

## **Exploring the Relationship Between Prison Social Climate and Misconduct and Recidivism - Review of Current Knowledge**

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Prison social climate represents enduring social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a correctional institution as perceived by inmates and correctional staff. Prison social climate may be attributed partly to the shared environment and common characteristics of individual prisoners in the unit/prison. It is assumed that prison social climate also exerts lasting, post-incarceration effects. Thus, this study aims to describe the potential criminogenic impacts of different prison social climate dimensions on prisoners' behaviour within prison and upon release. Among reviewed prison social climate dimensions, observed staff-prisoner relationships, prisoner-to-prisoner relationships, and observed levels of safety are considered the most important determinants of prison social climate. Despite the conceptual and methodological diversity of the reviewed studies, it could be concluded that prisoners who rated their

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institutional experiences more negatively, especially in terms of in-prison relationships and security, were more likely to misbehave in prison and were more likely to (re)offend.

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## **Introduction**

Imprisonment may influence prison misconduct and post-release recidivism through various mechanisms, and their understanding may improve correctional effectiveness and desistance process. The notion that “pains of imprisonment” (e.g., crowding and security level) may have the unintended consequence of increasing future offending is not new (see Sykes, 1958). However, previous research on the relationship between imprisonment and (re)offending yielded mixed results (e.g., Bales & Piquero, 2012; Loeffler & Nagin, 2022), partly due to methodological limitations and neglecting the importance of the heterogeneity of differences in prison experiences (Van Ginneken & Palmen, 2022; Ware & Galouzis, 2019).

To improve recidivism prediction, scholars recognised the importance of incorporating prison experiences’ differences into studies (DeLisi, 2003; Mears et al., 2016; Mears & Mestre, 2012; Nagin et al., 2009; Visher & Travis, 2003). The amount of personal deprivation experienced was better and more accurately measured using the subjectively experienced prison social climate (Bosma et al., 2020). Those subjective perceptions and experiences are assumed to exert lasting, post-incarceration effects (e.g., Maruna 2001).

By utilising an unstructured literature review based on the Wos, Scopus, and Google Scholar search while using keywords: (prison) climate & misconduct/ offending/ reoffending/ recidivism study aims to describe potential crime-productive effects of shared subjective experiences of prison conditions - prison social climate.

## **Theoretical perspectives related to prison misconduct and (re)offending**

When explaining prison (mis)behaviour, researchers mainly rely on propositions of the deprivation model, the importation model, and the situational model (Wooldredge, 2003), which differ in the importance they attribute to different personal and environmental factors while explaining misconduct. According to the importation model, the likelihood of

misconduct is determined mainly by individual characteristics (e.g., age) and pre-prison experiences (e.g., violent criminal history, previous incarcerations, alcohol and drug use disorders, psychiatric disorders) (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Steiner et al., 2014; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2019; van Ginneken & Wooldredge, 2024). According to the deprivation model, the prison environment (composition of the prisoner population, the composition of staff, and prison security level, Camp & Gaes, 2005; Wooldredge et al., 2001) through "pains of imprisonment" (e.g., loss of liberty autonomy, security, desirable goods and services, and heterosexual relations) have adverse effects on prison behaviour. The situational or management models postulate those features of the institutional setting (e.g., physical environment - prison architecture, temperature, staff resources, case management) affect prison behaviour (Morris & Worrall, 2014) and that prison misconduct is a result of dynamic interplay between inmate and the prison milieu.

Reoffending is often explained by the exposure of offenders during the imprisonment to negative labelling (Braithwaite, 1993), increased defiance (Sherman, 1993), weakened social bonds (Laub & Sampson, 1993), and learning "criminal" skills through frequent contact with criminal associates (Sutherland et al., 1992). Blevins et al. (2010) explain prison misconduct, and Listwan et al. (2013) explain reoffending by using general strain theory (GST) and integrating its postulates with the importation and deprivation perspectives. According to GST, certain strains - physically or psychologically distressing events and conditions (e.g., negative treatment, the loss of individually valued things, and the inability to achieve valued goals) increase the likelihood of crime. Offenders may have experienced those strains before and during imprisonment. It is hypothesised that strains most conducive to crime are high in magnitude, perceived as unjust, associated with low control, and create pressure or incentive for criminal coping. If they result in negative emotional states or/and traits (anger, frustration), reduce self-control and social control, and foster the social learning of crime, it is very likely that prison misconduct or reoffending will emerge.

### **Prison social climate**

The concept of social climate originates from Murray's (1938) hypothesis that social environments are significant determinants of behaviour and represent a set of characteristics that "(a) distinguish the organisation from other organisations, (b) are relatively enduring, and (c) affect the behaviour of people in the organisation" (Forehand & Gilmer, 1964, p. 362). The

social climate is an intervening variable influenced by the structural characteristics of the organisation, which, in turn, influences individual behaviour and "a set of organisational properties and conditions that are perceived by its members and are assumed to exert a major influence on behaviour" (Wright, 1985, p. 258). Moos (1975) was the first to apply the climate to the study of prisons and described it as a set of "material, social, and emotional conditions of a given unit and the interaction between such factors" (Moos, 1989) that distinguishes prison (units) from one another. Recent prison social climate definitions emphasise the concept of complexity, multifacetedness, dimensionality, and subjectivity and consider climate a relational social phenomenon (Lewis, 2017; Liebling et al., 2011; Mann et al., 2019). For example, Ross et al. (2008, p. 447) define prison social climate as the enduring "social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a correctional institution as perceived by inmates and staff", and Tonkin (2016, p.1377), suggested it could be seen as "a multifactorial construct, consisting of various components that describe how a given unit is perceived by its staff or residents" which influences the well-being and behaviour of prisoners both during and after imprisonment (Boone et al., 2016). According to Ware & Galouzis (2019), the conceptualisation and operationalisation of prison social climate have developed from a managerial perspective (objective and subjective aspects of safety and security and management performance) (Saylor, 1984) and therapeutic perspective (correctional staff support, safety, and perception of opportunities for inmate personal growth and development through therapy) (Schalast et al., 2008; van de Helm et al., 2011).

Prison social climate may be explained partly by the shared environment of the prison or its unit and partly, due to selective composition, by common individual characteristics of the members in the unit or prison (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). It still needs to be made clear to what extent prison social climate is an individual level versus a prison (unit) phenomenon. However, theoretically, climate exists at the meso/macro level; it is more than the sum of individual perceptions and has a contextual effect on outcomes (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). Hence, the prison social climate is a complex phenomenon because it integrates 1) subjective experiences with objective conditions in prisons; 2) the heterogeneity of prisons' structure itself, including, for example, closed, semi-open, and open departments with largely different conditions related to prisoners' well-being and interpersonal dynamics; 3) the complexity of interpersonal relations including the interpersonal processes between the prisoners, the staff-prisoners interactions, and the social dynamics between the staff including their different roles in prison

environment (e.g. security and treatment staff) and different positions in prison hierarchy.

Also, researchers have yet to agree on the number and conceptualisation of prison social climate dimensions. However, they mainly use four main conceptual categories: relationship (or *harmony*) dimensions, security dimensions, professionalism dimensions, and the sense of personal development and well-being within the prison experience (Liebling, 2004; Liebling et al., 2011), or six major domains: 1) relationships in prison, 2) safety and order, 3) contact with the outside world, 4) prison facilities, 5) meaningful activities, and 6) autonomy (Bosma et al., 2020). Since the prison social climate is an inherently relational social phenomenon many researchers consider that staff-prisoner relationships (e.g., Liebling et al., 1999; Beijersbergen et al., 2016), followed by inmate (peer-to-peer) relationships (e.g., van Ginneken & Palmen, 2022), and perceived safety (e.g., Mann et al., 2019; Schalast et al., 2008; Auty & Liebling, 2020) as the most important determinants of prison social climate.

### **The relationship between dimensions of prison social climate and prison misconduct and recidivism**

Prison social climate can potentially facilitate successful prisoners' rehabilitation, or it can lead to misconduct and (re)offending (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Prison social climates, like all social climates, are dynamic and malleable (Lewis, 2017), but their impact is mainly conceptualised as negative (Cid et al., 2021; Dhimi et al., 2007) contributing to the maintenance of criminal identity (Perrin & Blagden, 2014) and it is often considered counterproductive to the rehabilitation and resocialisation (Frost & Ware, 2017; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Ross et al., 2008). Due to the complexity of the prison social climate construct as well as its potential relationship to prison misconduct and recidivism, various dimensions of prison climate have been studied in relation to recidivism. The association of prison social climate with misconduct and recidivism will be reviewed for the previously mentioned six domains considered the most important in determining the quality of prison life (e.g., Bosma et al., 2020).

#### **1) Staff-prisoner relationships**

Researchers consider the staff–prisoner relationship a key aspect of a “good prison” (Liebling & Arnold, 2004; Maguire & Raynor, 2017), and within prison social climate research, this concept is often used interchangeably with “support”, “professionalism”, and “therapeutic hold”

(van Ginneken, 2020). Prison social climate can also be viewed as a network where specific aspects of social climate represent nodes and the relationships between them edges (for the usage of Network analysis in social science, see: Costantini et al., 2015; Epskamp et al., 2018; Mededović, 2021). Using network framework, when Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL+) model of prison social climate is analysed, the staff-prisoner relationship represents one of the most central nodes, having the most important place in the whole system of prisoners' quality of life (Mededović et al., 2024b). Generally, when prisoners are getting less satisfied with staff-prisoner relationships, including experiencing procedural injustice ("quality of decision-making procedures and fairness in the way citizens are personally treated by law enforcement officials", Bottoms & Tankebe, 2013, p.119), misconduct is more likely (e.g., Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Bosma et al., 2020; Reisig & Mesko, 2009; Rocheleau, 2013).

Specifically, in Wright's (1993) study, prisoners who rated themselves as having less support from staff reported more external problems, such as arguing and fighting with other prisoners. Joon Jang (2020), among adult male inmates in Korea, revealed that inmates' dissatisfaction with correctional officers was directly related to aggressive, but not to property misconduct, and the relationship to aggressive misconduct was only partially mediated by negative emotion - anger. The data from Slovenian prisons show that impaired relations between staff and prisoners generate/mistrust and hostile attributions, which are consequently associated with in-prison violence (Bezljaj & Tadič, 2024). Congruently, the prisoners in Serbia who had disciplinary sanctions<sup>6</sup> and prisoners who were imposed by special measures<sup>7</sup> also had lower levels of the Harmony MQPL dimension, which encompasses staff-prisoner relationships (Ćopić et al., 2024).

As an aspect of deprivation contextual forces, prison social climate may be even more important to predicting institutional conduct than importation factors like personality traits (Wooldredge, 2003). The research conducted

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<sup>6</sup> Disciplinary sanctions represent a set of indicators of prison misconduct, e.g., correctional officers' reprimand; restriction or ban on receiving packages for up to three months; deprivation of granted extended rights and benefits for up to three months; and limitation or ban on the disposal of money in the prison for up to three months.

<sup>7</sup> Special measures are confiscation and temporary retention of items otherwise permitted, accommodation in a specially secured room, accommodation under increased supervision, testing for infectious diseases or psychoactive substances, and separation from other prisoners.

in Serbia compared predictive powers of prison social climate and "Dark Tetrad" personality traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism, and sadism, Paulhus et al., 2014), and the findings showed that results on Harmony MQPL prison social climate dimension outperformed Dark Tetrad traits in predicting disciplinary measures and executing solitary confinement on a prisoner (Međedović et al., 2024a).

Sparks and Bottoms (1995), based on qualitative study results from two male prisons, concluded that procedural justice is also important for prison order. Liebling (2004) showed that inmates from five different UK prisons considered prisons with lower fairness as more disorderly. Osgood & Briddell (2006) revealed that juvenile post-release offending rates were higher if it was considered that the institution operates within a corrective ethic than within a treatment ethic. Reisig and Mesko (2009) demonstrated that perceived unjust treatment by staff influences prisoners' misbehaviour when examining the association between procedural justice and self-reported and registered violation of institutional rules in the following six months. Similarly, Beijersbergen et al. (2015), in a longitudinal, Dutch nationwide study, found that inmates who perceived unfair and inhuman treatment and had negative relationships with correctional officers were subsequently more likely to commit prison misconduct than those who did not. The effect was present after controlling for prior misbehaviour, but the relationship between fairness and misconduct was one-directional and mediated by negative emotions (e.g., anger, resentment, and irritation due to treatment by correctional officers). Beijersbergen et al. (2016) longitudinal study showed that procedural justice is also related to post-release offending. Although the effect was small, prisoners who felt treated by correctional staff fairly and respectfully during imprisonment were less likely to get re-convicted in the 18 months following release. In addition, no mediating effect of legitimacy in the procedural justice and recidivism relationship was observed. Auty & Liebling's (2020) results have confirmed that "good enough" social interactions (as a part of MQPL dimensions of Humanity and Decency) were important in predicting reoffending. Bosma et al. (2020), in a Dutch nationwide study, found that out of six dimensions of perceived prison social climate, only those with lower-than-average experience of staff-prisoner relationships and procedural justice were more likely to have registered or reported misbehaviour than those with a more positive experience.

Contrary to these studies' results, van der Laan and Eichelsheim (2013) have not found an effect of perceived justice on registered aggressive misconduct among juveniles in correctional institutions, and Cook & Hoskins Haynes (2020) observed that negative relationships between

inmates and prison staff were not correlated significantly with perceived likelihood of reoffending. Steiner and Wooldredge (2018) found no significant impact of inmates' perceptions of procedural and distributive justice during rule infraction hearings on the number of subsequent violent incidents. Like the other prison social climate dimensions, Van Ginneken and Palmen (2022) found that an association between staff-prisoner relationships and misconduct becomes insignificant when controlling individual risk factors (e.g. age, index offence, incarceration length). Despite those studies' results, it can be concluded that relatedness between staff-prisoner relationships and in-prison misconduct or post-release recidivism is frequently researched and relatively well established.

## **2) Peer relationships**

The impact of peer relationships, along with staff-prisoner relationships, is one of the primary research interests in predicting misconduct and reconvictions. Across prison social climate studies, “peer relationship” is sometimes used interchangeably with “relationships”, “cohesion”, and also “harmony” concepts (van Ginneken, 2020). The study results on peer relationship – misconduct/reconvictions relatedness are quite concordant. For example, Listwan et al. (2013) found decreased odds of recommitment to prison among male offenders who were recently released from prison and residing in halfway houses (accommodations for former prisoners where they can stay for a limited period of time in order to adapt or prepare for life outside prison) that those who were reporting more negative relations with other inmates (measured as direct victimisation). Even more specifically, Schubert et al. (2012) found a 32% reduction in the probability of self-assessed antisocial activity in the year following release among youth who reported less influence from antisocial peers in the institutional setting. Within this sample of serious offenders, perceptions of aspects of the institutional experience were associated with recidivism over and above individual characteristics as well as facility type. However, McGrath's et al. (2012) analysis of retrospective data from parolees showed that the positive relationship between in-prison victimisation and violent behaviour in prison became nonsignificant or reduced in size when negative emotionality (trait anger) was controlled for.

More recent research supports a significant association between poor inmate relationships and misconduct/reconvictions. For example, Bosma et al. (2020) showed that a more positive experience of prisoner relationships was related to a decreased number of self-reported misbehaviour. Van Ginneken's (2022) study results confirmed the



increased risk of all types of misconduct (violence, property, drugs, and possession of other contraband items) among inmates who reported a poor cellmate relationship in comparison to those with a neutral relationship or prisoners in single cells. Van Ginneken and Palmen (2022) found that more positive peer relationships were consistently positively associated with lower reconviction rates two years after release from prison. Thus, it seems that inmate relationships are a significant contributor to the prisoners' misconduct and that they have an important and prolonged effect even to the post-release convictions.

### **3) Autonomy**

The autonomy or "freedom" (van Ginneken, 2020) dimension is among the least researched prison social climate dimensions within the corpus of reviewed studies. However, those rare research still confirm that structure, support, freedom, and privacy are four dimensions of climate predictive for disruptive behaviour (Kevin & Wright, 1993). Prisoners experiencing lower personal autonomy (measured by the MQPL questionnaire) were those more often sanctioned by disciplinary corrections because of in-prison misconduct, while prisoners experiencing higher autonomy less often showed rule-breaking and disruptive behaviour (Ilijic et al., 2024). More positive autonomy experiences also predict lower reconviction rates even two years after release from prison (van Ginneken & Palmen, 2022).

### **4) Meaningful activities**

Prison social climate dimension of "meaningful activities" has often been connected to "personal growth", "well-being and development", or just "activity" (van Ginneken, 2020) and mainly absorbs the prisoners' experience due to inclusion in a variety of prison programs – rehabilitative, educational and/or vocational, but also with the prison pain of dealing with boredom. While the opportunity to engage in constructive activities while in prison might result in increasing prisoners' self-esteem and improving prisoners' lives, boredom may result in too much time to dwell on one's current and potential problems, rumination about negative past events, and too much time to think about and carry out acts of misbehaviour and violence (Rocheleau, 2013). According to McCorkle et al. (1995), institutions that involved a greater proportion of prisoners in educational and vocational programs were characterised by lower rates of prisoner–staff assaults, and Rocheleau (2013) found that difficulty in dealing with boredom was positively associated with both serious prison misconduct in

general and prison violence in particular. Certain evidence about the impact of activities such as work assignments and education on behaviour are not so beneficial (e.g., Howard et al., 2020; Teasdale et al., 2016), but in a Dutch nationwide study by Bosma et al. (2020), a higher-than-average experience of availability of meaningful activities was related to decreased numbers of self-reported misbehaviour. Also, Van Ginneken and Palmén (2022) found that a more positive experience of meaningful activities was associated with lower reconviction rates two years after release from prison. Thus, we could speak in favour of including prisoners in subjectively meaningful activities during imprisonment and its generally prosocial effect on behaviour.

## **5) Contact with the outside world**

Regarding visits, as one of the most researched aspects of contact with the outside world within prison social climate studies, there are contradictory results concerning visits – misconduct association. There is some evidence that receiving visits reduces misconduct and lack of visitation is associated with higher offending (e.g., Agúndez Del Castillo et al., 2022; Cochran, 2012; Hensley et al., 2002; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Lahm, 2008; Mears et al., 2012) because of less support from their relatives, families and friends and more severe breakdown of the relationship. However, most studies have found that receiving visits is associated with a higher risk of offending (Bosma et al., 2020; Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004; Siennick et al., 2013) or that it has no significant effect (Howard et al., 2020; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Lahm, 2008; Woo et al., 2016). In the Bosma et al. (2020) study, prisoners who were more satisfied with the frequency of contact with the outside world reported misbehaviour more often than those without such contact. This is possibly related to the quality and/or timing of visits, the type of visitor, and the fact that visitors may be used to traffic contrabands (Bosma et al., 2020).

## **6) Security**

When it comes to security, in the context of prison social climate studies, we often speak about concerns for personal safety and feelings of worrying and fear. Generally, most studies confirmed a positive association between experiencing worries and fear for personal safety and consequent misconduct. For example, Kevin and Wright (1993) found that the less safe prisoners feel, the more they report external problems (arguing and fighting with others). In Rocheleau's (2013) study, concerns about one's safety

(fear) were positively related to general serious misconduct and violence when age, prior incarcerations, prior psychiatric treatment, time served, and minority status were controlled. Furthermore, Listwan et al. (2013) showed that offenders recently released from prison who found that the prison environment was negative (i.e., fearful, threatening, and violent) had increased odds of both arrest and recommitment to prison. Similarly, Auty & Liebling's (2020) results have indicated that low scores on security dimensions (organisation and consistency, the level of drugs, bullying and victimisation in the prison, policing and security, and prisoner safety) were important in predicting rates of proven reoffending. In van Ginneken and Nieuwbeerta's (2020) study, the lower the average level of safety experienced in a unit, the more individuals in this unit report the more misconduct, while Joon Jang (2020) observed a significant relationship between overcrowding and inmate misbehaviour only if it was related to a decrease in prison security.

However, several studies also showed different trends, although their results seem more as an exception. For example, in Cook & Hoskins Haynes's (2020) study, the odds of reporting a perceived likelihood of reoffending upon release were significantly lower for those who reported fearing for their safety in prison, but only for first-time prisoners. On the other hand, Van Ginneken and Palmen (2022) found a non-significant relationship between subjective safety (security) and recidivism, which they attributed to high scores on safety across prisons in their study.

### **Current knowledge and challenges for future research**

There are large differences in the way prison social climate and misconduct/reconvictions were operationalised among studies that investigate the association between prison social climate and prisoner incidence of misconduct (Bottoms, 1999; Camp & Gaes, 2005; Reisig & Mesko, 2009; Bosma et al., 2020; Van der Helm et al., 2012), reconvictions (Auty & Liebling, 2020) and recidivism (Schubert et al., 2012). Thus, observed results may be at least partly attributable to the research methods. Most of the studies were conducted cross-sectionally among adult male prisoners, so it is hard to conclude if prisoner misconduct was influenced by prison social climate or *vice versa*. If perceived prison social climate and self-reported misconduct were gathered simultaneously and reported by the same persons, shared method bias is usually present (Bosma et al., 2020). Across studies, the relationship between different prison social climate dimensions and misconduct/reconvictions is not equally researched, making it difficult to generalise findings across less researched

dimensions. Since dimensions of prison social climate are usually correlated, it is also difficult to conclude about the effects of the individual dimensions. Due to their overlap, climate dimensions may have shared effects on misconduct/reconvictions (Van Ginneken et al., 2019). The relationship between different dimensions of prison social climate and misbehaviour is far less clear for different types of misconduct (e.g., violent/non-violent; officially recorded – self-reported) and for post-release recidivism and (re)offending. Challenges for future research also represent reaching a more comprehensive conclusion about the relationship between prison social climate and misbehaviour, considering the security of prison levels and dynamics in different prison units (e.g. closed, semi-open, open). Also, it is unknown for how long the effects of experienced prison social climate exert their influence on offending after release, especially if those experiences were not extreme and/or durable, and what their impact is in combination with other potentially confounding and more recently present risk factors for post-release recidivism (Gaes, 2005). Considering the dynamic character of the prison social climate and its dependence on (inter)personal and contextual factors, there is a need for additional longitudinal research that will examine the prison social climate – misbehaviour relationships over longer periods by capturing perspectives from both prison officers and prisoners simultaneously.

Furthermore, the conclusion related to (in)direct mediating effect of negative emotions (e.g., Johnson Listwan et al., 2013), as well as the size of the effect of experienced prison social climate on misconduct/reconvictions after controlling for other (e.g., individual) risk factors is still not reached (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020; Cook & Hoskins Haynes, 2020). Based on the meaningful relationships between aggregate-level prison social climate variables and misconduct, it can be concluded that prison social climate has (correlational) effects. However, these should not be overstated because if most variance on prison social climate variables was concentrated at the individual level (effect did not remain significant when controlling for individual risk factors), then prison social climate appears to be shared only to a small extent, and it can be best conceptualised as individual perceptions (van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020; Yu et al., 2022).

However, based on the studies that were conducted on relatively large samples, longitudinally (e.g., Schubert et al., 2012); Johnson et al., 2013), and in various and numerous correctional institutions, as well as in different countries, it could be concluded that prisoners who rated their institutional experiences more negatively, especially in terms of in-prison relationships and security, were more likely to self-report misbehaviour/reconvictions.

Thus, maintaining a positive prison environment - reflected in good relationships, a sense of security, and a procedurally just treatment, may reduce the potentially criminogenic effect of imprisonment.

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