, research, and resources of a university can lead to a holistic and actionable gender-responsive

training.” Altogether, the university served in a supporting role that extended beyond traditional academic involvement, offering both the knowledge needed to ground the work and the collaborative structure required to translate that knowledge into practice.

Moving Forward: Practical Steps

In the spirit of Better Than Arrival Corrections, shifting the purpose of corrections—from reducing recidivism to enhancing well-being—does not require sweeping reforms. It begins with small, deliberate steps that gradually change how people think and work. The following actions reflect the same process that shaped the gender-responsive training example described above.

Initiate a Conversation.

After reading, share the idea of Better Than Arrival Corrections with a colleague or leader in your organization, whether in corrections or in a university. Start wherever it feels natural—with someone you supervise, someone you report to, or someone you collaborate with. The goal is simply to spark shared curiosity about an alternative purpose for corrections. Cultural change starts when people begin imagining what else might be possible.

Identify a Local Point of Connection.

Universities and correctional agencies each hold forms of expertise the other can benefit from. Take stock of who is already in your network or close to it. For corrections, this might include university faculty, centers, or programs working in areas connected to well-being—psychology, public health, education, sustainability, architecture, or social work. For universities, this might include correctional leaders or units responsible for programming, education, mental health services, staff development, or rehabilitative planning. Then make a simple, low-stakes outreach: “I came across these ideas and thought there might be alignment. Would you be open to a brief conversation?” Many effective partnerships begin with a single, informal introduction.

Start with a Small, Low-Risk Pilot.

Collaboration does not require large grants or major restructuring. Begin with one manageable activity: a one-hour virtual idea session, a joint review of a specific well-being challenge (e.g., sleep, recreation, nutrition, visitation), or a small student-supported project. Include staff and incarcerated people as partners throughout the process. Critically, measure success with indicators of well-being so that the pilot reflects the shifted goals of a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach. Choose something that builds trust, demonstrates value, and offers an early win. From there, establish a small cross-institutional group that meets periodically to share knowledge, align goals, and pilot new well-being initiatives over time.

Conclusion

Universities should share responsibility for advancing the well-being of the communities in which they are embedded (Crow & Dabars, 2015). This responsibility should extend especially to communities that are structurally excluded, including people who are incarcerated and the staff who work in correctional facilities. While incarceration separates people from the outside world, that separation is temporary in nearly all cases, and most individuals will eventually return to our communities (Travis, 2001). We should want them to return better than when they left—for their own well-being, for their families, and for the health and safety of our communities. Although this article

has focused primarily on enhancing the well-being of people who are incarcerated, correctional staff play an equally vital role within a Better Than Arrival Corrections approach (e.g., Lovins et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2023). Staff should also experience enhancement in their well-being over the course of their careers. Empowering and investing in staff, including through university partnerships, can help build a workforce that is more supported, skilled, and resilient. Importantly, a shift toward well-being does not replace the need for evidence. We can change the goals of correctional success, but we should still measure and evaluate progress to ensure that people are, in fact, better than their arrival. We should not discard decades of correctional research—the findings or the methods. We can build upon this foundation with new goals to pursue and new approaches to generating knowledge that embrace diverse ways of knowing (Cullen, 2022).

Most people readily embrace the mantra to “leave things a little better than you found them.” It is practical, attainable, cumulative in its impact, and noble in its aspiration. Corrections could adopt this principle by supporting people under supervision so they leave the system better than they entered it, and by empowering staff so they experience growth and flourishing rather than fatigue and depletion. Most importantly, we can redefine our indicator of correctional success at the system level to ensure a legacy of leaving people better than we found them. A reimagined system designed to enhance well-being can draw upon partners like universities, which offer breadth of expertise, capacity for innovation, and infrastructure for collaboration. Better Than Arrival Corrections calls us to create a system in which well-being is expected, cultivated, and the logical and intentional result of our work.

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About the Author

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ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association

CALL FOR PAPERS: EDITION 21



CALL FOR PAPERS FOR PUBLICATION IN ADVANCING CORRECTIONS EDITION # 21

"Effecting Change in Corrections"

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL CORRECTIONS AND PRISONS ASSOCIATION
PLEASE SUBMIT BY

JUNE 30TH, 2026

AIMS AND SCOPE OF ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

The *International Corrections and Prisons Association* (ICPA) believes evidence should ground the development of professional and humane correctional services, internationally. Yet, evidence is of little value unless the meaning of the evidence is understood and put into action. Our semi-annual Journal, *Advancing Corrections*, aims to resonate with practitioners and support use of evidence to inform practices. The Journal publishes peer-reviewed papers that are scholarly in content but that can be digested and appreciated by practitioners, managers, policy-makers, and other correctional professionals. In providing a forum for both researchers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines (criminal justice, forensic, education, psychology, sociology, political science, economics, public health, and social work) we strive to publish articles examining issues from a unique, interdisciplinary, and global perspective.

The Journal invites submission of papers that can be digested and appreciated by practitioners, managers, policy-makers, academics, and other correctional professionals. Authors are welcomed to submit papers for one of three sections of the Journal:

- *Featured Research Articles* should be more research oriented and scholarly, including the usual practice of referencing the relevant literature.
- *Views and Reviews* are shorter and thoughtful discussions of relevant or emerging issues/ topics.
- *Practice Innovation in Corrections* aims to profile what is going on in a given agency/jurisdiction that is especially innovative and can be of interest broadly to others.

THEME FOR THE 21ST EDITION: "EFFECTING CHANGE IN CORRECTIONS"

Background to the Theme

Correctional agencies have to routinely implement change. Change could be initiated to improve practice and achieve better outcomes, in order to address a new issue or concern, solve a problem, increase efficiency or, at times, simply to try something out to see how well it works. The change could be significant and systemic or relatively small in scope. There may be time to plan the change;

to design, organize and implement it carefully. However, in other circumstances, change may have to be rushed to address a new legislative or policy mandate, an emerging crisis or an unexpected incident or tragedy. Change may be welcomed or resisted by line staff, either supported or dismissed as unnecessary by managers, and perceived as either disruptive or beneficial by the individuals under our care.

The growing focus on **Implementation Science** in the broader field of human services suggests that a methodical approach for implementation can assist in successfully adopting evidence-informed change in corrections¹. In this context, 'evidence' is understood broadly and may include formal research and evaluation, local operational data, practitioner knowledge, lived experience, and learning drawn from other jurisdictions. It also needs to be acknowledged there are practical, political, financial and social-cultural considerations that may impede successful implementation of change regardless of how careful or planned the implementation process might be. Modern correctional agencies need to assess the merits of an increasing number of potential innovations (e.g., adopting new technology), or changes in existing practice (e.g., various service-delivery frameworks). Often, there is also a need for synthesis of different sources of knowledge (and not just from evaluation) to inform decision-making. Critical questions arise: is there sufficient evidence to support the change within the agencies broader circumstances and priorities; is the change feasible to implement; what level of improvement might reasonably be expected; and what alternative options exist ... etc.? Too often, change efforts in corrections remain 'true on paper' but falter in practice, becoming fragmented, superficial or disconnected from daily work, with limited meaningful impact.

Edition 21

As a practitioner-focused Journal, *Advancing Corrections* aims to provide a useful knowledge base to inform change in practice. In this 21st Edition of the Journal we are aiming to provide discussions and examples of the **PROCESS** of **CHANGE** itself, including how change is adapted, sustained, diluted, or abandoned in real-world correctional settings, in the hope that this 'knowledge sharing' about **CHANGE** will help support further positive change in our field.

For this 21st Edition we invite examples of why **CHANGE** was initiated, in either institutional or community settings, how it was managed, supported and accommodated, what impact it had and what outcomes were actually achieved. We welcome papers examining both proactive, strategically planned change and change initiated in response to crisis, political mandate or system pressure. We are especially looking for discussions of change initiatives in different regions of the world, and particularly, those highlighting positive change that may be occurring in non-western cultural settings and low resource environments.

We emphasize that we would like discussions of the *process* of change and not just descriptions of a new program, policy or other change initiative.

Discussions of change initiatives should include:

- Description of the nature of the change and what it was intended to achieve;
- The challenges and obstacles that had to be dealt with (anticipated and/or unexpected);
- The relevance and role of 'evidence' in supporting the change, including how decisions were

¹ <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf>



made where evidence was limited, emerging, or contested;

- How success (or impact) was assessed;
- What lessons were learned and what further change (if any) is being considered;

We are looking as well for:

- Reasoned, and both evidence- and practice-informed discussions of how we can effectively adopt and sustain change in corrections, including when the evidence may be absent, fragmented, or inconsistent;
- Examples of how positive change in organizational culture, climate and staff well-being was achieved;
- Analysis of factors leading to success or failure in realizing change;
- Examples of significant change efforts that have fallen down, stalled, been diluted, or produced unintended outcomes (and why);
- Research looking at practitioner's perspectives on the impact of change and its perceived benefits (or drawbacks);
- Discussions of how change can (and should) be *fully integrated with* rather than just *added on top* of daily practice;
- Examples of systemic change to influence the inflow or outflow of correctional populations (e.g., to reduce over-crowding; reduce pre-trial populations; reduce size of probation caseloads etc.)
- Examples of how consequences/impact of unplanned or unwelcomed change were dealt with effectively (e.g., significant legislative or policy changes);
- Reflections on the consequences of reactive change (e.g., in response to political or perhaps infrastructure pressure) versus change that is proactive and part of continuous improvement.

HOW SHOULD YOU SUBMIT YOUR PAPER?

Manuscripts should follow the *Guidelines for Authors* for the Journal.

(<https://icpa.org/resources/advancing-corrections-journal/manuscript-guidelines-for-authors.html>)

Suggested page length is from 7 to 15 pages (about 2,000 to 5,000 word-count without references), although lengthier research-oriented manuscripts or reviews may be considered based on merit.

Whenever appropriate, papers should include referencing of other related scholarly work, though it is emphasized that *Advancing Corrections* is not intended as an academic publication. Papers should be respectful of evidence but they should be written in a way that appeals to practitioners.

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically using the submission link below.

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You need to complete a full online submission and email your WORD manuscript to Frank Porporino, Editor, ACJ.

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The Submission form asks authors to submit all the information that is needed (e.g., abstract, manuscript, bios, headshot, mailing address) all in one place.

A WORD copy of the manuscript should also be forwarded to Frank Porporino, Ph.D., Chair of the ICPA Research and Development Network and Editor of Advancing Corrections (fporporino@rogers.com).

Please note that before submitting your manuscript, we ask that you provide a succinct summary of how your paper will specifically relate to the overall Theme of the Edition or any particular sub-theme. Your manuscript may not be accepted without this.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR PAPER?

Advancing Corrections has an international Editorial Review Board and submitted papers **will undergo a formal and rigorous 'peer review' process** where each submission is reviewed by at least two members of the Editorial Board, or other individuals specifically recruited as experts for a particular thematic focus.

The Editor of *Advancing Corrections* will manage the process of final selection of manuscripts. For this Edition, in choosing the final set of papers to be included, the Editor will also be consulting with an Associate Editor, Jennifer Galouzis, Corrective Services New South Wales. Papers that may not be suitable for publication may nonetheless be posted on the ICPA Web Site or summarized in the ICPA Beyond the Wall Newsletter for the information of ICPA members.

Please note that we will not accept papers that are submitted after the deadline for a given Edition of the Journal.

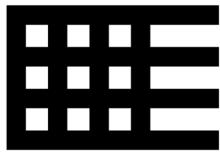
It is policy of the Journal to encourage the use of 'humanizing' language as much as possible in referring to those individuals we incarcerate or supervise in the community (e.g., refer to justice involved individuals rather than 'offenders' or 'prisoners'). We ask Authors to make use of more humanizing language throughout their manuscripts.

FURTHER NOTES FOR AUTHORS

Please note as well that we will not accept papers that simply attempt to promote a particular product or market a particular method or service without supportive evidence of effectiveness. *Advancing Corrections* is not a marketing vehicle. It is a professional Journal intended to broaden our knowledge base in corrections.

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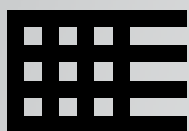
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