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Imprisonment in Europe: An Overview of Current and Up-To-Date Prison Research

Crime is a major societal problem. One way societies try to deal with crime is by imprisoning offenders. Imprisonment is the most severe criminal sanction that can be imposed on offenders in European Union countries. Decades ago, research already identified imprisonment as one of the most stressful life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). At present, about 1.7 million people are being detained in penal institutions across European countries (Walmsley, 2018). A prison sentence not only affects the offender but also extends to his or her family (e.g. parents, partners, and children). As such, many people are affected by prison sentences. Given the severity of the punishment, the high numbers affected by it, and the high costs associated with imprisonment, accurate knowledge on the implementation, execution, and consequences of imprisonment is of paramount importance. Knowledge on such issues will contribute to safety in society, reducing reoffending and promoting successful prisoner reentry, improving offender rehabilitation, and to creating a safe prison environment for all those working and living in prisons.

Imprisonment has received a lot of attention from scholars, both in the past and at present. A 'quick and dirty' search on Google Scholar combining the terms 'research', 'imprisonment', and 'Europe' for the time frame between 2015 and 2020 produced over 27,000 results. From the early days, research has focused on life in prison. Traditionally, attention centered around how prisoners adjusted to prison life. Classic work by Clemmer, Goffman, and Sykes focused on the social organization within prisons. These studies described life in prison as a 'total institution', and emphasized the norms and values of the prison culture and the deprivations and hardships associated with life in prison (Clemmer, 1958; Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958). Since then, research has evolved to examine a wide variety of prison-related themes, including but not limited to perceptions of and coping with life in prison, staff-prisoner relationships, safety in prisons, the wellbeing of prisoners and staff, and effects of imprisonment on reoffending and other important life domains (e.g. health, social networks, employment, and the wellbeing of prisoners' family members).

Despite the scholarly attention paid to imprisonment, many important questions remain unanswered. For instance, specific prison populations have been neglected. Much of the existing research focuses on adult male prisoners, leaving female prisoners, juvenile or young adult prisoners, and migrants under-researched populations. In addition, rigorous scientific knowledge on the intended and unintended consequences of imprisonment is still limited. Moreover, since much of the literature comes from North America, it is unclear whether all findings can be generalized to the European context, with its different sentencing policies, correctional systems, and social welfare regimes.

In this thematic issue, we highlight some of the fascinating and up-to-date prison research that is currently being done in Europe. The issue contains eight papers representing different European countries (i.e. Belgium, Germany, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland) and different methodological approaches (e.g. systematic review, surveys, in-depth interviews, administrative data, and analysis of laws and regulations). The papers can be organized into three main themes: (1) prisoners and staff perceptions regarding the prison environment (Cid et al.; Muirhead, Butler, & Davidson; van Ginneken et al.); (2) health-related issues in prison populations (Baggio et al., 2020; Gonçalves et al.; Urwyler & Noll); and (3) prisoners on their way out and after their release from prison (Robert & Laurrari; Woessner & Hefner). We hope that this palette of prison research in Europe will be informative and useful for criminal justice researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

All contributions come from members of the European Society of Criminology (ESC) Prison Working Group, which was initiated in 2010 (Dirkzwager, 2019). This working group brings together prison researchers from Europe and aims to promote communication between European prison researchers and to establish cross-national research ties. In order to achieve this, an annual two-day workshop is arranged and thematic sessions are organized at each ESC conference (for more information on the working group, see https://www.esc-eurocrim.org/index.php/activities/working-groups/47-prison-life-and-effects-of-imprisonment). Below, each individual contribution in this thematic issue will be summarized.

Normalization and reintegration are two important principles related to imposing imprisonment. For instance, in the European Prison Rules, it is emphasized that efforts should be made to make conditions in prison as close to normal life as possible (Council of Europe, 2006). In addition, one of the goals of implementing prison sentences is the rehabilitation of offenders by providing meaningful activities and treatment opportunities in prison to prepare inmates for their reintegration into society. The paper by Cid and colleagues addresses these two important principles. It does so by examining how a representative group of 538 prisoners experience their imprisonment in Spain. The study shows that while most aspects of the principles of normalization and reintegration were positively evaluated by the inmates, some important challenges regarding the perceived safety in prison and the continuity of care remain.

Two contributions in this thematic issue focus on prison staff and their interactions with prisoners. First, *Muirhead* and colleagues interviewed 52 prison officers and adult male prisoners in Northern Ireland about cell-sharing and cell allocation decision-making processes. Prison staff identified a number of factors, which were not covered by official policy, as important for making cell-sharing allocation decisions. Prisoners felt disempowered when they were unable to engage with the cell allocation decision-making process. Frustration about the lack of autonomy encountered in such circumstances could contribute to violence, disorder, and distress. The authors point to a need to further develop and improve the approach to cell allocation decision-making, and to include opportunities for prisoners to have a voice in this process. Interactions between prison officers and incarcerated individuals are considered essential for maintaining safety, order, and promoting wellbeing in prisons. The contribution of *Van Ginneken* and colleagues concentrates on the relationship between the prison officers' work climate and prisoners' perceptions of the prison climate in the Netherlands. To examine this, survey data were used from 1,508 Dutch prison officers and 4,538 incarcerated individuals, as well as administrative data. It turned out that on units with a higher workload, prisoners were less positive about their safety and their relationships with other inmates. On units with higher co-worker support, prisoners were more positive about aspects of the prison climate. This

study illustrates that staff and prisoner perceptions are linked. The authors emphasize that it is important to invest in a positive work climate as well as to invest in a positive prison climate. In the contribution by *Urwyler* and *Noll*, a different approach was taken to discuss the highly sensitive issue of assisted suicide for detained individuals. Do prisoners and those in preventive detention in Switzerland have the right to end their life with the help of an assisted suicide organization when serving a prison sentence or during the execution of a criminal preventive measure? This question was scrutinized and contemplated using a legal approach including different (constitutional) laws and legislation. The authors conclude that, in principle, detained people have the right to assisted suicide. However, certain public interests may conflict with the fundamental right of self-determination, and in some cases, these public interests may (temporarily) prevail. The authors emphasize the need and relevancy for a coherent regulatory approach, particularly given the increasingly aging prison population and increased security concerns in the context of corrections.

While it is well known that prison populations experience elevated levels of mental health problems, far less is known about the mental health of those who are held in immigration detention. This is surprising since the use of immigration detention has increased worldwide. *Baggio* and colleagues addressed this gap in knowledge and conducted a systematic literature search and meta-analysis to examine the prevalence rates of psychiatric disorders in this particular group of detainees. In the end, ten studies met the inclusion criteria, of which nine reported on adults and only three on minors. The meta-analysis showed high prevalence rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The authors conclude that the topic of mental health problems in immigration detention has been largely neglected, particularly with respect to minor and adolescent migrants who are placed in migration detention.

Mental health issues have also been under-researched among detained young adults. *Gonçalves* and colleagues focused on this population and examined the reciprocal relationship between receiving visits in prison and mental health problems. This longitudinal study followed 75 young adult males who were detained in Portugal. It turned out that a higher level of mental health symptoms was associated with more subsequent prison visits, but the number of visits was not associated with subsequent mental health symptoms. The findings suggest that young adult prisoners with more mental health problems are more likely to be visited by their family and friends. Maybe this represents a social support mechanism in which their family and friends try to help them to adjust to prison life in the initial stage of detention.

Worldwide, almost all prisoners are released at one point and, therefore, will return to the open society. As a consequence, it is important to examine how prisoners return to society. In their paper, *Robert* and *Larrauri* address this topic and they particularly focus on the use and functioning of prison leave in Europe, a subject about which little is currently known. *Robert* and *Larrauri* discuss a variety of issues that emerged in the context of an analysis of prison leave in eight different European countries. These issues include the purposes and functions of prison leave, the criteria for obtaining such leave and the authority that grants it, the link between prison leave and prison life, and the link between prison leave and recidivism. The authors identify a number of important gaps in knowledge and conclude by drawing attention to an underlying issue: is prison leave a privilege or a right?

One of the goals of imprisonment is to reduce recidivism. At present, rigorous scientific knowledge on the effects of imprisonment on recidivism is limited, particularly among specific offender groups. In the final contribution to this thematic issue, *Woessner* and *Hefner* address

this topic and examine recidivism after imprisonment among sex and violent offenders. At present, most research on reoffending behavior is based on information from official registration systems, and, as such, is largely restricted to crimes that are known to authorities. *Woessner* and *Hefner* combine officially recorded and self-reported reoffences among a sample of 140 sex offenders and violent offenders. Most respondents did not reoffend, either officially or 'unofficially'. In general, more serious crimes were more likely to be officially recorded than less serious crimes, but frequent crimes were not more likely to be detected. The authors conclude that in order to understand desistance, it is important to include self-reports of reoffending as well.

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