



Incarcerated People's Limitations of Digital Agency and Re-entry into Digitalised Society: A Qualitative Study in a Women's Prison in Finland

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Abstract

Digitalisation creates opportunities for prisons to promote incarcerated people's rehabilitation and re-entry into society. This study explores how access to the internet and digital services during imprisonment supports incarcerated women's digital agency and re-entry into society in the Finnish context. Data (from a total of 37 interviews) were collected during a two-year fieldwork study by utilising an ethnographic and qualitative approach. The results show that the opportunity to use the internet and digital services can support incarcerated women's re-entry into society, especially when digital interaction is combined with humane encounters, which is characteristic of Nordic criminal policy. However, the study found shortcomings in the digital agency of the incarcerated women, particularly in the areas of digital skills, access and the possibility of independent use digital services. Restrictions on its use are based on security concerns as well as on assumptions of incarcerated women's deficient digital agency and an instrumental interpretation of normality.

Keywords: Digital agency; digitalisation; prison; incarcerated women; re-entry; normality.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the digital transformation has touched criminal justice settings, and prisons have introduced digital client data management and advanced surveillance systems. They have also started to offer various possibilities for incarcerated people in different penal environments around the world to engage in digital interaction (Knight et al., 2023, 2024). However, this development has raised critical public debate, where incarcerated people's use of technology in the prison context has been perceived as a threat or an additional luxury item (see, e.g. Hadlington & Knight, 2022; Knight, 2015).

On the other hand, previous studies have seen information and communications technology (ICT) play a significant role in reintegrating incarcerated people into society and supporting their rehabilitation (Lulham et al., 2022; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Reisdorf et al., 2022; Toreld & Foss, 2024; Zivanai & Mahlagu, 2022). In their digital rehabilitation model, Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) identified support opportunities intertwined with three different realms – the imprisonment, release, and the digital realms – which can support the rehabilitation and re-entry of an incarcerated person into society. In these different realms, efforts are made to find the services, financial support, housing, education, employment and/or rehabilitation needed by the incarcerated people during their imprisonment process. Addressing these factors plays a key role in helping people desist from crime (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Lulham et al., 2022) and in enhancing their agency (Burnett, 2010).



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Many incarcerated women have substance abuse, mental health, learning and concentration-related challenges (Rautanen et al., 2023). Previous studies have also shown that women in prison represent a profoundly marginalised demographic, often burdened with extensive experiences of trauma (Crewe, Schliehe, & Przybylska, 2023). They may have multiple diagnoses of mental health disorders, which are typically attributed to crises rooted in childhood or relationships, power abuse, victimisation and traumatic experiences (Jewkes et al., 2019). Lehrer (2021) notes that incarcerated women's trauma is linked to recidivism. Thus, it is crucial to consider trauma-informed care that combines coping strategies and mindfulness. This can enhance community reintegration and reduce recidivism. Furthermore, maintaining family relationships, especially those with children, is crucial for the rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated women into society (Baldwin, 2017). However, various social and romantic relationships can also be harmful for incarcerated women (Leverentz, 2006; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015). The various social situations and service needs of incarcerated people should be considered when delivering services and rehabilitation during imprisonment. Prior to re-entry into society, it is critical to ensure the availability and accessibility of adequate services, as well as their subsequent utilisation post-release into the societal context. In this landscape, digitalisation can provide tools to enhance this.

In this study, we use a qualitative approach to examine one Finnish women's prison where advanced ICT has been introduced. Specifically, we investigate how access to the internet and digital services during imprisonment supports the digital agency and re-entry of incarcerated women into society in the Finnish context.

The Principle of Normality as a Starting Point for the Digitalisation of Prisons in the Nordic Countries

Nordic prison policies aim to provide incarcerated people with the execution of a fair sanction and opportunities for rehabilitation (De Vos, 2021; Engbo, 2017). Criminal policy research talks about *Nordic exceptionalism*, which refers to the lenient nature of the Nordic criminal justice system, based on a more general view of the welfare state (Lahti, 2017; Lappi-Seppälä, 2012; see also Crewe, Ievins, et al., 2023; Pratt, 2008; Reiter et al., 2018). This means that the welfare system builds on the principles of the social democratic model, emphasising the state's role and a universal approach to social policy. In line with the Nordic model, the mission of Finland's welfare state is also rooted in the individual's entitlement to public benefits, which are collectively funded through taxation (Anttonen et al., 2012). Lappi-Seppälä (2009) emphasises that liberal criminal justice policies are associated with a strong welfare state and the view that society will succeed when more money is invested in schools, social work and families than in prisons. Nordic penal policy also influences the goals associated with the digitalisation of prisons. Digitalisation serves as a means for incarcerated people's rehabilitation, enabling, among other things, their participation in remote rehabilitation.

The humane Nordic criminal policy emphasises the role of prisons as a social learning environment which promotes incarcerated people's rehabilitation and return to society; it is not only a punitive institution. Respectful and supportive interaction between prison staff and incarcerated people can be seen as part of this humane criminal policy, where staff adopt a coaching approach and prepare them for a crime-free life (see Järveläinen, 2022; Prison and Probation Service of Finland [PPSF], 2024). Digitalisation has also brought a new dimension to the encounter. This technology enables digital interaction and communication within prisons and helps incarcerated people keep in touch with their relatives and various authorities (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024).

In the Nordic countries, the principle of normality has guided the digitalisation of prisons, meaning that life in prison should resemble life outside as much as possible. Previous studies on normality have shown that access to the internet during imprisonment can be seen as a human rights issue (Smith, 2013) or as a means to facilitate reintegration into digital society (Toreld et al., 2018). The implementation of the principle of normality can be viewed from many different perspectives (Engbo, 2017; Snacken, 2002; van de Rijt et al., 2023). When discussing intrinsic normalisation, it is assumed that normality is a goal in itself. Instrumental normalisation is seen as a way to achieve (other) goals of detention, such as preparing incarcerated people for reintegration into society (van de Rijt et al., 2023). There are also clear national differences in interpretations of this principle. For example, in Norway, the principle is interpreted in an instrumental way whereby normalising prison conditions aims to create the right environment to encourage prisoners to rehabilitate and to live a crime-free life after release. In Belgium, the approach is more ambiguous, emphasising both human dignity and prisoners' rights (as values in themselves) and reducing the harmful effects of imprisonment (De Vos, 2021, pp. 103–104).

The Digital Agency of Incarcerated People

Knight et al. (2024) state that digital tools can support incarcerated individuals' desistance and enhance their digital skills related to job searching and education. The use of digital services is challenged by many factors, both in prison and after release. Achieving the digital inclusion of incarcerated people requires their access to society's digital services during imprisonment, sufficient digital skills and a positive attitude towards the use of these digital services (see Helsper, 2021; Reisdorf & DeCook,

2022). In a prison environment, this means building incarcerated people's trust in the use of digital services and the internet (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021) and also building prison employees' trust in incarcerated people (Monteiro et al., 2015).

The concept of digital agency encompasses an individual's ability to control and adapt to the digital world, and it includes three components. *Digital competence* describes the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively use digital technologies, *digital confidence* is feeling assured and capable when engaging with digital tools and environments, and *digital accountability* means understanding and taking responsibility for one's actions in the digital space (Passey et al., 2018). However, digital agency in the prison context also involves its own challenges, not only concerning skills gaps but also in regard to issues of access (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022) and privacy and autonomy for incarcerated people (Robberechts, 2020; see also Passey et al., 2018).

Digital agency can also be approached from the perspective of the general concept of agency. Bandura's (2001, 2002) theory of human agency is based on the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to the capacity to exercise control over one's life. According to the theory, core features of human agency are intentionality, forethought, self-regulation and self-reflectiveness. In the electronic era, this means that individuals have the ability to navigate, control and adapt to digital environments (Bandura, 2002). This involves not only using digital tools effectively but also understanding the impact of one's actions in the digital space and taking responsibility for them. In addition to individual agency, Bandura (2001) also discusses collective agency – working together based on socially coordinated and interdependent efforts – and proxy agency. Proxy agency relates to situations where people do not have direct control over conditions that affect their lives, but other people have the resources, knowledge and means to act on their behalf (Bandura, 2006).

Methods and Materials

The Methodological Approach and Research Question

In our study, we utilised an ethnographic approach, which has been used in several previous pieces of prison research and in studies on the digital exclusion of incarcerated people (see Crewe, 2018; Jewkes, 2014; Liebling et al., 2021; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; Ugelvik, 2014). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of technology adoption, we employed data triangulation through participatory observation days and interviews during a three-phase fieldwork study (see Reeves et al., 2008), using a follow-up design. The ethnographic approach facilitated the researcher's reflexivity and interaction with prison staff and incarcerated women. We aimed to consider the tensions inherent in ethnography related to the researcher's position (Ugelvik, 2014), gender (Jewkes, 2014) and ethical issues (Robinson, 2020). The research interviews and their analysis followed a qualitative attitude approach (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007).

This study focused on a Finnish women's prison that is using advanced ICT. We examined how access to the internet and digital services during imprisonment supported the digital agency and re-entry into society of incarcerated women in the Finnish context.

A Finnish Women's Prison with In-Cell Laptops as a Research Context

In this study, our research context was a Finnish women's prison with a high level of supervision, where advanced ICT had been utilised since 2021. In general discussions in Finland, it was termed a "smart prison". This prison had 100 places for women, each with their own private cell and in-cell laptop. With these, the incarcerated women had the opportunity to be in daily contact with the prison staff via transaction forms, instant messages and video calls. With the in-cell laptop, it was also possible to check – among other things – the balance of their prison account, make canteen purchases and clothing orders, and listen to audiobooks. The in-cell laptop provided possibilities to search for information about services and read the news or self-help material related to rehabilitation on a limited number of permitted, or "whitelisted" websites. These were secure and trusted websites where communication with external parties was limited or completely blocked. It was also possible to complete basic studies on a closed learning platform.

In Finland, the Imprisonment Act (767/2005, Ch. 12, § 9) defines that a prisoner may, for a special reason, be granted permission to maintain contact with the outside world by using electronic communication, telecommunications or another such technical connection unless the contact endangers the security of the prison. In the prison under study, this contact was supervised. Using the in-cell laptop, it was also possible to use external digital services with the support and supervision of prison staff. This provided the opportunity to apply for social support before release, search for housing or work and be in contact with various service providers such as different authorities or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to obtain necessary services. The prison under study had received significant national and international media attention since its opening. Additionally, the prison

had participated in various pilot projects where practices for digital services and rehabilitation had been developed in a customer-oriented manner with different partners (see, e.g. Lehtiniemi & Ruckenstein, 2022).

The Data Collection Methods and Instrument

The research interviews were conducted following a qualitative attitude approach (Peltola & Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen & Vesala, 2013; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007), rooted in Billig's (1987) rhetorical psychology. The central premise of this method involves presenting stimulating statements during the interview to foster argumentative discourse. Interviewees are invited to express their stance on these statements and provide justifications. Additionally, the interview process includes follow-up questions, such as requesting practical examples.

The individually conducted interviews of both the incarcerated women and employees included the following themes: experiences of the introduction of in-cell laptops in the closed prison, the impact of digitalisation on the prison's operating methods and client–employee relationship, and the potential for digitalisation to promote re-entry to society and a crime-free life. There were several open-ended questions and a total of three statements: “The digitalisation of the prison significantly eases the re-entry into society and detachment from crime”, “The smart prison serves as a learning environment where a person can learn the skills needed for a crime-free life during imprisonment”, and “The prison's digitalisation has significantly changed the prison's operating methods and the client–staff relationship”. In this article, we focus on the first two statements. The results of the third statement are reported in another article we have written (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024).

Procedure

The prison under study was opened in 2020, and in-cell laptops were introduced in March 2021. Our research was conducted in three phases (May–June 2021, January–February 2022, April–May 2023). We carried out our fieldwork (including 10 participatory observation fieldwork days) using an ethnographic approach and a follow-up design. In total, we conducted 37 interviews: 22 with the employees and 15 with the incarcerated women. These included 12 employees and 12 incarcerated women, who were each interviewed one to three times; the 13 of these interviews were follow-ups. The duration of the prison employee interviews ($n = 22$) varied from 37–110 minutes ($M = 66$ minutes), and the incarcerated women's interviews ($n = 15$) varied from 26–66 minutes ($M = 44$ minutes).

After obtaining research permission, arrangements were made with the prison director to conduct interviews and participatory observations. Volunteer employees were recruited through the prison director who sent an email to targeted employees (e.g. representatives from prison management, supervision, rehabilitation, social work and education, and development areas) with the researchers' information form and an open invitation to participate in the interviews. The employees were able to anonymously contact the researcher, and interview times were agreed upon. To recruit incarcerated women, the prison director appointed a special instructor who used targeted communication and verbal promotion to identify willing participants from different wards. The incarcerated women's interviews were conducted in a separate negotiation room within the prison, while one was conducted remotely. In the interview situation, only the interviewer and the incarcerated woman were present; no staff were involved. The employee interviews were conducted both on-site at the prison and remotely.

On fieldwork days, the researcher was able to observe the daily activities of the prison in various wards (a common living room and private cells) and in common areas (e.g. a sewing room, library, church, sports hall, secure outdoor areas, staff workspaces, canteen facilities). With permission from the prison director, the researcher was able to move freely in the facilities. Participatory observation included informal conversations with both prison staff and incarcerated women. The discussions were related to the introduction of in-cell laptops and the functionality of new facilities, among other things.

Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in accordance with the qualitative attitude approach (Peltola & Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen & Vesala, 2013; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007), where the interviewees' positions were mapped to statements in the first classifying step. At this point, we analysed whether the interviewees agreed (a positive position) or disagreed (a negative position) with the statement, or whether they presented points of view both in favour of and against the statement (a reserved position). In the next stage, the justifications offered by the interviewees for different positions were classified from the perspective of thematic content.

With regard to the statement, “The digitalisation of the prison significantly eases the re-entry into society and detachment from crime”, most of the employees presented a reserved stance ($n = 17$) due to the word “significantly”. Justifications for the reserved position emphasised that the process of re-entering society requires managing or learning digital skills and using digital services during imprisonment. While digitalisation was seen to help incarcerated women organise their affairs before release,

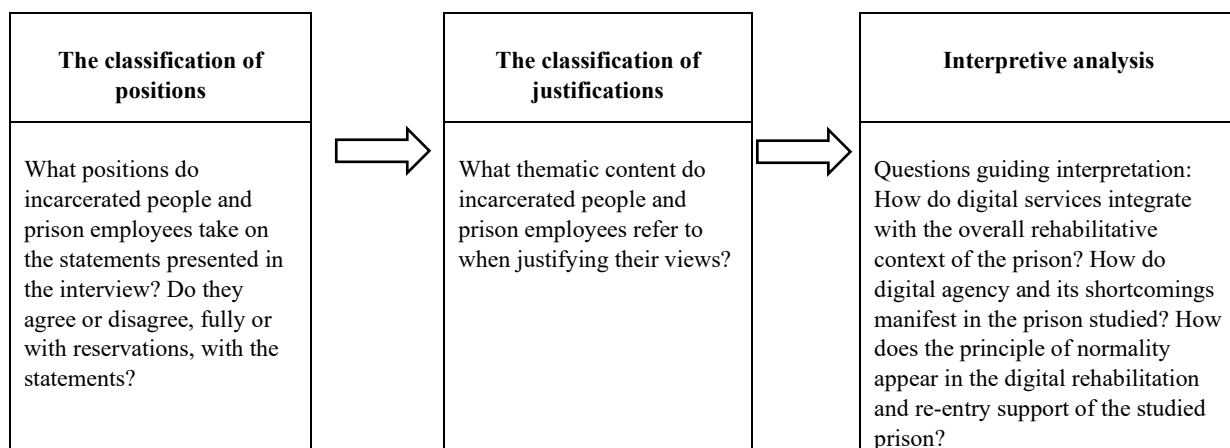
its impact on desistance from crime was considered less significant than the women's own willingness to desist. Justifications for a positive position ($n = 2$) highlighted the importance of learning digital skills through in-cell laptops and managing personal matters for smoother re-entry. Justifications for an opposing position ($n = 3$) pointed to inadequate digital skills, reduced face-to-face interactions and potential misuse of the internet for criminal activities or unfavourable relationships. The statement divided the incarcerated women's opinions. Justifications for an opposing position ($n = 7$) highlighted that digitalisation had no impact on desisting from crime and access to digital services was limited. Justifications for a reserved position ($n = 6$) emphasised that broader access to digital services could aid re-entry to society, but opportunities for independent interactions were limited and managed by employees. Justifications for a positive position ($n = 2$) emphasised the importance of learning digital skills in prison and the smoother re-entry into society facilitated by digital services.

Concerning the statement, "The smart prison serves as a learning environment where a person can learn the skills needed for a crime-free life during imprisonment", the prison employees' justifications for a reserved position ($n = 13$) emphasised that any prison could serve as a learning environment, and digitalisation was not directly related to this. Justifications for a positive position ($n = 8$) highlighted digitalisation's potential to enhance digital skills and agency, adding value to other rehabilitative activities. Justifications for an opposing position ($n = 1$) focused on the potential misuse of video calls or inmate emails and security concerns. The incarcerated women's positions on the statement were more divided. Justifications for a reserved position ($n = 7$) focused on digitalisation providing additional support for the prison's functions, such as rehabilitation, work, education and discussions with employees. Justifications for a positive position ($n = 7$) emphasised learning digital skills and maintaining digital agency to succeed in a crime-free life and digital society. Justifications for an opposing position ($n = 1$) highlighted prohibitions on higher education and gradual release, as well as the stereotyping of incarcerated women, which hindered the possibility for change.

In the interpretation phase, we examined the material as a whole. We initially investigated how access to the internet and the use of digital services supported the rehabilitation and re-entry of the incarcerated women into society, based on the interviews. Next, we examined the use of digital services in relation to other rehabilitative activities in the prison context, where the importance of interaction between the employees and incarcerated people came to the fore. Next, we focused on digital agency and its construction (Passey et al., 2018; see also Bandura, 2002, 2006). Finally, we interpreted our findings using the concept of normality (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Progress of the Data Analysis



Ethical Questions

The study adhered to the guidelines set out by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2019) and followed the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Ethical approval for conducting and publishing the research was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Research permission was granted by the Prison and Probation Service of Finland. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and consent was requested from each interviewee in oral and written form. The anonymity of the interviewees was respected throughout the different stages of the research and the publication of the results. The interviews were conducted by a female researcher who paid special attention to

the vulnerability and potential trauma backgrounds of the incarcerated women who were the focus of the study. Participatory observation respected the daily routines and work schedules of the prison, aiming to disturb the work peace or personal space of the prison staff and incarcerated women as little as possible.

Results

Access to the Internet and Digital Services as a Support for Re-entry into Society

In the prison under study, the use of in-cell laptops had become part of daily life in the final observation phase, and although there had been initial rigidity, the challenges of introducing the technology had decreased. The in-cell laptops were used in the prison's daily communications for sending electronic transaction forms, instant messaging to social work and special rehabilitation instructors, calendaring daily activities, checking the prison bank account balance and placing canteen orders. With the in-cell laptops, there was limited access permitted to some whitelisted websites, which mainly enabled information retrieval from different services or actors. In addition, the incarcerated women were allowed video meetings with relatives and employees of the social and health services. Prison employees supervised the meetings with relatives, but official meetings took place unsupervised.

The employees mentioned how electronic interactions had enabled the flexible use of various gender-sensitive activities and other external support services as a supplement to the prison's own functions and rehabilitative activities. Various NGOs held live peer group activities in prison and remote meetings. This was aimed at attaching women to various activities so that they had a new community with which to connect at the release stage. By creating networks and finding a contact person during imprisonment, bridges to society were built for each woman:

Lilja (38 years): I've also talked to them [the NGO employees of a gender-sensitive project] recently. But since I'm not being released, it's not relevant to me yet. But they still met me via a video call and told me about themselves and so on. It was a really good thing.

Interviewer: What services did they offer in that project?

Lilja: For example, a former prisoner, who has been released, is there as support, possibly in many matters, because they have the background and the knowledge and the skills.

Interviewer: So, they are a peer in that sense?

Lilja: Yes, exactly. They can't, of course, get housing for anyone, but they can help with all these kinds of things; they can help and be supportive, keep you on feet or lift you up.

Many of the employees pointed out how important it was to organise official meetings preparing for release well in advance of the release date. In these video calls, the official and the incarcerated women discussed matters related to rehabilitation, housing, income support and employment. One of the employees explained:

When they stop and take care of things and handle their affairs and get some housing matters in order and money comes into their account, the prisoner realises that they don't have to worry and go and rob a store just because nothing works. Then there is a benefit in that. (Employee 9)

Additionally, ICT provided new opportunities for self-rehabilitation. For example, various websites were installed on the in-cell laptop that related to substance abuse or mental health rehabilitation, and various self-help programmes were also available to all the incarcerated women through the available Gate (Portti) websites. The in-cell laptops were seen to enable increasingly close contact with relatives and children, which was seen as particularly significant in maintaining the roles of mother, parent and spouse. The arrangement of remote child meetings during the week was seen as extremely important and they were well anticipated, as were remote family meetings, organised at weekends.

On the other hand, our research revealed many challenges in the adoption and use of the in-cell laptops. A lack of digital skills among the employees and incarcerated women, as well as various technical problems and security concerns, hindered the use of the devices, especially in the initial phase of implementation. The small number of whitelisted pages limited the use of the internet and some necessary services. In addition, although the in-cell laptops enabled communication with family members, the incarcerated women felt that the number of video meetings was insufficient to maintain their role as mothers. Therefore, they wished for more opportunities for video meetings.

Nonetheless, the study highlights the benefits of digital interaction during imprisonment. In the prison under study, rehabilitation and social work staff extensively used services from external providers to complement the prison's own services. These included various NGOs and public agencies (the social insurance institution, social and healthcare services, employment office, education agencies, etc.). Our research gives indications that, by offering incarcerated women the opportunity to use the internet and digital services, it is possible to support their rehabilitation and improve their readiness for release.

Humane Encounters and Digital Interaction to Support the Learning of Crime-Free Skills

In the studied prison, attempts were made to support the incarcerated women's rehabilitation and their re-entry into digitalised society while enabling digital services and video-mediated interaction alongside various rehabilitative functions of the prison and the employees' supportive interaction. These efforts were made to ensure that the prison's operations and practices resembled a "miniature society" and would emphasise a crime-free life. As such, the incarcerated women had the opportunity to manage their own official matters and keep in contact with their families. Additionally, the incarcerated women were required to follow a certain daily routine and take responsibility for various tasks, such as participating in rehabilitation, education (basic, vocational education) or work (e.g. property maintenance, textile care, working in the sewing shop or library, gardening, cleaning). Furthermore, they had the opportunity to engage in leisure activities, such as guided exercise, visiting the library, or occasionally participating in activities organised by different NGOs. The employees highlighted the importance of learning about normal life to better cope in society:

In my opinion, it supports our activities. It's not there in normal life either, where you sit at some computer or something. People have to keep their noses out and interact with other people and participate, go to work or have a hobby (...) You learn the skills and it supports your being here and there in civilian life too, but then these normal-life contacts and being and living have to be here, like in civilian life too. Well, of course, you can wrap yourself up in your own flat and then just connect through a computer, but that's not normal in any way. (Employee 11)

Various forms of substance-abuse rehabilitation were offered in the prison, ranging from rehabilitative programmes to intensive community substance-abuse rehabilitation. One ward focused on community-based rehabilitation, which was considered effective and was going to be expanded to other wards. This ward's 15-week programme allowed a person to progress according to their own goals, emphasising trust, community, peer support and individuality. The ward's employees encouraged the incarcerated women to take responsibility for their own actions, while the peer support offered by the ward's employees and other incarcerated women played a major role in the rehabilitation. The opportunities brought about by digitalisation were seen as beneficial, but essential skills for a crime-free life were learnt through social interactions between the incarcerated women and prison employees:

If we think that digitalisation enables, for example, knowledge of those digital devices, and of course, it's a big deal that such things are practiced, but that's not enough for the skills needed in a crime-free life. These are often related to thinking, attitude, emotion regulation, problem-solving skills, stress regulation and social skills, which are learnt in interaction with people. Yes, of course, it is possible to learn through our services, which digitalisation enables. But it is not the digitalisation itself that enables this – it is the fact that we can bring together services and these clients even more. But it's not that we have these in-cell laptops and such, digitalisation doesn't necessarily suffice in itself – it's the work that is enabled through them. (Employee 7)

In the above excerpt, the employee emphasises that the in-cell laptops are not sufficient alone but that they can enable contact with the necessary rehabilitation actors to support these women. The community-based rehabilitation in the prison was based on a resource-centred approach. Through various activities and individual and group tasks, the aim was to find one's own independence and femininity and adopt new ways of acting. Overall, the incarcerated women highlighted that being substance-free provided a new perspective with which to examine their actions and the factors that had led to crime. With the support of employees and peers, they were able to question their actions and values, leading to realisations and a change in thinking.

The material highlighted the importance of humane encounters with employees, supporting the women to live a crime-free life. The incarcerated women emphasised the employees' motivational approach and supportive attitude that helped them to re-evaluate their own values and be better parents. They pointed out that prison should be seen as a place that enables detachment from crime and promotes rehabilitation, which is what digitalisation and humane encounters can contribute to promoting:

It's very good that such a smart prison has been created because it enables a completely new direction in the release and care of prisoners. It's a completely different thing to talk about parenthood during prison time than it is to be a parent and get support for parenthood in prison. That sort of support is usually just you talking to some employee, but what you do for your parenthood there in prison (...) But this has gone in a very good direction. For the first time, I myself also have a feeling that when I leave here, I have done something other than just serving my sentence. (Sara, 34 years)

Furthermore, the above excerpt illustrates that the incarcerated women's interactions with employees were seen as significant in supporting their parenthood. The employees emphasised in their interviews that learning the skills needed for a crime-free life specifically takes place in social encounters between the employees and the client. Face-to-face encounters were seen as the primary way of conducting their client work, and digital interaction served as an additional tool. The employees saw themselves as a kind of role model in social interaction with different officials, where they acted as a mirror for the incarcerated women in regard to handling their own affairs in society. Conflicts between the incarcerated women and prison staff emerged during the research, as well as some examples of disrespectful attitudes towards the incarcerated people by the employees. However, the general atmosphere in the prison appeared to be respectful and supportive of rehabilitation. In the prison under study, respectful encounters with the prison employees, reflecting the Nordic humane criminal policy, were flexibly combined with digital interaction and the use of digital services. In accordance with the principle of normality, the prison's rehabilitative activities, digital services and supportive interactions aimed to teach the incarcerated women the skills with which to conduct a life without crime and cope in a digitalised society.

Limited and Desired Digital Agency in Prison

The study highlights the importance of digital services for rehabilitation and re-entry into society, but it also identified challenges, particularly regarding the limitations of the incarcerated women's digital agency. Firstly, it emerges in the interviews that digital agency required incarcerated people to also have a sufficient level of digital competence. Many of the interviewees highlighted the importance of digital skills as key skills needed in everyday life, for example:

All those everyday things that you need in everyday life, the everyday skills and digital services in everyday life and all such like ... The more such things are available, the more you can practise them and learn them here or maintain them because the services may change quite a lot in a year. To keep up with the development when everything is completely different when you get out of here in a couple of years. Having some contact with the digital world, it's a good thing, it maintains those skills. Then you're not completely lost with applications and other things when you get released from here and you have to do everything by yourself, and an official doesn't handle your affairs anymore. There are opportunities to support that. (Anni, 34 years)

In the excerpt, viewing ICT as a part of learning everyday skills appeared to be crucial.

Agency was also related to an individual's autonomy and its absence in the prison context. Limited access to the internet and digital services outside the prison hindered digital interaction and was further complicated by restrictions related to the independent use of bank IDs within the prison. Some of the incarcerated women also lacked an ID card and bank identifiers, so transactions were not possible at all.

The issue of digital agency and autonomy also seemed to be associated with the support provided by the prison staff. Access to digital services required strong identification using bank IDs; therefore, official interactions always took place with the assistance of employees, supervised or – in the worst case – by proxy. One employee highlighted how restricting access reduced the digital agency of the incarcerated women:

Employee 7: Well, at least it makes it easier that they can handle their personal matters and figure things out much more independently with the in-cell laptop. Of course, they still need employees as middlemen, but they are not completely dependent on us. Somehow, some kind of own agency is more preserved.

Interviewer: You mean acting as a middleman? Is it because of the bank IDs?

Employee 7: Yes, in that respect, for example. When, for example, all the housing issues and rent are taken care of. Those apartment rental pages won't open on our in-cell laptops. Or you can't get those e-books or audiobook things, you can't apply for those IDs yourself – the employees have to do it. You need the employees for things like that.

The interviewed women noted that their relatives handled their official affairs during imprisonment. Digital agency depended on whether the employees trusted the incarcerated women enough to allow independent actions. Prohibiting such actions created a cycle of dependency. Many interviewees believed that being able to act independently would create a feeling of safety and would support their digital agency:

Well, it might bring about a feeling of safety; the fact that when you have handled things yourself, you know that they have been taken care of and how they have been taken care of. When you have an employee to handle things on your behalf, which still happens, you have no idea whether they have been taken care of after all. (Sara, 39 years)

This excerpt highlighted the importance of personal digital agency and its challenges. Additionally, according to some employees, most women lacked sufficient digital skills for independent interaction. From this perspective, the lack of independent digital agency was acceptable and working together with the employees was appropriate:

Things somehow get done in cooperation and ... well, there are probably those who would handle it all by themselves if it was possible. In that way, doing it yourself is not necessarily a value in itself. The idea that 'I can do this myself, so I do it myself'.. (...) Then again, the plan is made together. If, for example, some rehabilitative work activity is being prepared, it would be quite laborious for the prisoner to do it all alone, because it requires several contacts. And then you have to deliver many things, attachments and such. So then, if she were to do it all by herself, it wouldn't necessarily serve the purpose so much because it's much easier then, with the social worker. (Employee 7)

In the above excerpt, the employee emphasised collective agency, where digital interactions appeared more as a means of rehabilitation rather than having an intrinsic value. The interviewed women criticised the limited access and functionality of the in-cell laptops, comparing them to children's computers with restricted usage rights. This lack of access discouraged them from using the laptops, even for the permitted purposes. Furthermore, the monitoring of all family visits raised concerns about privacy. The interviewed women also pointed out that video-mediated motherhood was insufficient to properly maintain the role of a mother or parent, but that these few meetings were seen as better than nothing.

In the interviews, the restrictions were not only justified by safety but also by the motivation to lead a crime-free life. Some supervising employees felt that the limited access prevented potential crimes and the incarcerated women's own irresponsible actions. The threat was seen in terms of actions related to money transfer, extortion or reckless use of one's money. In the worst case, this would have increased the commission of crimes during imprisonment or the incarcerated woman's indebtedness. Furthermore, the harmful social relationships that online interactions could enable among the incarcerated women were considered a risk:

I do not like excluding real relationships, but ... I don't really like it that prison-to-prison video calls are granted lightly because, in my opinion, I see it as the opposite to desistance from crime. It is wrong that prison enables maintaining criminal friendships. It's the same in other prisons too. But in a way, previously, the women were out in the prison yard and looked for company, so now it has gone online in quite a modern way. It hasn't changed as such, but in the case of female prisoners, I don't see it as a good thing at all. (Employee 5)

The above excerpt highlighted that video calls that were meant for official and family interactions also posed risks of unwanted digital agency for the incarcerated women. Concerns about irresponsible agency and inappropriate relationships with incarcerated men have led to strict surveillance rules. The employees feared that video calls could become dating channels between incarcerated people in different prisons, potentially even fostering a criminal lifestyle. Instead, family meetings focusing on interactions with children, spouses and authorities were encouraged. The restricted use of prisoner email was effective for official matters but not for maintaining unrestricted social relationships.

Overall, the study found several factors that weakened the digital agency of the incarcerated women. These factors were partly related to the characteristics of some of the incarcerated people, such as a lack of competence. However, prison authorities were predominantly limiting the conditions for agency based on perceived or assumed lack of skills, irresponsibility and security threats.

Discussion

The Main Findings

The utilisation of technology in prisons offers possibilities to promote incarcerated women's rehabilitation, re-entry into society and digital agency. However, these efforts are limited by the prison's security policies and legal regulations. This study examines a Finnish women's prison that is using advanced ICT. In the study, we ask how access to the internet and digital services during imprisonment supports the digital agency and re-entry of incarcerated women into society in Finland. According to our results, firstly, the opportunity to use the internet and digital services during imprisonment can support the re-entry of incarcerated people into society. Secondly, in the studied prison, digital interactions were combined with humane encounters. In this case, digital interaction and the use of digital services comprised part of a broader rehabilitative learning environment. However, in the prison studied, the lack of digital agency of the incarcerated women limited their use of the internet and digital services. A lack of digital skills and insufficient familiarisation with the use of laptops further limited their use. Furthermore, the findings suggested that restrictions on the incarcerated women's internet and digital services use were based on assumptions of inadequate ability and irresponsible personal agency. Therefore, instead of autonomous digital interaction, supported digital

agency was emphasised, sometimes as a proxy function. The interviewed prison staff also revealed that the opportunity to use the internet is not a value in itself but a tool that supports the incarcerated person's rehabilitation and facilitates their return from prison.

Reflection on the Results

According to our findings, the possibility to use the internet and digital services during incarceration was seen to support the re-entry of the incarcerated women into society, although the study also identified some challenges that limited digital interaction. Video contact with family and children allowed the incarcerated women to maintain at least some degree of video-mediated parenthood. The in-cell laptops allowed the supervised handling of official matters and for the incarcerated individuals to be in contact with NGOs that provided rehabilitative services, something which also supported their re-entry into society. Our findings are in line with previous research that emphasises the significance of digitalisation and use of digital services in supporting re-entry into society and the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals (see Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024; Lulham et al., 2022; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Reisdorf et al., 2022; Toreld & Foss, 2024; Zivanai & Mahlagu, 2022).

In the prison under study, digital interaction was combined with a humane encounters approach, which is characteristic of Nordic criminal policy (see Järveläinen, 2022). The employees emphasised the importance of face-to-face interaction in motivating the incarcerated women to use digital services outside the prison as part of their rehabilitation and re-entry into society. So, the digitalisation of prisons does not necessarily mean they become "faceless"; instead, the results showed how the employees flexibly combined face-to-face and digital interaction as part of their interactive work. Our findings support Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) view that potential positive effects during re-entry into society can be achieved through possibilities offered by the digital realm. In accordance with the principle of normality, we also emphasise the interconnection between the two offline realms included in the model of digital rehabilitation and re-entry, i.e., prison and re-entry realms. This means both the use of advanced technology and the development of the prison reality to reflect the reality outside prison to which the released women will return.

The study highlights the challenges of the incarcerated people's digital agency and how the prison employees also contributed to constructing deficient agency. Our results highlighted that sufficient digital skills were relevant in relation to digital agency. The incarcerated women in the prison under study had some deficiencies in their digital competence, digital confidence and digital accountability (see Bandura, 2001, 2002, 2006; Passey et al., 2018), but there were also challenges related to autonomy and privacy (see Robberechts, 2020). Due to a perceived lack of digital skills among the incarcerated women, collective agency was also offered, where employees assisted in using digital services. In some cases, this appeared to be a proxy agency, which raised suspicions among the incarcerated people who were accustomed to using the internet. Furthermore, this kind of restriction of digital agency can be considered problematic in terms of the development of digital skills. The goal is to support the incarcerated people and facilitate their re-entry. However, the lack of opportunities for autonomous interaction can also prevent the learning of independent digital skills, even though these skills can be considered essential for reintegration into society.

The restriction of digital agency can also manifest as restrictions to certain social relationships. According to previous studies (Leverentz, 2006; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015), both harmful and romantic relationships can be obstacles for incarcerated women in their reintegration into society and rehabilitation. Consistently with this, in the prison under study, the prison employees also sought to prevent the maintenance of undesirable social and romantic relationships through restrictions. Recommended and permitted contacts were only with family members or other authorities. These restrictions combined security-oriented thinking with paternalistic protection; they resulted in the construction of responsible female agency being determined by prison authorities. The prevention of the supposed harms and the protection of the incarcerated women were then considered more important than their right to use the internet.

The principle of normality emphasises developing the prison environment to be as similar as possible to the world outside (Engbo, 2017). This also includes access to welfare services outside the prison (Snacken, 2002). In the prison under study, we observed a clear effort to conduct practices in accordance with this principle. However, the data indicated that the principle of normality was largely manifested in accordance with instrumental interpretation. Digital interaction and the use of digital services were not seen so much as a right of the incarcerated people (i.e. an intrinsic value) but rather as a tool to support the rehabilitation and re-entry of the incarcerated women into society (see van de Rijt et al., 2023). When interpreting the data through the concept of agency, we observed the assumption that the incarcerated people lacked the ability for independent and responsible digital agency. Thus, if an incarcerated woman cannot use the internet in a manner conducive to her rehabilitation, its use is restricted, supervised and supported. Paternalistic protection also appears as part of this instrumental interpretation of normality.

Facilitating digital interaction for incarcerated people also requires justifying the issue to decision-makers and the general public. Quite often, incarcerated people's internet use raises critical public debate (Hadlington & Knight, 2022). Thus, Hadlington and Knight (2022) emphasise that the benefits and value of digitalisation should be made visible to the public. They highlight how the use of technology during incarceration enhances the digital literacy of incarcerated individuals and creates the readiness to succeed in the digital world upon their return to the community.

Limitations

This study focused solely on one prison in the preliminary stages of implementing advanced technology in the Finnish context. The study also took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the opening stages of a new prison, which posed challenges for both the research and the technology implementation. The digitalisation of prisons is a long-term process, so the results should be viewed as specifically pertaining to the early stages of implementation.

It is also worth noting that the study does not fully reflect the situation in Finnish prisons more generally. The prison under study represents a kind of digitalisation pilot among Finnish prisons. As a result, the interviewees' views are quite positive towards digitalisation, although the non-functioning of technology and learning new things also raised criticism.

The triangulation approach used provided us with a deeper understanding of the data and the phenomenon being studied. The analyses described here are based on our research interviews. However, based on our field observations, we can reasonably assume that the analysis also reflects the real situation in terms of the use of technology and its challenges in the prison under study.

Conclusion

The integration of ICT within prison systems has shown promise in diversifying prison practices and communication methods. ICT has also introduced new ways to support the rehabilitation and re-entry of incarcerated women into society. However, many incarcerated women have gaps in digital competence, which highlights the importance of training and support for the use of digital services. Issues related to the independent use of services raise concerns that highlight the need to strike a balance between security considerations and support for rehabilitation and integration into society. The results of the study highlighted the Nordic humane criminal policy, as well as principle of normality, where digital interaction is flexibly combined with the use of digital services. The adoption of ICT in prisons is recognised as a long-term process, during which the strengthening of incarcerated women's digital agency should be considered.

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