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Security Matters: Predictors of Self-Rated Prison Climate in Serbian Prisons

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Abstract: *Background*. The prison climate significantly impacts on prisoners' quality of life and rehabilitation outcomes. This cross-sectional study aimed to identify which security-related dimensions predict prisoners' evaluations of overall prison climate in the largest Serbian correctional institutions. *Methods*. We administered the *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life* (MQPL) survey to 543 (86% males) prisoners in four correctional facilities: Sremska Mitrovica, Niš, Požarevac–Zabela, and Požarevac. Most participants were aged 31–40, were serving sentences of 3 to 10 years under a closed regime, and nearly half had committed a violent offence or received disciplinary measures. We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to examine the predictive value of four MQPL dimensions (*Policing and Security*, *Prisoner Safety*, *Prisoner Adaptation*, and *Drugs and Exploitation*) on overall climate ratings. *Results*. Regime type significantly predicted overall climate ratings in Step 1 (β = .28), with semi-open regimes receiving more positive ratings. When MQPL subscales were added in Step 2, the explained variance increased from 8% to 28%, and the predictive strength of regime type decreased (β = .12). *Prisoner Safety* (β = .28) and *Policing and Security* (β = .26) were the strongest predictors, while *Prisoner Adaptation* and *Drugs and Exploitation* were not significantly associated with overall ratings. *Conclusions*. While the structural regime type is important, prisoners' evaluations of life in custody are primarily influenced by their perceptions of safety and adequate staff supervision. Improving institutional safety through fair and consistent supervision may have a greater impact on prison climate than regime classification alone.

Keywords: prison climate, prison security, prisoner safety, staff supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Prison Climate and Perceptions of Safety and Security

Prison climate is a term that reflects the social, emotional, organizational, and environmental aspects of life in prison (Liebling et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2008). A more favourable prison climate is characterized by safety, fairness, and supportive relationships. It is often associated with improved well-being, reduced violence, increased engagement in rehabilitation, and lower rates of reoffending overall (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Ilijić et al., 2024;

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Liebling et al., 2021; Liebling & Arnold, 2012; Mastrobuoni et al., 2014; Skar et al., 2019). Numerous factors can influence perceptions of prison climate, including environmental conditions, social dynamics, and psychological factors such as experiences of safety, threat, and procedural justice (Liebling, 2004).

The concept of safety is closely related to the broader prison climate and is described as a subjective, relational, and dynamic experience (Peart et al., 2024). In the context of prisons, security can be understood in two main ways: 1) formal (hard) security, which includes structural or operational elements designed to prevent escape and violence such as surveillance systems, architectural design, and safety rules and procedures (Jovanić et al., 2020); 2) dynamic or felt (subjective) security, which reflects prisoners' perceptions of safety and threat within the prison environment (Wolff & Shi, 2009).

Research shows that feelings of safety are highly contextual and relational in nature. Environments that foster supportive relationships and reduce isolation are more likely to be perceived as safe (Liebling et al., 2012; Madoc-Jones et al., 2016; Peart et al., 2024). While safety is often associated with levels of surveillance or control, appropriate use of authority, and security infrastructure, it is also dependent on the presence of meaningful activities, opportunities for personal development, interpersonal support, and rehabilitative programming (Bosma et al., 2020; Jovanić et al., 2020). Research further indicates that subjective safety is not merely an individual trait but is shaped by shared perceptions of prison and work climate, including satisfaction with organizational conditions, peer relations, and access to purposeful activities (Palmen et al., 2022). Prisoners may feel safe despite being in a high-risk environment; factors such as local social networks and institutional social dynamics (e.g., interactions with other prisoners and staff) and recent victimization experiences can significantly influence prisoners' perceptions of safety (Wolff & Shi, 2009). At the same time, high formal security does not always translate to a sense of safety, as a heavy reliance on formal, coercive security can undermine perceived security, leading to increased anxiety, more violence, and less trust. Moreover, declining trust, fractured relationships, and fears (e.g., of radicalization) can intensify feelings of threat, even in highly secure settings (Liebling & Arnold, 2012; Martens & Crewe, 2024; Poklek, 2020; Ricciardelli & Sit, 2016).

Institutional Context and Variation in Perceptions of Safety and Security

Evidence to date suggests that the type of prison regime (e.g., open, semi-open, high-security) influences how prisoners perceive the prison climate and affects their overall experience (Palmen et al., 2022). Higher-security facilities are viewed more negatively (Williams et al., 2019), in comparison to lower-security and open prisons that tend to receive more favourable ratings across various domains of prison climate, particularly in terms of safety (Madoc-Jones et al., 2016). In general, open and semi-open wards typically offer more space, freedom of movement, access to designated "safe zones", and greater opportunities for rehabilitative engagement while also avoiding overcrowding (Madoc-Jones et al., 2016; Peart et al., 2024). Moreover, perceptions of safety differ not only across individuals but also across prison systems. For example, prisoners in some systems (e.g., Norway) reported a greater sense of security and trust, whereas others (e.g., England and Wales) experienced constant vigilance and a limited sense of safety (Martens & Crewe, 2024).

In Serbia, perceived safety and deprivation of freedom appear to vary more between different prison types (i.e., open, semi-open, and closed institutions) than between wards within the same institutions (Jovanić et al., 2020). Convicts in open-type prisons reported significantly lower levels of perceived deprivation than those in semi-open or closed prisons, particularly in more recent years (2001 vs. 2018), suggesting that the formal level of institutional security has a measurable impact on the intensity of freedom deprivation experienced by prisoners. Conversely, the type of ward was not significantly associated with different levels of deprivation, and perceptions remained relatively stable between 2001 and 2018. These findings clarify that macro-level prison security classification (year and prison type) plays a central role in determining prisoners' perceptions of deprivation and security in Serbian prisons, over and above micro-level housing arrangements (ward type). In Serbia's only prison for women in Požarevac, female prisoners have expressed a generally moderate level of perceived security in their daily lives (Batrićević et al., 2023; Stevanović, 2025). Furthermore, many reported being able to adapt relatively well to the prison environment. Concerns were noted regarding personal safety, staff supervision and understaffing, but also regarding drug-related problems and the influence of informal prisoner hierarchies (Batrićević et al., 2023; Stevanović, 2025).

The MQPL Framework and Its Security-Related Dimensions

One of the most recognizable frameworks for assessing prison climate is the *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life* (MQPL) survey (Liebling et al., 2012). The MQPL captures prisoners' lived experiences, including their relationships with staff, perceptions of fairness, safety, respect, institutional legitimacy, and personal development, among others. It has been validated across various prison systems, including the one in Serbia, which is particularly valuable given the limited availability of standardized prison climate research in the Southeast European contexts (Međedović et al., 2024; Milićević, Ilijić, et al., 2024). Longitudinal analyses have demonstrated that low MQPL scores, particularly in Well-Being, Harmony, and Security, are associated with elevated risks of violence and self-harm, thus confirming the instrument's predictive utility in prison management (Auty & Liebling, 2024).

Within the MQPL framework, security-related dimensions can be broadly categorized into four distinct areas (Liebling et al., 2012). First, *Policing and Security* reflects the staff's ability to supervise and control the prison environment. This dimension focuses on the measures taken to maintain order, prevent violence, and ensure the safety of prisoners and staff. It includes the use of surveillance, disciplinary practices, and the effectiveness of security protocols. Closely linked to the security measures and social dynamics within prisons, *Prisoner Safety* refers to the individual's sense of protection from harm and examines the extent to which prisoners feel safe from violence, exploitation, and other forms of harm. Next, *Prisoner Adaptation* assesses the pressure to engage in informal prison economies and hierarchies. It explores how prisoners cope with the prison environment, including their ability to integrate into the social structure. Finally, the *Drugs and Exploitation* dimension addresses exposure to substance use, bullying, victimization, and other forms of exploitation, which can undermine safety and hinder rehabilitation efforts.

Research Gap and the Current Study

Most existing prison studies, predominantly conducted in Western contexts (Milićević, 2024; Ross et al., 2008), examine security as a structural or operational feature of prison regimes or focus on misconduct only, overlooking its lived dimensions and the value of subjective climate data (Bosma et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a lack of published data on the specific contribution of security-related aspects, such as perceptions of safety, staff supervision, and experiences of threat or exploitation, to the broader prison climate. This research gap is particularly evident in under-studied prison systems, such as those in Southeast Europe, including Serbia, where evidence-based approaches are needed to promote institutional legitimacy and improve prison conditions and the quality of life within prisons (Milićević, 2024).

Therefore, this study aimed to identify security-related predictors of prisoners' perceptions of the overall prison climate in the largest prisons in Serbia while controlling for the type of regime. Specifically, it examined the relative contribution of four MQPL dimensions: policing and security, prisoner safety, prisoner adaptation, and exposure to drugs and exploitation. Since previous research has established that climate constructs such as safety and security are cross-nationally stable and comparable across national settings (Ross et al., 2008), the findings of our study could contribute to a better understanding of how security-related factors influence the lived experience of imprisonment.

As for the structure of this study, it begins with an overview of the conceptual and institutional context of prison climate and safety, followed by a presentation of the MQPL framework and the research gap addressed. The methodology section summarizes the procedure, measures, sample, and analytical strategy. The results are discussed across two thematic areas: the predictive role of regime type and the influence of security-related MQPL dimensions. The paper concludes with implications for prison management and study's limitations and proposes directions for future research.

METHODS

Procedures

Participants were recruited from four Serbian correctional facilities (Sremska Mitrovica, Niš, Požarevac–Zabela, and Požarevac) between May 2022 and January 2023. The Požarevac facility is the only prison for women serving custodial sentences in Serbia. Convenience sampling was used. Eligibility criteria included voluntary informed consent, at least 30 days served, no disciplinary segregation at the time of data collection, and functional literacy in Serbian. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured anonymity, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Questionnaires were administered in person by the research team during a single session in the prison dining area using a paper-and-pencil format. Researchers remained present to assist and collect completed forms in sealed envelopes.

This study is part of the broader PrisonLIFE project (https://prisonlife.rs/en/) and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research (Nos. 103/2020) and conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

Measurements

The MQPL survey is a multidimensional framework designed to assess the overall quality of prison life as an indicator of the prison social climate (Liebling et al., 2012). In this study, a Serbian version of the MQPL was employed (Milićević, Ilijić, et al., 2024), which had previously demonstrated acceptable to good reliability (Cronbach's α = .60–.97; Međedović et al., 2024). Both the original and versions adapted for different jurisdictions have demonstrated similar psychometric properties (α = .56–.89; Ilijić et al., 2024).

The MQPL consists of 127 items, of which 126 are rated on a 5-point Likert scale and grouped into five categories: *Harmony*, *Professionalism*, *Security*, *Conditions and Family Contact*, and *Well-Being and Development*. As an indicator of the broader prison climate, one global item captures prisoners' perceptions of their treatment and conditions within correctional institutions on a 10-point scale, with higher scores indicating a more favourable perception. For the purposes of this study, the *Security* category was selected, with its four distinct scores: 1) *Policing and Security* (9 items, e.g. Supervision of convicts is weak in this prison); 2) *Prisoner Safety* (5 items, e.g. Generally speaking, I fear for my physical safety); 3) *Prisoner Adaptation* (3 items, e.g. It's hard for me to avoid being in debt in this prison); and 4) *Drugs and Exploitation* (5 items, e.g. Many use drugs in this prison). The scores are calculated as an average of the corresponding items. Higher scores indicate a better quality of prison life. Scores above 3.00 suggest positive evaluations, while those below this neutral threshold indicate areas that need improvement (Liebling et al., 2021).

Finally, we collected additional data from self-reports and official records. Risk was assessed using the Offender Assessment System (OASys), a standardized tool used in Serbian prisons for evaluating inmate risks, needs, and sentence planning.

Sample

The study sample consisted of 543 incarcerated individuals from four correctional institutions in Serbia (Table 1). The majority were male (86%) and between 31 and 40 years old (40%). Most participants completed high school (63%). In terms of institutional distribution, inmates were housed in Sremska Mitrovica (32%), Niš (32%), Požarevac–Zabela (22%), and Požarevac (14%).

The average sentence length was 6 years and 9 months, ranging from 2 months to 40 years. Over half were serving between 3 and 10 years (56%) and were first-time prisoners (53%), with 73% incarcerated under a closed regime. In terms of time served, 51% had already served more than two years. Nearly half of the sample (45%) had committed a violent offence. The most common criminal offences were against human health (34%) and property (33%), followed by violent crimes such as those against life and limb (18%). Regarding risk categorization, among those sentenced to three years or less, 50% were classified as middle-risk, while among those with longer sentences, the majority were classified as high-risk (47%). Nearly four in ten prisoners (38%) had at least one disciplinary measure imposed against them. Work was the main daytime activity for about half of the men (51%).

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics (n = 543)*

Variable		*n*	%
Gender	Male	465	85.6
	Female	78	14.4
Age (years)	*M* = 39.44, *SD* = 9.95, *Mdn* = 38.00, Min = 20, Max = 74		
Age (category range)	20–30 years	105	19.3
	31–40 years	218	40.1
	41–50 years	142	26.2
	51 years or older	78	13.8
Education	Unfinished elementary school	31	5.7
	Elementary school	133	24.5
	High school	340	62.6
	Vocational college or higher	37	6.8
Prison location	Sremska Mitrovica	174	32.0
	Niš	172	31.7
	Požarevac–Zabela	119	21.9
	Požarevac	78	14.4
Sentence length (years, months)	*M* = 6 y 9 mo, *SD* = 3 y 11 mo, *Mdn* = 4 y 6 mo, Min = 2 mo, Max = 40 y		
Sentence length (category range)	1 year or less	7	1.3
	Over 1 to 3 years	129	23.8
	Over 3 to 10 years	305	56.2
	Over 10 to 20 years	88	16.2
	More than 20 years	13	2.4
Prison regime	Closed	398	73.3
	Semi-open	145	26.7
Criminal offences	Against human health	187	34.4
	Against property	177	32.6
	Against life and limb	97	17.9
	Other criminal offences	27	5.0
Elements of violence	Violent crime	245	45.1
	Non-violent crime	296	54.5
	Missing data	2	0.4

First-time prisoners	Yes	284	52.3
	No	258	47.5
Time served[a]	6 months or less	70	12.9
	Over 6 months to 1 year	87	16.0
	Over 1 year to 2 years	110	20.3
	Over 2 years	275	50.6
Disciplinary measures	No	333	61.3
	Yes	204	37.6
Work in prison	No	262	48.3
	Yes	275	50.6
Risk category[a] (up to 3 years of imprisonment)	Low	11	6.4
	Middle	86	50.3
	High	73	42.7
Risk category[a] (for more than 3 years of imprisonment)	Low	12	3.2
	Middle	161	43.4
	High	174	46.9
	Very high	23	6.2

Note. Other criminal offences include offences against: Public peace and order = 19 (3.5%); Economic interests = 14 (2.6%); Sexual freedom = 12 (2.2%); Relating to marriage and family = 10 (1.8%); Freedoms and rights of man and citizen = 6 (1.1%); Road traffic safety = 4 (0.7%); Government authorities = 3 (0.6%); Legal instruments = 1 (0.2%); Official duty = 2 (0.4%); Humanity and other right guaranteed by international law = 9 (1.7%); Law on public order and peace/obstructing an official in discharging official duties in government authority = 2 (0.4%).
[a] At the time of data collection.

Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize sample characteristics and scale scores. Data normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and by visual inspection of the histograms. To examine predictors of overall prison climate, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. The prison regime (closed = 0; semi-open = 1) was entered in Step 1. In Step 2, four MQPL-based security dimensions were added (*Policing and Security*, *Prisoner Safety*, *Prisoner Adaptation*, and *Drugs and Exploitation*).

The number of predictor variables used was five, requiring a minimum sample size of 90 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The current sample size of 543 exceeded this value. Assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, and independence of residuals were met. Multicollinearity was excluded using correlation matrices and collinearity diagnostics (tolerance, VIF). Outliers beyond three standard deviations were excluded, and Mahalanobis distances were also inspected. Standardized coefficients (β) were used to compare predictors, and unstandardized coefficients (*B*) were used to interpret their effects. A listwise deletion strategy was used. Regarding sample characteristics, missing data was

minimal across variables, with the highest rate being 1.1%. Analyses were conducted at a significance level of 0.05.

RESULTS

The average rating of *Overall Prison Climate* was moderate ($M = 4.29$) on a 10-point scale (Table 2). Among the security-related MQPL dimensions, *Prisoner Adaptation* had the highest mean ($M = 3.75$), followed by *Prisoner Safety* ($M = 3.45$), *Policing and Security* ($M = 3.27$), and *Drugs and Exploitation* ($M = 2.92$). All four scales demonstrate acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .70–.83$), comparable to or higher than those reported in previous studies (Liebling et al., 2012, 2021; Međedović et al., 2024). The *Overall Prison Climate* rating correlated with all four security scores ($r = .29–.48$). The strongest correlations were found between *Drugs and Exploitation* and both *Policing and Security* ($r = .74$) and *Prisoner Safety* ($r = .63$), with stronger staff supervision and a safer environment associated with reduced informal coercion and lower exposure to drugs and victimization within the prison setting. Regime type was significantly related to all security dimensions ($r = .27–.38$), indicating better-perceived treatment and conditions in less restrictive settings.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and the Correlations Between Examined Variables*

	M (SD)	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Overall Prison Climate Rating[a]	4.29 (2.60)						
2. Policing and Security	3.27 (0.69)	.76	.46*				
3. Prisoner Safety	3.45 (0.84)	.73	.48*	.61*			
4. Prisoner Adaptation	3.75 (0.92)	.70	.29*	.55*	.51*		
5. Drugs and Exploitation	2.92 (0.99)	.83	.43*	.74*	.63*	.47*	
6. Prison Regime, closed/semi-open %)	73.3/26.7		.28*	.27*	.32*	.28*	.38*

Note. [a]Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of the overall prison climate (1 = lowest, 10 = highest).
*The coefficient is significant under Bonferroni correction ($p < .001$).

The hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that regime type was a significant predictor of broader prison climate ratings in Step 1 ($\beta = .28$), accounting for 8% of the variance. Specifically, transitioning from a closed to a semi-open ward was associated with an average increase of 1.66 points in the prison climate score (Table 3). However, when security-related MQPL subscales were included in Step 2, the prison regime remained a significant but weaker predictor ($\beta = .12$). At the same time, the overall model improved substantially, explaining 28% of the variance in overall prison life ratings. The change in explained variance between Step 1 and Step 2 was statistically significant, accounting for an additional 21% of the variance in overall prison life ratings ($\Delta R^2 = .21$). This result indicates that the addition of MQPL domains significantly enhanced the model's predictive power. Among the Step 2 predictors, *Prisoner Safety* ($\beta = .28$) and *Policing and Security* ($\beta = .26$) emerged as the strongest contributors to the model. A one-point increase in *Policing and Security* and *Prisoner Safety* was associated with a 0.97- and 0.89-point rise in

Overall Prison Climate, respectively. Moving to a semi-open ward increased the rating by 0.72. *Prisoner Adaptation* and *Drugs and Exploitation* scores did not significantly predict the outcome (Table 3).

Table 3. *Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Overall Prison Climate Rating*

MQPL	Predictors/Model	Step 1		Step 2	
		B (*SE*)	β	*B* (*SE*)	β
Overall Prison Climate Rating[a]	Prison regime[b]	1.66 (.24)	**.28****	.72 (.23)	**.12****
	Policing and Security			.97 (.22)	**.26****
	Prisoner Safety			.89 (.16)	**.28****
	Prisoner Adaptation			-.13 (.13)	-.05
	Drugs and Exploitation			.11 (.16)	.04
	Model R^2 / Adj. R^2 / ΔR^2	.08 / .08 / .08**		.29 / .28 / .21**	
	F (*df1, df2*)	47.05 (1, 541)**		43.66 (5, 537)**	

Note. MQPL = Measuring the Quality of Prison Life Survey; *B* = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardised beta coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination; Adj. R^2 = adjusted R^2; ΔR^2 = change in R^2 between steps. Statistically significant predictors are given in bold.

[a] Higher scores indicate a more positive perception of the overall prison climate (1 = lowest, 10 = highest).

[b] Prison regime is coded as 0 = closed, 1 = semi-open.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined how security-related dimensions of prison climate predict prisoners' overall perception of their imprisonment, as measured by the MQPL survey. Our findings indicate that, beyond the influence of regime type, prisoners' experiences of safety and security are central to their overall assessment of the prison climate. This research addresses an important gap by clarifying how security relates to prisoners' lived experiences.

Regime Type as a Predictor of Prison Climate Evaluations

We found that regime type significantly correlated with all MQPL security-related dimensions (Table 2), indicating that prisoners in semi-open settings reported higher perceived safety and overall prison climate, lower exposure to exploitation, and less reliance on adaptation strategies than those in closed wards. However, regression analysis revealed that regime type alone explained only a modest but significant portion of how inmates rated their treatment and institutional conditions (Table 3).

In Serbia, general prison conditions had no significant effect on perceived treatment (Bobić et al., 2022). In comparison, the severity of a prison regime in Slovenia negatively im-

pacted legitimacy, with prisoners in open and semi-open regimes perceiving staff as more legitimate than those in closed regimes (Hacin, 2018). The main purpose of strict control and high-security measures in closed prisons is to prevent escapes and maintain order, yet they often create a tense environment with elevated stress, conflict, and compromised safety. These issues are partly attributed to rigid discipline, higher violence, and restricted access to meaningful activities that can undermine the overall prison experience (Goossens et al., 2025; Peart et al., 2024; Wolff & Shi, 2009).

In contrast, prisoners in minimum-security, semi-open, or open regimes consistently report better safety, well-being, and overall climate as the institutional focus shifts from punitive control to rehabilitative support (Ilijić et al., 2024; Jovanić et al., 2020; Mjåland et al., 2023). These settings promote autonomy and provide more access to education, work, and social interaction, all of which could positively influence the prison climate (Bosma et al., 2020). Recent studies show that safety (perceived and actual), relationships (among prisoners and with staff), and autonomy (sense of control) are key climate dimensions predicting violence and victimization (Goossens et al., 2025). Dynamic security, based on constructive and respectful staff–prisoner relationships, helps prevent misconduct, maintain safety and order, and improve the prison climate (Van Ginneken et al., 2018).

Overall, our findings support the view that structural and operational regime differences shape not only safety perceptions but also broader evaluations of prison life. Semi-open prisons, such as those in Serbia included in our research, prioritize rehabilitation and typically rely on more dynamic security approaches (Jovanić et al., 2020), which may explain the more positive perceptions of prison climate reported in these settings.

Security-Related Predictors of Prison Climate

When security-related factors were added to the regression model, *Prisoner Safety* (i.e., the perceived protection from harm, threat, or danger) and *Policing and Security* (i.e., staff supervision and control) emerged as the central predictors, each contributing uniquely to more positive climate evaluations (Table 3). A one-point increase on these MQPL subscales corresponded to nearly a one-point improvement in overall prison climate scores, implying that perceived safety and adequate staff supervision are important for creating a more positive prison environment.

Current evidence suggests that in therapeutic environments, where relationships tend to be more respectful and rehabilitative goals are prioritized, prisoners tend to report feeling significantly safer and more supported (Blagden et al., 2016). A strong perception of personal safety reduces anxiety and fear, enabling better psychological stability, which in turn fosters a more positive perception of the prison climate (Goossens et al., 2025). In Serbia, a group of authors found that better staff interactions were strongly associated with more positive evaluations of prison treatment (Bobić et al., 2022). In Norway, Kilmer et al. (2023) found that correctional officers who practiced dynamic security were perceived as more legitimate, which in turn fostered prisoner trust, cooperation, and a more rehabilitative prison climate. Our findings align with research from Slovenia, which also noted the central role of staff effectiveness in promoting safety, legitimacy, order, and compliance (Hacin & Meško, 2018). Although regime type is relevant, studies consistently show that relational and procedural factors are often more influential. Prisoners' perceptions

of legitimacy, trust in staff, and staff effectiveness appear more influential in determining feelings of safety and well-being (Hacin, 2018; Hacin & Meško, 2018).

Although *Prisoner Adaptation* (e.g., trading, allegiances) and *Drugs and Exploitation* (exposure to bullying, victimization, and illicit substances) were not significant predictors of the overall climate ratings, these factors may still affect daily life. Previous research has shown mixed results, with some suggesting that these behaviours reflect adaptation to weak institutional management or harmful norms rather than directly influencing climate perceptions (Wooldredge, 2020). Regarding drug misuse, qualitative focus groups in local prisons in England found that it could be a coping mechanism for boredom and stress and not a central driver of how prisoners view institutional conditions (Nurse et al., 2003; Woodall, 2011).

Prisons with poorer climates, defined by staff and prisoner dissatisfaction, tend to have higher rates of victimization (Wolff et al., 2009). Research highlights that, in addition to individual characteristics (e.g., mental health or misconduct), certain contextual factors (e.g., security level, routine, and population composition) particularly affect victimization risk (Teasdale et al., 2016). Some climate features, such as strained staff–prisoner relationships, a high value placed on social status, or a negative peer environment, are linked to more bullying, aggression, and drug use (Bosma et al., 2020; Teasdale et al., 2016). This study has found that, generally, in-prison behaviour experiences (e.g., drug use, bullying) do not independently determine broader climate evaluations, confirming the earlier notion that staff–prisoner relationships and perceptions of fairness, rather than institutional regimes or daily adaptation behaviours, are central to how prisoners evaluate their treatment in Serbia (Bobić et al., 2022).

Our finding that adaptation is not necessarily linked to prison climate could suggest that, from the prisoners' perspective, feeling safe and trusting staff are more important for experiencing a positive climate than an individual's level of adaptation (Khan, 2022; Wheeler & Cline, 2020). Our findings also resonate with previous research demonstrating the cross-cultural stability of core prison climate dimensions, namely safety and security, across Western prison systems (Ross et al., 2008). This outcome further reinforces the view that these aspects of prison climate are key to how inmates evaluate life in custody, in contrast to more individually variable factors like adaptation.

Prisoners' evaluations of prison life appear to be more influenced by systemic, structural, and relational aspects of the environment, such as staff conduct, institutional organization, and access to care, than by subcultural or individual adaptations, or exposure to informal systems of exploitation (Goomany & Dickinson, 2015; Hyatt et al., 2024; Nurse et al., 2003). One alternative explanation for this result is that personal experiences of relationships within prison were not directly considered. However, previous research has shown that these experiences had a more significant role in prisoners' adaptation to imprisonment than the broader characteristics of the prison unit itself (Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020; Van Ginneken et al., 2019).

In general, adaptation refers to how individuals cope with or adjust to imprisonment (e.g., reducing hopelessness or rule-breaking), which may or may not always align with positive perceptions of their environment (Casey et al., 2016; Dhami et al., 2007). In some cases, adaptation may coexist with distress, particularly in situations of deprivation (Casey et al., 2016). In an English men's medium-security prison, recent results on the Incentives and

Earned Privileges scheme revealed that policy changes redefined how prisoners adapt, making it more about strategic, visible compliance than just passive rule-following (Khan, 2022). This explanation suggests that adaptation may be shaped more by institutional expectations than by internalized perceptions of the prison climate (Khan, 2022; Wheeler & Cline, 2020). Prisoners who feel misunderstood or devalued due to institutional responses to self-harm report emotional isolation, suggesting that how prisoners are treated (i.e., recognition, respect, and support) matters more than their adaptation strategies (Neave & Glorney, 2024).

Recently, Auty and Liebling (2024) found that three MQPL dimensions (*Harmony*, *Security*, and *Professionalism*) must exceed specific thresholds for a prison to be considered "safe enough" and legitimate. Serious violence and poor outcomes were best predicted not by individual behaviours but by broader relational and institutional factors, particularly when these fell below empirical thresholds. Even in "minimally safe" prisons, informal adaptation and victimization may still occur if relational and procedural foundations are perceived as strong. Therefore, our results extend the findings of previous studies by suggesting that prisoners' evaluations of prison climate are more strongly influenced by the perceived moral and relational quality of the institution, such as safety and staff conduct, than by the presence of illicit behaviour or informal adaptation strategies, including levels of drug use, bullying, and victimization.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

However, the study has limitations: it did not consider factors such as prison design, activity availability, staff perspectives, or the variability in prison climate across different wards. The use of self-report measures may introduce bias, and findings may not be generalizable due to the specific institutional and cultural context in which they are obtained. Future research should investigate whether specific MQPL thresholds are applicable in Serbia and identify combinations of climate dimensions that are critical for meeting security standards, incorporating factors such as bullying, victimization, substance misuse, coping, peer dynamics, and staff legitimacy. A longitudinal and mixed-methods approach, including qualitative narratives and staff views, is recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings suggest that while the type of prison regime matters, perceptions of safety and staff control play a more substantial and direct role in shaping how prisoners experience and evaluate life in custody than informal coping strategies or exposure to illicit behaviour. Specifically, higher perceptions of safety and more effective staff supervision were associated with increased overall climate ratings. To conclude, enhancing security through fair and consistent supervision and fostering a sense of personal safety is more impactful for improving prison climate than structural regime differences alone.

Our findings have implications for prison management and practice. Namely, when it comes to safety in prisons, improving prisoners' perceptions of safety and overall climate can be achieved by enhancing staff supervision and ensuring protection from harm. Re-

lational security, ethical staff conduct, and trust-building should be prioritized in prison management, with staff training extending beyond procedural control to include interpersonal skills and fairness.

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