



**WHAT COULD  
HAVE BEEN?**

Exploring incarcerated  
women's experiences and  
speculative visions for  
prevention in Denmark

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*PhD dissertation, Aarhus University  
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The front page features a digitalized version of a linocut print, created by PhD student Anna Lea Munk Magnussen as an artistic contribution to this dissertation.

Supervisors: Professor Dorthe Staunæs (supervisor) and Associate Professor Charlotte Mathiassen (co-supervisor).

**An excerpt from the assessment committee's written statement**

“The PhD dissertation *What could have been? Exploring incarcerated women's experiences and speculative visions for prevention in Denmark* is ambitious, meticulously and carefully written as well as a daring project in its aim of understanding and exploring the penal welfare system for women in Denmark within a framework of social harm. The ambition of introducing a harm preventive paradigm by introducing an interconnected framework of zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice in a Nordic context is a very timely, and in many ways ground-breaking research endeavor. This requires a movement away from damage centered theories and an individualized focus on “crime” to centering the experiences and writings of the incarcerated women while not losing sight of the structural conditions in which the women are situated and formed. Gjørding manages to do this successfully via creative and communitybased methods such as writing workshops and hybrid storytelling as well as her mobilization of speculative methods.”

*Associate Professor Iram Khawaja*

*Docent Ann-Karina Henriksen*

*Professor Justin Piché*

# Abstract

This research stems from an interest in learning from currently incarcerated women in the pursuit of a society with less social harm. It deliberately forgoes concepts such as ‘crime’ and ‘criminals’ to open space for centering people’s experiences of harm. The study reintroduces abolitionist perspectives and brings zemiology and transformative justice into Nordic academia as pointful theoretical companions for understanding the harm prevention paradigm embedded in the Danish penal welfare system. Drawing on existing literature, I conceptualize the penal welfare system and its animating impulses that orient its practices across institutions. This study offers new empirical insights based on engagement with primarily incarcerated women and secondarily with staff in Jyderup Prison. Exploring collaborative methods, this study turned to writing workshops, where the women authored creative pieces on their lives and the penal welfare system. Nineteen interviews with incarcerated women explored both lived and speculative pasts of their encounters with institutions across sectors, while interviews with eight prison staff provided insight into their understanding of the women’s challenges and their views on the penal welfare system’s capacity to address them. Rather than contrasting these perspectives, I engage them collaboratively, highlighting how both groups identify parallel problems in the workings of the penal welfare system.

Through what I term *hybrid storytelling*, this research presents four reconfigurations of life stories intertwined with their encounters with the penal welfare system. These collectivized narratives counter individualizing tendencies in discussions of crime and offer novel insights into incarcerated women’s lives and institutional engagements prior to sentencing. This approach arises from the research strategies employed in the study: 1) decentering the individual, 2) replacing carceral concepts as analytical categories, and 3) engaging in speculation and counter-spells. The third strategy, in particular, guided an analysis of the women’s “what ifs”-speculations on how public harm prevention efforts might function differently. Through an analysis of their longings towards alternative approaches, I highlight the qualities and practices they hoped to find in public institutions. Drawing on these findings, the research culminates in a speculative reflection on what I call a *transformative harm prevention paradigm*. Building on the theoretical framework and empirical analysis, this paradigm emphasizes infrastructures that nurture relational autonomy, foster accountability, and sustain interdependence. What began as an inquiry into incarcerated women’s encounters with the penal welfare system thus expands into a broader reflection on institutional design and governance.

Ultimately, the research offers an empirically grounded rearticulation of how to orient ourselves toward the pursuit of a society with less social harm.

# Resumé

Denne forskning udspringer af et ønske om at lære af nuværende kvindelige indsatte som led i at fremme et samfund med mindre social skade. Begreber som 'kriminalitet' og 'kriminelle' er fravalgt, for at skabe plads til at centrere menneskers oplevelser af skade. Studiet genintroducerer abolitionistiske perspektiver og bringer zemiologi og transformerende retfærdighed ind i nordisk academia som relevante teoretiske værktøjer til at forstå det skadeforebyggende paradigme, der er indlejret i den danske straffende velfærdsstat. Ud fra eksisterende litteratur konceptualiserer jeg det straffende velfærdssystem og de impulser, der animerer dets praksisser på tværs af institutioner. Studiet tilbyder nye empiriske indsigter baseret på involvering med primært indsatte kvinder og sekundært personale i Jyderup Fængsel. Som en udforskning af samarbejdsbaserede metoder rummer studiet også skriveworkshops, hvor de indsatte kvinder skrev kreative tekster om deres liv og deres erfaringer med det straffende velfærdssystem. Nitten interviews med indsatte kvinder undersøgte både oplevede og spekulative fortider i deres møder med institutioner på tværs af sektorer, mens interviews med otte fængselspersonale gav indsigt i deres forståelse af kvindernes udfordringer og deres vurdering af systemets kapacitet til at imødekomme dem. Frem for at sætte perspektiverne op imod hinanden engageres de kollaborativt, hvilket fremhæver, hvordan begge grupper identificerer parallelle problemer i systemets virkemåde.

Gennem det, jeg betegner som *hybrid historiefortælling*, præsenterer studiet fire rekonfigurerede livshistorier sammenvævet med erfaringer med det straffende velfærdssystem. Disse kollektiverede narrativer udfordrer individualiserende tendenser i diskussioner om kriminalitet, og giver nye indsigter i indsatte kvinders liv og institutionelle møder før domfældelse. Tilgangen udspringer af de anvendte forskningsstrategier: 1) decentring af individet, 2) erstatning af strafferetlige begreber som analytiske kategorier, og 3) engagering af spekulation og modbesværgelser. Særligt den tredje strategi førte til en analyse af kvindernes "hvad nu hvis"-spekulationer om, hvordan offentlig skadeforebyggende initiativer kan foregå anderledes. Gennem en analyse af deres længsler mod alternative tilgange fremviser jeg, de kvaliteter og praksisser de håbede at finde i de offentlige institutioner. Med udgangspunkt i disse fund kulminerer forskningen i en spekulativ refleksion over det, jeg kalder et *transformerende skadeforebyggende paradigme*. Informeret af de anvendte teorier og de empiriske analyser, lægger paradigmet vægt på infrastrukturer der understøtter relationel autonomi, understøtter forpligtende ansvarlighed og nærer den gensidige afhængighed. Det, der startede med en undersøgelse af indsatte kvinders møder med det straffende velfærdssystem, breder sig dermed til en refleksion over institutionel udformning og styring.

Samlet set tilbyder forskningen en empirisk baseret gentænkning af, hvordan vi kan orientere indsatsen mod at skabe et samfund med mindre social skade.

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# 1. Transformative futures from past penal welfare experiences – *an introduction*

To live through harm and to cause harm are rarely separate experiences. They often coil around each other, shaping choices and possibilities. Lissi, one of the incarcerated women I met in Jyderup Prison, grew up with a mother whose alcoholism carried both emotional wounds and immediate risks; as when she was drifting asleep while driving with her daughter, Lissi, in the car. Now serving time for storing weapons while living with her partner's child, Lissi reflected on how these early experiences formed a web of influence: one in which her own decisions and the harms done to her cannot easily be pulled apart:

And I think, had I processed it [her childhood] earlier, I would never have gone along with the things I've agreed to. It's not like I'm blaming others for it because I've made the bad decisions myself... but there's been a lot of external influences...

While harm is a complex phenomenon that resists simple linear or causal explanations, research consistently shows that people who enact violence have often been subjected to it themselves (Braga et al., 2017; Christoffersen et al., 2011; Henriksen & Miller, 2012). This dynamic is frequently conceptualized as the “cycle of violence” (Widom, 1989), highlighting how unaddressed harm can reverberate across time and relationships. Studies reveal that individuals exposed to physical violence in childhood are more likely to engage in violent behavior later in life (Fagan, 2001; Reckdenwald et al., 2013), particularly when those experiences are left unacknowledged or unsupported (Maxwell et al., 2016). More insidious types of harm—emotional neglect, structural abandonment, systemic discrimination, poverty—may be equally wounding and propelling (Braga et al., 2017; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). This underpins Lissi's embodied insights of how things might have been different for her; had she processed her experiences of harm. These patterns prompt urgent and difficult questions

about our collective responsibilities: How might we, as a society, interrupt these cycles? What forms of imagination, commitment, and institutional transformation are needed to meaningfully respond to harm?

This study turns to the experiences of incarcerated women in Denmark to explore what can be learned from those who may have both endured harm and inflicted it to nurture our capacity to grapple with these questions. It leaves the category of *crime* behind to follow the zemiological tradition of exploring how a society address and seeks to prevent *social harm* (Canning & Tombs, 2021a). In doing so, it moves beyond an individualized, behaviorist approach to crime prevention and instead joins the more foundational task of exploring how to prevent social harm. In Denmark, the penal welfare system responds to harm through a combination of care and containment; social workers and solitary confinement (Brønsted, 2019; Christensen et al., 2024). This study approaches the system as a network of institutions and practices that may both prevent or mitigate harm but also incite and (re)produce it. Research shows that women in prison—both in Denmark (Koch & Jensen, 1981a, 1981b; Lund-Sørensen & Clausen, 2014; Mathiassen, 2015a, 2015b, 2021b) and internationally (Osterman, 2016; Richie, 2012; Seaman & Lynch, 2022)—often come from more deprived backgrounds and carry more extensive histories of harm than their male counterparts.<sup>1</sup> These intersecting vulnerabilities make them a significant group for examining how social harm might be prevented and addressed. As social work scholar Ann-Karina Henriksen (2021a) observes “at the margins of the Danish welfare state, welfare provision turns punitive by means of interventions that potentially aggravate the social disadvantages of girls and young women” (p. 206). As such, this study opens the possibility to understand these women also as parties to the failings of the current harm prevention paradigm in Denmark; not to excuse, but to understand.

Yet, to linger only in retrospective critique is to confine our (political) imagination to the past and to what already exists. As the late critical theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009) poignantly notes, “[t]he here and now is a prison house” (p. 1), in his call to envision queer futurity. Like Muñoz, this study moves toward what could be. It embraces speculative methods to illuminate the contingencies of the present—and, with them, the potential for change (Ross, 2022; Springgay & Truman, 2018). It asks how such engagement might open space—epistemologically, relationally, and politically—for reimagining harm prevention. This involves inviting incarcerated women not only to recount what was, but also to imagine what could have been: What kinds of interventions might have addressed harm and nurtured transformation? What could have enabled different paths; away from prison and the acts for which they were convicted? The analytic movements of this study thus oscillate across time: from the present to the past, and from the past toward the not-yet. Through this temporal folding, the research seeks both to understand the workings and failings of the penal welfare system and to sketch an alternative harm prevention paradigm informed by the women’s

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<sup>1</sup> International studies shows that incarcerated non-binary and transpeople have experience heightened marginalization (LaChance & Dwyer, 2023; Mountz, 2020; Walker et al., 2018), yet their criminalized experiences in Denmark remain largely undocumented. This study, regrettably, does not fill that gap.

experiences and reflections. Within this pursuit, two guiding sets of research questions frame the inquiry:

- 1) How have incarcerated women experienced their encounters with the Danish penal welfare system; both prior to and during incarceration? What can their experiences teach us about the workings of the system?
- 2) How had these women hoped their contact with the penal welfare system would have unfolded? What do their longings and critiques invite us to envision in terms of public prevention efforts?

To explore these questions, I draw on existing literature and, crucially, on empirical material generated during time spent in Jyderup Prison; a newly opened facility for incarcerated women in Denmark. In the period between late September 2022 and early April 2023, I spent 30 days inside the prison, participating in various occupational activities, deep conversations, and fleeting interactions in communal spaces. Nineteen women, aged 19 to 65, took part in recorded interviews, while many unrecorded moments and conversations also shaped this research. From the vantage point of *now*—incarcerated in Jyderup—we traversed different pasts: lived pasts in which the women recounted their encounters with various public interventions, reflecting on how these shaped their lives; and imagined pasts that could have unfolded differently, perhaps leading to other points of *now*; ones not marked by imprisonment. Beyond spending time with the incarcerated women, I also interacted with prison staff. These engagements prompted an interest in how their interpretations and daily practices could illuminate dimensions of the penal welfare system that remain less visible when viewed solely from the women’s perspective. Therefore, the study also includes insights from interviews with eight staff members working across health services, substance use treatment, education, and ‘the work unit’. The conversations revolved around two central themes: first, how staff interpreted the life situations and challenges commonly faced by incarcerated women within their respective professional domains; and second, how they perceived their own roles, as well as the wider penal welfare system, in processes of prevention.

Being in Jyderup Prison, I sensed that a few of the women (naturally) were skeptical of a researcher within prison walls, while others considered it a long-awaited opportunity to speak back and be heard. As Lea phrased it:

That's also why I thought—when you mentioned the municipality thing—because I always thought: "Oh! Can't I just get a microphone! [Merethe: hehe] And let me just come out and say how fucked up this system is, because it just doesn't work!"

Lea had lots on her mind about the dysfunctions of the penal welfare system, and for her the interviews were an outlet to share her experiences and frustrations. Most of the women had previously been questioned by numerous professionals—caseworkers, social workers, judges, psychologists—where their struggles and choices were interrogated, diagnosed, and subjected to bureaucratic processing. This research, however, approaches questioning from a different orientation. Rather than scrutinizing the women’s lives to classify or control them, being a critique of (some) criminological research (Agozino, 2010), this project inverts the analytical gaze. The women are invited to assess the very system that has long evaluated them. As these women are situated under state control and punitive measures, it became especially important

to explore approaches that engage participants collaboratively rather than observing them from a distance. This led to incorporating aspects of community-based participatory research (Hacker, 2013; Lykes & Crosby, 2014; McCracken, 2019), including open dialogue with the women about their hopes for the research, establishing a community advisory board, and experimenting with arts-based method (Leavy, 2020). Fueled by a curiosity to explore what might emerge if the women wrote about themselves and the penal welfare system, this study turned to writing workshops as a site of collaboration and knowledge production (Walsh et al., 2013). In partnership with author Lee Langvad, this study hosted two workshops inside the prison, offering the women opportunities to create “curated windows” (Pecenco, 2018: 315) into their lives for readers on the outside, possibly far from similar experiences. Following educational scholar Patti Lather and psychologist Chris Smithies’ (2018/1997) advice to avoid “drowning” participants’ creative texts with an authoritarian researcher voice (p. xvi), these writings are displayed on separate pages as invitations to connect with, interpret, and respond directly to the women’s expressions. By giving form to their anger, doubts, lingering questions, and reflections, the texts have been integral to the analytic process and central to the formation of the study’s arguments.

### Could there be other types of magic?

While the empirical material is anchored in Jyderup Prison, the trajectories it covers encompass the many institutions, initiatives, practices, logics, and penal welfare workers that constitute the current state-led harm prevention paradigm. Drawing on restorative justice scholar Howard Zehr’s (1994) notion of a justice paradigm as a “matrix of assumptions, language, and metaphors—that frames our pursuit of justice” (p. 209), I extend this conceptualization to encompass harm prevention. Justice paradigms, I suggest, crystallize into justice cultures, shaping how norms are lived, how practices are institutionalized, and how relations between people and systems unfold. As sociologist David Garland (1990) writes: “[p]enal institutions are thus ‘cause’ as well as ‘effects’ with regard to culture” (p. 250). Accordingly, ‘justice’ in this study is understood as a contested concept, considered in relation to different paradigms of responding to harm rather than a fixed political or moral ideal. Within Nordic penal welfare states, research has highlighted *retributive* and *rehabilitative justice* as the dominant paradigms, marked by an uneasy yet enduring co-existence (Bjerre & Brinkgaard, 2025; Lappi-Seppälä, 2012; Smith, 2009; Smith & Ugelvik, 2017b; Storgaard, 2020; Tang, 2023; Ugelvik, 2016). In a simplified manner, retributive justice frames justice as the balancing and allocation of harm by a centralized authority, which evaluates an individual’s responsibility in a specific incident according to legal statutes and, if deemed culpable, imposes punishment (Bedau, 1978; Walen, 2014; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016). Rehabilitative justice, while also centering an authority’s assessment of responsibility, prioritizes individual treatment and capacity-building over deprivation and suffering (punishment), operating on the principle that supporting the development of the individual contributes to a more just society (Cullen, 2013; Gideon & Thomas, 2017). Retributive and rehabilitative justice

paradigms thus manifest in the harm prevention efforts institutionalized in the Danish penal welfare system, informing both its material structures and its underpinning logics.

One of the women I met in Jyderup Prison, Camilla reflected on her experiences with this paradigm. She described that punishment for her had functioned as a final gesture; an externally imposed closure that left little room for fostering self-reflection or change:

Camilla: (...) Well, yeah, but then *this* is the punishment! Then I don't have to think about it anymore; then I've been punished for what I did [Merethe: mhm], and that's that, kind of.

Merethe: That's actually almost what makes you reflect less [Camilla: mhmm] about it? [Read: your actions]

Camilla: Exactly, that's it.

Merethe: And what, what have you noticed works better?

[5 seconds of silence while she is thinking]

Camilla: Well... being met with understanding instead of being treated worse and trying to do things differently, because I really don't believe that anyone actually wants to mess things up for themselves if they can find a way to do it right. There's usually a reason behind why people do things, whether it's one thing or another.

The punishment we spoke about was not limited to her current prison sentence but reached back to her earlier placement in a Children and Youth Home.<sup>2</sup> Camilla expressed the belief that people—including herself—want to “find a way to do it right” and to be supported in this effort. For her, this support could take the form of “being met with an understanding” and a curiosity about the reasons and larger context behind her actions. In her view, punishment as an institutional response feels closed, external, and ultimately ineffective. Camilla's account reminded me of legal philosopher H.A. Hart's (2008/1968) quirky yet poignant observation of the disconnect at the heart of retributive justice. Hart suggests that retributive justice, by framing justice as a balancing of suffering—inflicting pain on someone who has caused harm—amounts to “a mysterious piece of moral alchemy, in which the combination of the two evils of moral wickedness and suffering are transmuted into good” (Ibid.: 234-5). Despite the persistence of societal myths that this alchemy prevents ‘crime’ (Law, 2021), Camilla's experience disrupts retributive justice's alchemical fantasy. She recounts how being “treated worse” is not generating positive metamorphosis. Her reflection invites us to ask: What if the magic lies not in retribution, but in understanding?

This study animates the belief that something can actually be transformed. With curiosity to learn from Camilla and the other women regarding their experiences with the current harm prevention paradigm, and their speculative explorations of what could have been, this study will contribute with reflections on what we might need for the magic to work. This is not least nurtured by theoretical commitments within zemiology (Canning & Tombs, 2021a), abolitionism (Davis et al., 2022) and transformative justice (Kim, 2018). Turning to zemiology allows this study to reject the idea of crime as a fixed moral or natural category, instead treating it as a political and historical construction (Hillyard et al., 2004). Zemiology shifts attention

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<sup>2</sup> With the new Child Act (2025), Children and Youth Home [Børne- og ungehjem] has become the collective term for a diverse range of residential institutions (Lausten, 2025).

from ‘crime’ to how harm is experienced, produced, legitimized, and unevenly distributed through access to—or denial of—resources (Canning & Tombs, 2021a; Wright, 2023). As zemiologist Simon Pemberton’s (2015) argues, the production of social harm is “determined by the forms of organization” (p. 10) a point that clarifies how the Danish penal welfare state is *one* form of organization, which not only responds to harm but is itself implicated in its production. Abolitionism deepens this work’s critical reach by offering both a rich body of scholarship critiquing carceral responses to harm and a challenge to imagine a world where punishment is not the default and safety is not anchored in exclusion or control (Davis et al., 2022; Lamusse, 2023). At the heart of its contribution is the imperative to expand the analytical and political horizon, making space for alternative futures (Abolition Collective, 2020; Scott, 2013). As philosopher Joy James (2023) writes "the abolitionist is an alchemist", seeking to transmute current oppressive structures into openings for greater liberation. While abolition charts the horizon, *transformative* justice (yet a justice paradigm) offers pathways for the journey (Ansfield et al., 2023). Grounded in the lived realities of communities most directly targeted by criminalization (Kaba, 2021; Nocella, 2011), it turns away from state systems and authority decision-making, centering local and relational responses to harm. These practices aim both to meet needs and to cultivate accountability<sup>3</sup>, while working toward the transformation of the structural inequalities that shape and sustain harm (Hoddy & Gready, 2020; Howe, 2018).

Overall, this research is grounded in a commitment to engage with harm through co-habitation as a fundamental human premise inspired by philosopher Judith Butler’s (2012) reading of philosopher Hannah Arendt (2022/1963). Butler (2012) frames an “ethics of co-habitation” which “commit us to [create] institutions that seek to sustain human lives without regarding some part of the population as socially dead, as redundant, or as intrinsically unworthy of life and therefore ungrievable” (p. 145). The notion of ‘human’ has long been socially and politically constructed through processes of exclusion and domination. Decolonial, indigenous, and post-materialist feminist traditions have illuminated how Western modernity has defined humanness through racialized, gendered, and colonial hierarchies (Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003). Carceral logics influence who is recognized as fully human (Rodríguez, 2018), as criminalization not only imposes punishment but also distorts recognition, erases complexity, and denies vulnerability (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Transformative justice paradigms offer a counterpoint, insisting that no human is disposable (Barrie, 2020), and align with abolitionist commitments to building life-affirming institutions and cultures (Kandaswamy et al., 2023). The domain of ‘humanness’ thus remains a contested site, and this study necessarily takes place within it. In response, this research is explicitly committed to sustaining (also the) life deemed unworthy, choosing to staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2010) of dealing with social harm from that position.

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<sup>3</sup> I understand accountability as an inner resource and capacity to relate to others in an responsible and responsive manner which can be strengthened through practice (Burk, 2011).

## The penal welfare state as context, not as endpoint

In this study, *penal welfare state* designates the broader political architecture of the Danish state, while *penal welfare system* refers to its concrete institutions and practices. This conceptualization challenges the familiar portrayal of Denmark and other Nordic countries as simply *welfare states*, lauded for progressive social policies (Kettunen & Petersen, 2021; Lister, 2009). In the 1960-70's, US descriptions on Nordic prisons were “frequently so uncritical that prisoners in those institutions would have a difficult time recognizing them” (Hornum, 1988: 63). Today, the Nordic countries are often regarded as “good punishers” which offers leverage in foreign policy (Lohne, 2023: 129). Criminologist John Pratt’s (2008a, 2008b) influential concept of *Scandinavian exceptionalism* (often called *Nordic exceptionalism*<sup>4</sup>) reinforced the perception that Nordic penal regimes remained lenient and welfare-oriented—an apparent exception to the punitive turn witnessed across much of the Global North. Yet, Pratt (2008b) also cautioned that welfare restructuring and increased immigration might fuel growing individualism and punitive sentiments toward “outsider” groups (Pratt, 2008b). Subsequent research has supported this warning, with scholars employing concepts such as *Nordic nationalism* (Barker, 2017), *welfare capitalism* (Shammas, 2024), and *bifurcated criminal justice system* (Madsen, 2023) to capture the dynamics at play. Nordic scholars have questioned whether the region is truly exceptional, a relative exception, or merely represents a localized variant of the broader punitive turn (Barker, 2013; Crewe et al., 2023; Madsen, 2023; Shammas, 2016). The commonly used metaphor of a state’s “left” and “right” hands—where the left hand represents care (welfare, education), and the right hand, control (police, prisons) (Wacquant, 2004/2009: 289)—falls short in the Nordic context.<sup>5</sup> Rather, as sociologist Vanessa Barker (2017) contends, welfare “works in tandem with penal order” (p. 28). To capture this blend of care and control, punishment and treatment, penal historian Peter Scharff Smith and criminologist Thomas Ugelvik (2017a) have introduced the concept “Big Mother penal welfare state” to denote the Nordic countries. While the concept never gained much traction in scholarly debates, I choose to reinvigorate it in this study—albeit with a deliberate adjustment. I omit the gendered metaphor of “Big Mother”, as the association of care with femininity and punishment with masculinity risks reinforcing binary framings that obscure rather than clarify the workings of the penal welfare system. Using the concepts of *penal welfare state* and *penal welfare system*, this study acknowledges how recent shifts have reinforced a more punitive social order; visible across societal institutions (Bjerre & Brinkgaard, 2025; Pedersen et al., 2018). This study is thus analytically open to reaffirming the welfare aspect of the Danish societal constellations, dominant in the common imaginary of the Nordic countries. Yet, it is equally analytically open

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<sup>4</sup> Pratt focused on Finland, Norway, and Sweden. *Scandinavian* countries, however, typically refers to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, while the *Nordic* countries include the same countries plus Finland, Iceland, and the partly self-governing areas of Kalaallit Nunaat, the Faroe Islands, and Åland.

<sup>5</sup> The entanglement of penalty and welfare is yet not unique to the Nordics; Garland (1985) shows the entanglements in early British social policy, calling it the *penal-welfare complex*, while Wacquant (2004/2009) notes how carceral and welfare institutions mirror each other in the U.S., through the turn to punitive policies following neoliberal welfare cuts.

to challenging its idealized representation through considering “penal” an equal denominator in understanding the public structures and the state.

Conducting exactly this study in Denmark<sup>6</sup> is also a refusal (Tuck & Yang, 2014b) to regard the current penal welfare state as an ideal endpoint; whether for governance, solidarity, or justice. I align with abolitionist scholar Ti Lamusse (2023) in conceiving the state “as a site of conflict” (p. 95), believing in its possibility for change, however difficult and disheartening it may seem at times. While this dissertation is empirically centered on the penal welfare system, it engages theoretical frameworks that carry deep skepticism toward—or outright reject—the idea that justice can be enabled through state structures (Ansfield et al., 2023; Lamusse, 2023). Rather than tempering the radical commitments of zemiology, abolition, and transformative justice to fit within the confines of the Danish state, I have aimed to let these frameworks sharpen and expand the analysis of the penal welfare state and its possible alternatives. Currently, research applying these theories to the Nordic penal welfare systems remains notably scarce. This gap shapes both how the systems are understood, our capacity to name what sustains it, and to imagine “the otherwise.” By situating these theories within a Nordic context, this study not only affirms their relevance but also proceeds through exploring their potential to open new analytical angles on both the present system and its possible futures. This approach resonates with Lamusse’s (2023) call to “investigate what is possible based on currently existing material conditions and justice technologies, as well as what is not currently possible, but could or should be” (p. 60). In attending to ‘the now’ and recent pasts of the Danish penal welfare system, the research maintains a focus on reducing harm in the present, rather than deferring it to an imagined future.

This research unfolds during a period marked by heightened (at)tensions on matters around harm and justice. Globally, punitive logics have intensified in various ways; evident in the expansion of criminal legal policies, surveillance technologies, and carceral infrastructures (Aguirre, 2024; Fonseca, 2018; Garland, 2012). In Denmark, since the 1990s, parliamentary discourse has increasingly framed justice through a punitive lens, while knowledge about the social consequences of punishment has been sidelined compared to the tighter collaboration in the 1950-60’s between scholars, practitioners, and politicians (Balvig, 2005; Elholm, 2011; Fransen, 2021; Nilsson & Nagel, 2015). The punitive lens has led to a significant rise in legislative amendments, introducing new criminal offences, broadening the definitions of existing ones, and expanding the number of prison cells due to the enforcement of longer sentences (Feldtmann et al., 2024; Minke & Vanhouche, 2023; Schultz & Gjørding, 2023). Researchers have noticed how punitive policies in particular carry symbolic weight (with material consequences) where politicians posture as decisive protectors, despite ‘tough punishment’ being found to not lessen recidivism (Carvalho & Chamberlen, 2018; Smith, 2023). Importantly, the penal expansion does not occur without resistance. Many prison guards are resigning, citing the loss of relational, human-centered work that initially drew them to the profession (Damsa, 2023b; Gjørding, 2022; Gregersen, 2018, 2021). Amid the

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<sup>6</sup> Given Denmark’s colonial entanglements, this calls for precision. This study focuses on the geographical area of Denmark, not Kalaallit Nunaat and the Faroe Islands, while acknowledging their relevance.

fortification of punitiveness, a growing global interest in restorative and transformative justice, alongside a renewed engagement with penal abolitionism (Davis et al., 2022), is reflected in Denmark both in policies and in grassroots initiatives<sup>7</sup> (Dünkel et al., 2015; Felholt, 2024; Hjelmar, 2013; Laugesen, 2017; Tønnesvang & Alstrup, 2013).

## But who is actually harming?

This study deliberately centers on the handling and prevention of social harm, tracing—with curiosity and critical attention—how incarcerated women experience institutional responses to the harms they have endured, in order to reflect on these institutions’ capacity to interrupt cycles of harm. While the framing and analytical approach of this study might give the impression that the institutions of the penal welfare state operate with a clear, explicit aim of preventing harm, this is not the position taken here. Harm prevention may be a stated rationale in certain contexts, but it is far from a consistent guiding principle across public institutions. The institutions serve multiple, sometimes competing interests, which can conflict with the harm-preventive needs of groups and individuals (Damsa, 2024; Shammas, 2024). As sociologist Inge Marie Bryderup (2010: 175) notes, social pedagogy—which some might consider purely solidaric—is intended to support societal stability as much as the individuals themselves through the efforts to integrate and normalize marginalized groups. Focusing on ‘harm handling and prevention’ therefore serves as an analytical strategy, allowing for a closer examination of how different interventions—whether framed as protective, supportive, corrective, or punitive—are experienced by those subjected to them.

Existing research indicates that the existing harm prevention paradigm does not adequately address the intertwined realities of experiencing and perpetuating harm for girls and women. According to Henriksen (2017), staff at secure institutions [sikrede institutioner]<sup>8</sup> are aware that that “the large majority of girls [placed there] are victims of sexual and physical violence” (p. 691), but this understanding rarely translates into pedagogical practices attentive to the connections between “abuse and troubling behavior, or how institutional practices might reinforce such behavior” (p. 691). Given that 21% of imprisoned women in Denmark have been placed in a Children and Youth Home (including secure institutions) before turning 15 (Lund-Sørensen & Clausen, 2014), this further underscores the likelihood that harm prevention efforts have been insufficient. According to psychologist Charlotte Mathiassen (2015a), criminal acts by women associated with substance dependency frequently reflect attempts to manage intense “life pain” (p. 101, my translation). Highlighting the lack of attention to these experiences in Danish prisons (Mathiassen, 2011), she states: “If it does not

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<sup>7</sup> Such as the emergence of the following activist groups: Restore CPH [Genopret KBH] in 2018, Forum for Prison Abolition [Forum for fængselsafskaffelse] in 2022, Restore South Funen [Genopret Sydfyn] in 2023, as well as the practitioner and academic led group: Association for Restorative Law and Practice [Foreningen for genoprettende ret og praksis] in 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Secure institutions are carceral residential settings where children and youth are placed through either social or penal legislation (Danish Regions [Danske Regioner], N.N-b).

become possible to offer genuine treatment for a life shaped by abuse, then it seems futile to try to punish this group of women into compliance" (2015a: 101, my translation).

In 2023, the female prison population in Denmark numbered around 218, representing 5.2% of the total 4,191 incarcerated individuals<sup>9</sup> (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024: 18+19). In 2021, Jyderup Prison was converted into a women's facility, marking the reintroduction of gender-segregated incarceration in Denmark. Politically, this change was framed as a response to persistent challenges, including the lack of gender-sensitive rehabilitation and issues of sexual harassment (Danish Government, 2017; Frandsen, 2011; Lindstad, 2014). For decades, Denmark practiced mixed-gender prisons, where women sentenced in either gender mixed- or separated units. Visiting four different prison sites, Mathiassen (2011) notes that men repeatedly crossed boundaries with women in the mixed-gender units, but also how such incidents occurred less frequently in units with engaged social-pedagogical practices. This is illustrative of how sexual harm is shaped by (institutional) culture and relational practices. Framing gender separation as a solution to sexual harm interestingly uses the logic of dislocation and control that underpin incarceration itself. It offers a spatial fix while leaving gender norms and institutional conditions unchallenged. As another consequence, non-binary and transgender people<sup>10</sup> are offered worse conditions (Van Hout & Crowley, 2021). The then-director of The Prisons of Denmark,<sup>11</sup> Thorkild Fogde, characterized incarcerated women as "a particularly vulnerable and exposed group" and argued that gathering them in one location would "strengthen the professionalism of the resocialization efforts directed towards this group" (The Prisons of Denmark, 2019, my translation). Two years after its opening, this research allowed me to visit Jyderup and gain insight into how these ambitions unfold in practice.

Given that women are culturally constructed as more likely to be victims than perpetrators, with their agency constrained (im)materially by patriarchal norms (Morrissey, 2023), focusing on incarcerated women in studies like this may hold an advantage. It allows for greater readiness to attend to the social harms they have experienced, which in turn opens space to challenge the rigid victim/perpetrator binary and to consider alternatives to punitive responses. I aim to strategically leverage this relative openness to cultivate a foundation for extending such alternative thinking across gender and other social categories. Moreso, while this research offers insights into the women's backgrounds and experiences of social harm, it does not aim to diminish the pain they may have caused others. Their complex humanity encompasses both the capacity to be harmed and to harm, like all of us. Most women I met in Jyderup were convicted of drug-related offenses, but some had inflicted direct physical harm, injured bodies, and in a few cases, caused death. That reality demands care and attention. I invite you to pause and breathe as needed while engaging with this research.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2024, Denmark's incarceration rate was 69 per 100,000 people, compared to 24 per 100,000 (13 individuals) in the Faroe Islands and 294 per 100,000 (167 individuals) in Kalaallit Nunaat (World Prison Brief, N.N., N.N.-a, N.N.-b).

<sup>10</sup> Approximately 1% of the Danish prison population is estimated to be gender minorities, which amount to around 42 people (Hjaltason & Taxhjelm, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> As of fall 2025, the Department of Prison and Probation [Kriminalforsorgen] will adopt a new name: the Prisons of Denmark [Danmarks Fængsler] which is used throughout this study.

Breathing space.

I hope that all the people who have been harmed  
receive the support they need.

Breathing space.

Still, by entering a prison to explore the relationship between experiencing and enacting harm, I remain cautious of reinforcing the idea that it is behind bars that we find the people who have done the most harm. This is not the position of this study. The dominant ‘tough on crime’ discourse purports to take harm seriously, yet allows much of it to persist undisturbed (Coyle & Nagel, 2021: 5). Many harmful acts are not penalized, and not all punishable acts are harmful. The filter of criminalization, far from neutral, shapes which harms and subjects are recognized, protected, and sanctioned (Gaynor, 2018; Nagel, 2021). The scholarly traditions of Marxist criminology (Lynch, 2017) and white collar crime (Sutherland, 1983) have illustrated the classed nature of the criminal justice system. Philosopher Jeffrey Reiman and criminologist Paul Leighton (2015/1964) argue that the system is structured to “make it look as if crime is the work of the poor” (p. 5), transmitting the message that the primary danger to society comes from below rather than above. These classed operations are entangled with racialized patterns of discrimination and regulation (Aliverti et al., 2021; Blankholm et al., 2024; Haller et al., 2020). It is the social harms occurring in the streets and not during board meetings which are predominantly targeted and criminalized, shaping the public imagination of who the ‘criminals’ are. If I truly wanted to engage with people who commit grave social harm, I could have turned to the boardrooms of Cheminova: a chemical production company responsible for polluting Denmark’s waters (Tynell et al., 2024). Or directed my attention toward the Ministry of the Environment, which deliberately issued guidelines that violated EU environmental law, enabling this pollution to unfold (ibid.). I could also have attended weapon industry conferences; among those who profit from the production and trade of arms that fuel death and genocide in places like Palestine, Sudan, and Congo, as I write this dissertation. The individuals behind such harms rarely occupy prison cells. In this way, the penal system both reflects and reinforces unequal distributions of regulation and punishment. Crucially, however, this does not suggest that poorer and marginalized populations are inherently ‘more criminal’, nor that eliminating poverty alone would end ‘crime’. This is merely one side of the story of inequality. As criminologist John Braithwaite (1979) argues “too little power and wealth creates problems of living, and this produces crime; too much power corrupts, and this also produces crime” (p. 187). In other words, the social positions afforded by both deprivation and excess create distinct conditions and incentives for harm. As this research turns towards those incarcerated, it will most likely learn about harm prevention from engagement with those with “too little power and wealth”. In other words, this dissertation engages a group of people who, through the discourse of criminality, are cast as harmful and punished accordingly. Studying the link between being subjected to and enacting harm from a prison context is also a way to confront the classed and racialized structures that shape incarceration and the cycles of harm. Listening to the experiences of those incarcerated becomes an act of both research and solidarity, one that seeks to understand responsibility and harm prevention in broader terms.

## The relationality of this study

Knowledge-making is always in connection with the lives, institutions, and struggles it touches. Moving with the ethics of co-habitation invites me to reflect and respond to such. I align with feminist criminologists Carly Guest and Rachel Seoighe (2021) in considering carceral logics to be “dependent on emotional distancing” (p. 87) and take up the ambition to work in ways to disrupt this distance. As educational scholar Erica Meiners (2010) aptly argues “prisons serve as public pedagogy” (p. 548) being psychological manifestations of the notion that “bad people” should be segregated from society and subjected to punishment. This distancing fosters ignorance about the individuals themselves, the conditions of their lives, and the instruments of criminalization. Feminist criminologists Meda Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko (2012/1997) argue that our collective ignorance about the lives we keep punished “(...) cost us far more than dollars. In our silence, we begin to deny our own humanity and the humanity of those we imprison.” (p. 9). Their articulation captures a truth both beautiful and painfully accurate: recognizing another’s humanity is not merely intellectual but an embodied practice as we affirm our own humanity in the process. The beauty of this entanglement is inseparable from its pain, as the weight of recognition presses in a world marked by punitive discourse (Smith, 2023), persistent wars, and portrayals of humans as non-givable subjects (Butler, 2009). By relating to the humanity of those we incarcerate, I aim to deepen and enact my own, and hope this dissertation offers readers the opportunity to practice theirs.

Throughout this dissertation, I sometimes call upon and speak to a ‘we’ and an ‘us’. These refer to anyone who feels aligned with this collective at a given argument and moment. It represents what anthropologist Marisol De la Cadena (2019) might describe as a “complex we”, characterized by both divergence and inclusivity. The ‘I’ in this text is continuously evolving and has changed during this research. I consider myself an “implicated subject” (Rothberg, 2019), a position beyond the victim–perpetrator binary that makes it possible to ask how each of us “contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination” without directly controlling them (p. 1). My own relationship to the penal welfare system is layered. I, of course, carry diverse lived experiences of moving through a society shaped by a retributive and rehabilitative justice culture. As a cisgender woman, white, non-addicted, queer, highly educated Danish citizen, I closely resemble criminologist Nils Christie’s (1986) figure of the *ideal victim*; someone whose harm is socially and juridically legible. Yet the carceral system has not appeared as ideal for me. For four years, I worked part-time at SAVN—Børn og pårørende til indsatte [MISS—Children and Relatives of Incarcerated People], an NGO supporting families of incarcerated people, where I gained insights of how punishment extends far beyond prison walls. Over the past six years, my engagement with the network Genopret KBH [Restore CPH] has further shaped my understanding of how to engage with harm. Supporting people and groups in moments of painful conflict has taught me that transformation is never straightforward—it is slow, demanding, and imperfect. It has also revealed the profound beauty in striving for it and the possibilities of doing things differently.

Throughout this research, I found myself repeatedly returning to abolitionist Thomas Mathiesen's (2015/1974) notion of 'the unfinished'. His vision of abolitionist alternatives insists on their necessarily incomplete and continuously evolving nature, emphasizing that alternatives must remain open-ended to not be co-opted by dominant structures or rendered irrelevant. This refusal of finality calls for an ever-evolving heuristic process, one that forces us to notice emerging structures of power and to respond with new understandings of both the problems and possible solutions. This resonates with criminologist Liat Ben-Moshe's (2018) reflections on abolitionist work not as "finality but process itself, trial and error, and in understanding disorientation as generative" (p. 348). I conceptualize this study as a research endeavor of the unfinished; one that remains open to revision, expansion, and transformation. This means embracing the fact that better versions of these arguments most likely will emerge in the future. As the 'now' will change, the understandings and alternatives will need to shift as new experiences, and struggles, take shape. That is also to say, if you are picking up these pages 20 or 50 years from now, I hope you will find these arguments mundane. I hope the conversations have deepened, and the horizon for harm prevention changed.

## How the dissertation unfolds

This thesis proceeds with unfolding the theoretical anchor of the study in chapter 2, *Grasping the penal welfare system and beyond*. Here, I explore how zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice offer relevance for studies of this kind. I attend to how each framework has contributed and shaped the direction of the research, including the tensions that arise in their application. A continuous thread leads into chapter 3, *Methodological reflections on the research endeavor of the unfinished*, where the analytical anchor is translated into three research strategies. The chapter also unfolds how the notion of 'the unfinished' informed my approach to knowledge-making. I reflect on questions of legitimacy and responsibility in conducting this study, and present how the empirical material came into being; through negotiated access, encounters, and conversations. The chapter closes with shorter sections outlining the analytical moves and sensibilities that shaped the development of the empirical analyses. The first of these, chapter 4, *Incarcerated women's encounters with the penal welfare system*, presents—through what I term *hybrid storytelling*—the trajectories of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise. I reflect on how to name the harms they have endured, and through speculative engagement denaturalize that they are the ones currently incarcerated.

In chapter 5, *Impulses animating the penal welfare system*, attention moves from collective trajectories to the larger questions of how the system came into being and what sustains it. Conceptualizing the notion of *impulse*, the chapter draws on multiple strands of scholarship to rearticulate the forces driving the penal welfare system across its diverse units and institutions, highlighting both historical legacies and present-day logics. With both the hybrid stories and this conceptual framing in mind, chapter 6, *Depicting the penal welfare system*, turns to thematically exploring recurring patterns in the experiences of incarcerated women

and prison staff with the penal welfare system. The analysis centers on how they perceive the system's capacity—or failure—to respond meaningfully to different situations and to the realities of social harm. Chapter 7, *Longing for other public structures and responses*, shifts the temporal frame from lived pasts to speculative ones. Here, I unfold the women's 'what ifs' through four qualities they wished they had encountered in the penal welfare system—qualities that may point us toward more life-affirming public responses to harm. Drawing the threads together, Chapter 8, *A Transformative harm prevention paradigm*, explores and speculates on what an alternative harm prevention paradigm might look like. It takes its cue from the women's lived experiences and visions, and from the theoretical anchor of this study, in seeking to imagine a social architecture that minimizes social harm and enables human flourishing.

The incarcerated women's creative texts serve as interludes and openings to the chapters. Since a recurring theme for the women is the experience of not being heard, I have considered how not to reproduce such experience in this thesis. Decolonial scholar Julia Suárez-Krabbe's (2023) concept of relinking—a praxis of authentic relating across various divides—has been generative in this regard. It has inspired me to think of this dissertation not only as an account of research but as a space that can curate and offer links: bridges across the carceral divide. In this spirit, the women's writings appear along with some of the responses they have elicited. While conducting this research, I also taught classes in which I invited students to listen to the women's texts and reflect on their epistemic and affective possibilities. Students engaged in writing exercises to capture how the words moved, stirred, or lingered with them. Some allowed me to share their responses with the incarcerated women—returning to them a sense of how their words had reached people who did not know them personally, yet felt a momentary closeness. A few of these student responses are included in this dissertation, to honor the significance of being received and witnessed. Each woman has chosen her own poetic alias, distinct from the pseudonym used elsewhere in the dissertation, and the students have similarly chosen their own names. As these texts were written in Danish, they feature in their original language at the end of this dissertation, so they can be read exactly as authored. I have translated all quotes from Danish into English, so the creative texts serve as the sole entry point to the women's words in their original form, without the subtle shifts that translation inevitably introduces.

Following the conclusion, a page is left for you, the reader, to sit with the women's words and the arguments of this research and reflect on what emerges within you. This invitation derives from the study's methodological stance: if carceral logic relies on emotional distance, abolitionist research must nurture affective proximity.

## **If I were a minister**

If I were a minister, I would take a closer look at the penalty frameworks

If I were a minister, I would focus on rehabilitation

If I were a minister, I would open up opportunities

If I were a minister, I would focus more on education in prisons

If I were a minister, I would focus on the principle of proximity and build more women's prisons and halfway houses, better distributed

If I were a minister, I would give well-functioning inmates a chance to make an extra effort

If I were a minister, I would not advocate for punishment but for help

If I were a minister, I would listen to what the inmates themselves have to say and accommodate it

If I were a minister, I would ensure that our psychiatric hospitals are properly managed so that prison officers don't have to handle tasks they aren't trained for

If I were a minister, I would open nursing home prisons for the elderly and vulnerable inmates who need extra health personnel

If I were a minister, I would make sure that we get incarcerated people out on the other side in the best way

If I were a minister, I would visit prisons and experience them firsthand

- S.N.

*/Text 1*

## 2. Grasping the penal welfare system and beyond

In the creative text *“If I were a minister,”* S.N. urges us to consider alternative responses to harm. She gestures toward a broader shift beyond punishment and toward support for those who have caused harm, while also calling for reforms in the present: better psychiatric facilities and penal sites located closer to people’s homes and communities. These suggestions position us in the in-between—between the current prevention paradigm and what might come. Abolition, as Mathiesen (2015/1974) reminds us, unfolds in this terrain of the unfinished, which means that our analytical frameworks must also remain in motion: open to continuous making, unmaking, and remaking, in the pursuit of new possibilities. Taking this to heart, the analytical anchor of this study loosely weaves together three evolving theoretical frameworks—zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice—to understand the prevention paradigm shaping the penal welfare system, and to envision what could become.

This chapter first outlines how the three theoretical traditions inform the analysis of incarcerated women’s and prison staff’s experiences within the penal welfare system, and how they function as epistemic resources for reimagining harm prevention. In seeking to reintroduce abolitionism and to bring zemiology and transformative justice into Nordic academia, I present these frameworks individually, with the aim of broadening their accessibility and clarifying their relevance for future scholarship in the region. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how these theoretical traditions, taken together, offer a generative lens for understanding, analyzing, and envisioning harm prevention. I turn to complementary concepts to better grasp the relational and cross-scalar complexity of harm, thereby contributing by pushing these theories further. Building on this theoretical anchor, prevention can be reconceptualized as efforts to create and sustain a societal infrastructure that nurtures the social and political conditions required for human and planetary flourishing.

## Centering experiences and societal arrangements through zemiology

As this research seeks to explore incarcerated women's encounters with and experiences of harm prevention across the layered terrain of the penal welfare system, it is important to construct an analytical approach that foregrounds both the experiences of harm and the broader structural and institutional context. Zemiology, the study of social harm, offers such an approach. Derived from the Greek word *zemia* (ζημία) meaning *damage, loss, or detriment*, zemiology invites us to look not just at harm itself, but at the human, political, and institutional arrangements through which harm is produced, tolerated, or mitigated (Canning & Tombs, 2021a). This orientation allows this research to focus on the ways the incarcerated women perceive the penal welfare system's ability to address varying situations and potential experiences of social harm. Zemiology emerged in the 1990s among scholars frustrated with criminology's tight tether to state-defined categories (Canning & Tombs, 2021a; Hillyard et al., 2004).<sup>12</sup> Critical criminologists—including those from conflict/Marxist and feminist perspectives (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Quinney, 1974)—had however long been concerned with criminology's risk of being politically domesticated, serving the interests of those in power (Tauri, 2013). Crime, the central analytical category of criminology, lacks an "ontological reality" as the late abolitionist Louk Hulsman (1986) argues. 'Crime' is a social construct by political designation with real material consequences. What counts as a crime, and who is seen as a criminal, are not neutral categorizations but bound to dominant norms, values, and interests (Aliverti et al., 2021). By shifting focus from 'crime' to 'social harm', zemiology refuses the assumption that legal categories capture the full extent of what is damaging to people or to the planet. Zemiology thus creates space to consider how institutional practices—including those deemed lawful or preventative—can themselves cause harm (Veitch, 2007). This opens the possibility of rethinking harm prevention in terms of institutional and structural transformation (Canning & Tombs, 2021a; Hillyard et al., 2004; Tombs, 2018). Thus, in the context of this research, a zemiological approach strengthens the analytical move beyond an individualistic focus by directing attention to institutional practices and their capacity to change. The incarcerated women are not approached as inherently morally deviant or pathological, as they are at times portrayed in political and media discourse (Mayr & Machin, 2011). Rather, the zemiological focus is on the societal production and regulation of 'deviance' and social harm (Canning & Tombs, 2021a).<sup>13</sup> Centering the experiences of the penal welfare system from the subject position of incarcerated women offers a generative site for theoretical and political critique, enabling broader interrogations and reconfigurations of social organization. Pemberton's (2015) assertion that social harm is "determined by the forms of organization" (p. 10) is especially relevant here, to position the penal welfare system as one such form of organization. One that not only responds to harm but is itself implicated in its production.

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<sup>12</sup> The trajectory of studies that center harm rather than crime dates back to at least 1986, with abolitionist Louk Hulsman's article *Critical Criminology and the Concept of Crime*.

<sup>13</sup> Zemiology here aligns with a core endeavor of queer theory in deconstructing social categories in order to lessen their material impact as stratifiers. For publications exploring these intersections see e.g. Ball (2016), Buist and Semprevivo (2022), and Tolu (2025).

Some critiques of zemiology are worthwhile addressing. Sociologist Majid Yar (2012) for example, argues that social harm remains vulnerable to the same charge it levels at criminology: that its core category is culturally contingent and lacks ontological grounding. Yet, from a constructivist standpoint, this can be considered a feature not a flaw, inviting for a situated and reflexive mode of analysis. That said, this openness carries risks important to be mindful of. The definitional breadth of social harm can, as Canning and Tombs (2021a: 108–109) point out, lead to inconsistent and—ironically—harmful application if it fails to name systemic harms such as racism. This critique is crucial to stay engaged with throughout a study such as this, to be mindful of what is highlighted in analysis as harm and what is left out. With interest into how this study could approach experiences of harm, I notice scholars like Greenfield and Paoli (2013), Pemberton (2015), and Soliman (2021) who have offered important frameworks to assess harm from. Yet, I have not encountered work that addresses a more foundational concern: what are the qualifying attributes that make harm *harmful*? Canning & Tombs (2021a) caution against framing this as a quest to establish a fixed ontology of harm and seeking a single truth about harm. Instead, they argue that the work of qualifying harm might be better understood as a “productive process without endpoint” (Ibid.: 102). They thus suggest to begin with lived experiences—listening to how people name and describe social harm—and then seek to qualify and analyze it from there (Canning & Tombs, 2021b: 122). Beginning with experiences, is the orientation this study has taken on, foregrounding responsiveness over rigidity and treating harm as situated, relational, and contextual. As such, this study does not seek to define what makes something harmful in the first place; rather, it contributes empirically through a curiosity toward the research participants’ experiences with the penal welfare system. By attending closely to what incarcerated women have stressed, repeated, and returned to as they share their engagements with the penal welfare system, this study asserts that giving space to such experiences must be central to any serious attempt to understand and prevent harm. This stands in contrast to the practices of penal law, where crime is predefined and legal procedures leave no space to ask whether and how a given act was in fact harmful, and what responses are seen as needed (Christie, 1977; Gjørding, 2020; Gjørding & Jessing, 2023). As feminist criminologist Carol Smart (2002/1989) argues, the claiming practices of law operate by foreclosing contestation, thereby disqualifying lived experience. Social harm approaches, by contrast, open space for autonomous concept-making rooted in knowledge and lived experience, rather than in political or juridico-administrative definitions of crime. This study engages the zemiological proposition that harm is not a fixed category but a contextual, relational, and collaborative task to be negotiated by scholars, practitioners, and communities within their specific circumstances. Such openness is generative, echoing abolitionism’s commitment to a continuous becoming in response to evolving needs (Ben-Moshe, 2018; Mathiesen, 2015/1974). Instead of relying on fixed definitions, this approach asks us to attend to lived realities, which may yield more relevant and responsive understandings. Yet, I remain attentive to the fact that such openness can be misapplied in ways that produce harm. To provide conceptual grounding, I follow Pemberton’s (2015) insight that social harm arises when “human flourishing is compromised by the denial of social resources necessary to enable the exercise of life choices” (p. 3). Yar (2012)

complements this position by arguing that harm arises when human needs<sup>14</sup> go unrecognized, highlighting the fulfillment of these needs as a necessary step toward reducing harm and cultivating more just societies. As such, I have attended to the moments when the women were unable to access the resources needed to navigate and shape their lives, and when the penal welfare system appeared unresponsive to their needs. By foregrounding both societal structures and individual experiences, zemiology allows this study to attend to the social harms women endure before, during, and after their encounters with carceral institutions. It extends and challenges classical criminology's focus on individual deviance and legal transgression, enabling the visibility of social harms and the influence of public institutions—factors that are frequently overlooked in conventional criminological analysis.

### Bridging the 'now' to the 'then' through abolitionist alchemy

Broadening the analytical lens through social harm opens space for speculations about the past, present, and future. In this project, taking the 'what ifs' seriously has been inseparable from taking the research participants seriously, as the women I spoke with frequently articulated aspects of the penal welfare system they wished were different. Their reimaginations—cautious, bold, or contradictory—are therefore treated as vital contributions to rethinking what harm prevention might entail. As a political project and theoretical framework, abolitionism honors such speculations by offering both negative and affirmative critique, challenging the current order and its perceived inevitability (Carrier & Piché, 2015; Coyle & Scott, 2021; Raffnsøe et al., 2022). Abolitionism urges us to stay with uncertainties and possibilities, to ask "what if?", and to take seriously the speculative gestures that reach toward different futures. Engaging incarcerated women and prison staff in imagining alternatives involves treating their longings and visions as significant contributions to shaping an otherwise. Through interviews attentive to respectfully speculative pasts and alternative working conditions, and writing workshops grounded in "ifs," this study sought to open spaces where longings and imagined possibilities could be taken seriously and allowed to unfold.

I understand abolitionism as carrying a dual imperative, which has guided this study. As political theorist Andrew Dilts (2019) notes, argues, abolition involves *analyzing* how oppressive systems are produced and maintained, while simultaneously *committing* to their dismantling by cultivating alternative ways of organizing social life. This study enacts duality by working with both *critique* and *construction*, the *now* and the *then*. Whilst abolitionism have also been developed within the context of Europe—particular during the 1960-70s' (Langer, 2020; van Swaaningen, 2013)—as well as in other parts of the world (Davis et al., 2022; Piché & Larsen, 2010), its most enduring traditions are rooted in and inseparable from

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<sup>14</sup> Across zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice, the idea of fundamental human needs reoccur as central to imagining political and institutional structures capable of preventing harm through their fulfilment. However, the notion of "need" itself often remains undertheorized. In this research, needs are understood in relation to people's capabilities to function and flourish (Nussbaum, 2011). Human needs, then, go beyond the bare minimum for survival to encompass the possibility of becoming capable, exercising choice, and participating meaningfully in society.

decolonial and Black studies shaped through struggles against slavery in the U.S. (Hart, 1980; Yee, 1992). Now, these imperatives extend across many domains: the family institution (O'Brien, 2023; Weeks, 2023), carceral psychiatric hospitalization (Ben-Moshe, 2020), national border regimes (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023), (carceral) social work (Kim et al., 2024; Toraif & Mueller, 2023), and the penal system (Coyle & Nagel, 2021; Coyle & Scott, 2021; Ruggiero, 2010). This study in particular draws on penal and social work abolitionist traditions that seek to cultivate epistemologies of anti-violence, grounded in the fundamental commitment to prevent and respond to harm through an ethics of co-habitation (Heiner & Tyson, 2017; Kandaswamy et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024). These strands call for a dis-epistemological detachment from the carceral logics that structure our collective imagination (Ben-Moshe, 2018)—what has been described as the “carceral occupation” of our capacity to envision alternative responses to harm (Chartrand & Rougier, 2021). In this spirit, this study attempts to denaturalize the retributive and rehabilitative justice culture through nurturing the possibilities of thinking and doing otherwise. Centering “both/ands” as a foundational abolitionist commitment, as articulated by abolitionists Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie (2022: 3) has been especially relevant to the approach of this study. This refusal to accept binary categories—between victim and perpetrator, immediate needs and long-term transformation, critique and creation—has been formative for the analytical sensibility of this study. Accordingly, I resist framing the penal welfare system as a singularly good or bad formation. Rather, I remain with the tensions that arise in participants’ experiences of it; experiences that often carry both harm and care, containment and support. Similarly, I avoid polarizing incarcerated women and prison staff into antagonistic roles. Instead, the study traces how both groups navigate, challenge, and are shaped by institutional conditions. The roots of abolitionism remain present and deeply relevant in the intellectual and activist trajectories of contemporary abolitionist scholars—those who refuse the foreclosure of Black life under the current racial-capitalist order (Davis, 2011, 2011/2003; Rodriguez, 2022; Shange, 2020b). This refusal reverberates in the Nordic context as well, where racialized communities—particularly black and brown men—continue to be disproportionately criminalized and surveilled (Birk Haller et al., 2020; Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003; Solhjell et al., 2019). However, recognizing the importance of not simply importing a framework developed in response to a different context, this study approaches penal abolitionism as a set of conceptual tools and political commitments that must be translated, reshaped, and elaborated in dialogue with local histories and conditions. In this sense, the project is an attempt to carry out an abolitionist inquiry within a Nordic penal welfare state, attuned to its institutional particularities, societal dynamics, and ambivalences.

In the introduction, I presented H. L. A. Hart’s (2008/1968) critique of retributive justice as a peculiar form of “moral alchemy”; the belief that responding to something ‘bad’ with further harm somehow produces something ‘good’. One of the incarcerated women, Camilla, reflected that punishment had done little to support meaningful change in her life. What she longed for instead was a deeper effort to understand the context behind her actions. Her perspective resonates with abolitionist thinking, insisting that violence cannot be the basis for generating more just social relations. Rather than fostering accountability or transformation, prisons and punishment may in fact erode the very conditions needed for change and genuine

accountability (Borbón, 2022, 2024; Díaz-Soto & Borbón, 2024). Butler's (2020) thinking on the (im)possibility of using violence as a mere tool helps understanding why this "alchemy" falters. They argue that violence resists being reduced to a simple means to a defined end; as it spills over, leaving unpredictable and often destructive consequences in its aftermath (ibid.). When extended to institutional punishment, which is (also) grounded in coercion, deprivation, and violence, this insight compels us to confront how such practices may themselves generate instability, harm, and social fragmentation. This is precisely the terrain on which penal abolitionist thought intervenes: by insisting on forms of consequence after harm that are rooted in support, relational accountability, and change-making rather than retribution. As philosopher Joy James (2023) suggests, "the abolitionist is an alchemist" attempting to transform oppressive structures into possibilities for greater liberation. This metaphor resonates deeply with the ambitions of this research. Here, the incarcerated women and prison staff are positioned as alchemists in their own right: people who articulate the imaginative, pragmatic, and sometimes contradictory forms of transformation that might guide us toward a society with less social harm. Through this approach, I take up a familiar critique of abolitionism as utopian and naïve; detached from reality and concerned with producing unrealistic utopias (Ben-Moshe, 2018: 341). I understand this critique as arising from two distinct entry points: first, as a dismissal aimed at delegitimizing abolitionist contributions, which this study pushes back against; and second, as a potentially generative frustration—a desire for more concrete, detailed alternatives. This study affirms that desire by grounding abolitionist thinking in empirical inquiry, offering proposals that arise from the lived experiences and visions of incarcerated women and staff. These proposals do not claim to deliver social work and penal abolition in full; rather, they illuminate pathways for moving differently within the present. I consider the materialization of an abolitionist horizon not as a single leap but as an ongoing journey; one that can be scaffolded through moving towards non-reformist reforms.<sup>15</sup> Briefly put, *non-reformist reforms* aim to shift power and reorganize institutions so they can meaningfully respond to human needs, and reject loyalty to any given dominant political order in this endeavor (Gorz, 1967/1964: 13). *Reformist reforms*, by contrast, operate squarely within existing dominant political frameworks. While they may improve certain conditions, they ultimately uphold the system's foundational logics and maintain loyalty to the existing order—prioritizing its preservation over substantive transformation (ibid.). In this study, both retributive and rehabilitative justice paradigms can be understood as integral to that dominant political order. When we bring this into conversation with Pemberton's (2015) definition of social harm—as occurring when individuals are denied the resources necessary to make meaningful life choices—non-reformist reforms emerge as strategic efforts to reconfigure social structures in ways that cultivate life-affirming possibilities. This framing resonates with human geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore assertion that "abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building

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<sup>15</sup> Originally conceptualized by philosopher André Gorz (1967/1964) in his reflections on the revolutionary workers' movement and its potential to dismantle neo-capitalism as an overarching structure. The concept of non-reformist reforms was later taken up by Thomas Mathiesen (2015/1974), Liat Ben-Moshe (2013), and other abolitionists to articulate steps toward dismantling carceral and punitive systems and building alternative structures.

life-affirming institutions."<sup>16</sup> As such abolition futurity concerns visions of a “culture of life” (Kandaswamy et al., 2023). It is from this orientation that this research seeks to articulate visions grounded in the expressed needs of incarcerated women and a commitment to the creation of life-affirming institutions. Yet the visions the women shared are rarely straightforward. Sometimes they take the form of pragmatic reforms; at other moments, they reveal tensions between reformist adjustments and more transformative reconfigurations. As S.N. imagined, placing herself in the role of a minister, she would both establish more geographically accessible women’s prisons and halfway houses, while also insisting she would “not advocate for punishment but for help.” Her vision does not situate itself neatly within reformist or non-reformist reforms; instead, it holds elements of both. Beyond responding to critiques of abolitionism as naïve or unrealistic, we can also examine the naïveté embedded in the assumptions that sustain the current carceral system, assumptions that position it as ‘the realistic one’ (Coyle & Nagel, 2021; Law, 2021). Abolitionist Victoria Law (2021) takes up this task by examining and challenging enduring myths, including the claims that “we need prisons to make us safe” and “prisons are the only logical and evident way to address violent crimes and meet the needs of victims” (chap. 2 & 20). The persistent failure of states to address harm exposes the inadequacy of these myths and the fragility of the system they defend. In Denmark, for instance, 127,000 people experienced at least one act of physical violence in 2023, yet only 5% reported it to the police themselves and another 4% were reported by others (Pedersen, Okholm, & Balvig, 2024: 22). This challenges the idea that retributive justice is highly responsive to ‘crime’, as most violent acts are not processed by the criminal justice system.

Guided by the disjunctures between the promises and practices of retributive justice, this study seeks to cast what I describe in the next chapter as a counter-spell against carcerality myths. With disenchanted eyes and ears, I turn to the experiences of incarcerated women and prison staff to learn from how they navigate and reflect on the penal welfare system’s attempts at harm prevention. Where zemiology provides an analytical lens for understanding political structures as both producers and mitigators of harm, abolitionism grounds this study in a dual commitment: to remain attentive to the oppressive structures in the present, and to take seriously what else could be. It is a sense of slow urgency—of carrying persistent imperatives while recognizing the impossibility of closure.

## Learning from and contributing to a transformative infrastructure

By exploring incarcerated women’s experiences with the penal welfare system, this research examines how harm prevention practices currently are institutionalized within the broader societal infrastructure. As previously argued, this infrastructure is deeply shaped by the dominant justice paradigms—retributive and rehabilitative justice—which often are taken for granted as natural or inevitable positions and approaches to various forms of harm. Engaging

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<sup>16</sup> Though its original source remains elusive this quote endures, perhaps because it beautifully articulates the generative, world-building dimension of abolition.

with the transformative justice paradigm has been part of enabling this study to denaturalize the dominant paradigms and articulate how harm can be considered and responded to differently. As both an evolving theoretical framework and a set of practices, transformative justice offers alternative ways of understanding and relating to one another during and after conflict and harm (Kim, 2021; Morris, 2000; Nocella, 2011). While restorative justice—at least etymologically and in the early articulations—centers the notion of *restoring* trust, dignity and relationships, transformative justice centers the necessity of *transforming* relations and structures.<sup>17</sup> Advocates of transformative justice argue that restoration is not always desirable, as harm often arises due to preexisting relationships of inequality and imbalance (Locke, 2021: 315f; Morris, 2000: 19). Consequently, transformative justice directs attention not only to the incident of harm itself, but to the broader conditions that make such harm possible. The aim is to approach harm with curiosity about what must change in order to cultivate more just futures. Because these conditions are embedded in social and institutional structures, transformative justice practitioners often refuse to wait for change to be delivered from above—by those holding power in companies, political systems, or organizations. Instead, they experiment with building alternative ways of responding to harm within their own communities. This commitment to practical experimentation has led transformative justice to be described as “an infrastructure project for the abolitionist age” (Ansfield, Herzing & Spade, 2023: 187). That is, an endeavor with the ambition to transform existing oppressive systems of harm-handling and beyond, through developing practices and relational structures that affirm “that everyone is worthy of care and that no one is disposable” (Ibid.: 189, Spade cited). In this way, transformative justice practices enact a form of prefigurative politics, creating parts of the world they hope to see realized more broadly across scales (Monticelli, 2024).

Learning from transformative justice and abolitionism entails engaging and legitimizing with forms of knowledge not predominantly born out of academia. While both traditions are theorized and developed in academic contexts, they are deeply rooted the lived experiences and imaginative efforts of those directly impacted by oppressive systems and actively involved in movements for social change<sup>18</sup> (Nocella, 2011). A wealth of resources has emerged from communities and individuals actively engaged in transformative justice practices, including; The Barnard Center for Research on Women & Project NIA (2020), adrienne maree brown (2017), Creative Interventions (2021), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ejeris Dixon (2020), Generation Five (2017), Mariame Kaba & Shira Hassan (2019), and Mariame Kaba (2021). The research at hand follows this lineage by taking seriously both the lived pasts and the present dreams of punished people, as contributions to the broader effort of envisioning and building a future with less social harm. While transformative justice practices vary, they are rooted in shared principles that provide orientation rather than prescription (Pelsinger,

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<sup>17</sup> Presenting justice paradigms through this distinction serve the purpose of highlighting how responses to harm will change depending on the scale you consider relevant to locate a solution in. Indeed, the boundaries between restorative and transformative justice are more blurred in practice as they encompass overlapping elements (as argued by Harris (2007) and Llewellyn (2021)).

<sup>18</sup> While the term was coined by white Quaker abolitionist Ruth Morris (1994a, 1994b) its practices have largely evolved in black, brown, queer, femme, and sex worker communities (in particular from the U.S.)—groups disproportionately impacted by social harm and carceral violence. These practices may draw upon but are also distinct from Indigenous approaches to harm (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Tauri, 2013).

2025; Piepzna-Samarasinha & Dixon, 2020). Engaging with this diverse body of work, I found a few of these common orientations as particularly valuable epistemic resources for this study. These principles are: (1) a decentralized and collectivizing approach to harm; through (2) processes that support all parties involved; within (3) a greater effort to transform distribution, institutions, and social norms. Together, these principles articulate another way of understanding and ‘doing justice’. From this vantage point, it becomes possible both to denaturalize and critique the dominant justice frameworks embedded within the penal welfare system and to envision alternative possibilities; including supporting the incarcerated women’s speculations. Unfolding the principles below, I am aware of the idealized phrasings used. In practice, these principles often take root in far messier ways: they can be co-opted, enacted coercively, or drift from the generative intentions that originally shaped them. Surely, people engaged in transformative justice practices may at times avoid responsibility or lack the resources needed to support others, all of which shapes what becomes possible—and what becomes necessary to counter that—within such processes. As transformative justice practitioner Mia Mingus reminds us, transformative justice practices grow best when the “soil” is ready (brown & Mingus, 2023)—when the surrounding conditions and relationships can truly nourish them. The principles should therefore be understood as situated aspirations within the transformative justice paradigm: hopes that become more attainable when we cultivate the soil; the broader societal infrastructures, relational competencies, and introspective skills.

The first principle concerns *addressing harm and conflict through a decentralized and collectivizing process* (Howe, 2018).<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the retributive model—where an external authority evaluates guilt through legal categories and delivers a prescribed punishment—transformative justice centers the collective involvement of those affected to determine what repair and change should follow (Barrie, 2020; Kim, 2018). Participants may include people who have experienced harm, those who have enacted it—acknowledging that these positions are often fluid and overlapping—as well as others connected to the situation, such as family members, friends, and community members relevant to the context. Through facilitated processes and with appropriate support, they work together to decide what forms of repair, accountability, and transformation are needed and to participate in implementing these responses (Mingus, 2022; Pelsinger, 2025). In this way, transformative justice emphasizes collective self-determination, where communities take ownership of the conflicts that arise among them with the aim of strengthening both personal and communal accountability (Chen et al., 2016; Fuller & Russo, 2016). Harm is thus reframed from being merely an individual failure to having a collective dimension, as harmful acts emerge within broader social, economic, and relational context (Coker, 2002; Kim, 2021). Addressing harm therefore extends beyond seeking individual behavioral change and involves transforming the conditions, norms, and relationships that enabled or allowed it to occur—a concern that connects directly to the third principle regarding systemic change (Ibid.).

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<sup>19</sup> For those unfamiliar with such practices, I encourage engaging with Creative Intervention’s (2021) toolkit and Ruth Morris’ (2000) *Stories of Transformative Justice*.

The second principle is *to create processes which seek to support all parties in their respective journeys of healing and accountability*. This involves offering sustained support to those who have experienced harm, to those who have caused harm, and to the communities around them, recognizing that these positions are often fluid and that people’s needs frequently overlap (Coker, 2002; Pelsinger, 2025). The moral alchemy of retribution is exchanged with a belief that something good will appear when people are supported—rather than punished—in becoming accountable. Transformative justice therefore emphasizes that change is most likely to occur when individuals remain connected to others who care about their transformation (Hipple et al., 2016; Mingus, 2019). Importantly, this does not imply that people who have experienced harm must remain in proximity to those who harmed them, nor that harmful actions occur without consequences. Rather, transformative justice processes insist that change is necessary precisely because people are interconnected and our actions affect one another. For this reason, those involved must also have a voice in determining what happens next. A central tenet of transformative justice is the belief that “no one is disposable” (Ansfield et al., 2023; Barrie, 2020), representing a direct challenge to carceral logics that isolate and remove individuals rather than supporting collective processes of accountability and repair. As transformative justice practitioner adrienne maree brown (2017: 131) notes, ecological systems offer a useful metaphor for this perspective. In nature—of which humans are a part—nothing is truly disposable; everything participates in cyclical processes of transformation. Interestingly, the Danish word for garbage, *affald*, originally referred to fallen leaves; organic material essential for nourishing the soil and sustaining life (Nørretranders, 2021). Over the 20th century, *affald* came to mean discarded waste, while a new term, *løvfald* [leaf-fall], was introduced for fallen leaves (ibid.). This linguistic shift mirrors a broader societal tendency to treat both materials and people as expendable. As ecological crises increasingly force societies to reconsider ideas of waste and sustainability, transformative justice can be understood as part of a similar reckoning: what we discard may in fact hold the conditions for renewal.

Lastly, transformative justice *situates structural transformation at the center of both addressing and preventing social harm*, directing attention toward questions of distribution, institutional arrangements, and the social norms that shape everyday life (Evans, 2016; McGill, 2019). The commonly invoked phrase of addressing the “root causes” of harm and unmet human needs reflects this cross-scalar ambition (Hoddy & Gready, 2020). As feminist scholar Andrea Smith (2023)<sup>20</sup> observes, transformative justice ideally links local practices with broader regional and global efforts to prevent harm and foster systemic change, thereby working toward the realization of a different justice paradigm. In practice, however, the most developed dimensions of transformative justice have so far emerged at the local level, where individual people and communities have a greater ability to intervene and experiment with alternative approaches. At this scale, organizer Connie Burk (2011) has emphasized the importance of “building a community where robust accountability is possible, expected and likely” (p. 273). Such work involves cultivating intrapersonal awareness—such as recognizing

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<sup>20</sup> I am aware that Andrea Smith has claimed to be of Cherokee Nation, while she is not (Viren, 2023). In my understanding, which only is meditated through online writing and thus limited, she resists to change her identification despite dialogical attempts. I reference this article as I consider it of analytical value and as I am committed to foster change whilst in connection.

one's needs, triggers, and boundaries—while also strengthening interpersonal skills like conflict navigation, deep listening, and bystander intervention. These practices are often accompanied by forms of mutual aid and community-based conflict processes that enable collective responses to harm. Yet the transformative justice horizon extends well beyond local practices. Its long-term visions include building societies organized around equitable access to housing, healthcare, and education, alongside forms of global interdependence not structured by domination and extraction (Ansfield et al., 2023). In this way, transformative justice resonates with the broader abolitionist project of cultivating life-affirming institutions capable of supporting human and collective flourishing.

The three principles provide an alternative language and orientation through which to engage the women's reflections on what kinds of societal infrastructures might prevent harm and support human flourishing. While I later in chapter 7 relate the incarcerated women's speculative visions with these principles, transformative justice has not been applied as a predefined blueprint against which their experiences or aspirations are measured. Rather, the women's longings and critiques are presented with fidelity to their own articulations and remain grounded in the immediacy of their lived realities. The empirical contributions of this study thus remain closely connected to these non-ideal conditions and emerge from participants who are not necessarily familiar with transformative justice as a theoretical or political tradition—a point I return to later.

### Affirming interdependent scales in conceptualizing prevention

Approaching prevention through the lenses of zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice requires recognizing harm as situated within specific local contexts and deeply interwoven with wider political arrangements. This perspective resonates with the longings expressed by several incarcerated women in this study: a desire for their actions to be understood not as isolated choices, but as shaped by the complex conditions in which they were embedded. As later chapters will explore, many spoke to an absence of such contextual understanding in their encounters with public institutions. Matching this longing, the three-pronged theoretical anchor open up space to grasp their acts and experiences through a broader context. This study, then, departs from the individualist logic that informs both retributive and rehabilitative justice, where harm is framed as individual failure and prescribed punishment or correction as its remedy (Gerber & Jackson, 2013; Raynor & Robinson, 2009; Walen, 2014). Such justice paradigms obscure the complex contexts and constraint that shape human life, development, and choice (Caruso, 2021). Instead, this study centers interdependence; understanding also autonomy as something cultivated within, and contingent upon, the social and material world. Philosopher Catriona Mackenzie (2013, 2019b) offers the concept of *relational autonomy* to describe how autonomy is emergent and changeable: shaped by relationships, histories, and structures. Mackenzie's conceptualization aligns with the capability approach to social justice, which likewise contends that the freedom to exercise choice is dependent on access to enabling resources and supportive conditions

(Mackenzie, 2013, 2019a; Nussbaum, 2011). Unfolding the process of autonomy formation, philosophers Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth (2005) introduce the notion of *autonomy-undermining injustices* (p. 130) to name the multiple ways in which systemic barriers (economic deprivation, institutional neglect, racialized violence, carceral regulation) undermine a person's ability to cultivate their autonomy and act responsibly. The notions of relational autonomy and autonomy-undermining injustices provide complimenting angles to understanding social harm as occurring by denial of necessary social resources to exercise of life choices (Pemberton, 2015). This study thus approaches the incarcerated women and the prison staff as subject shaped by and shaping the social nexus they inhabit. Their choices, capacities, and trajectories are never simply individual; they are forged within a landscape of constraint and possibility. Agency and responsibility persist, but they are co-constituted through the political, social, and economic formations that give rise to them. This guides our attention to relationships, practices, institutions, and norms that aid a person in coming into being in the broadest spectrum, to attend to what is hindering and what is enabling.<sup>21</sup> Rather than focusing exclusively on *preventing* undesirable outcomes—as common within a risk paradigm (Case, 2006; Goddard, 2012)—these theories invite us to also explore the conditions and modes of *enabling*. Writing about the force of non-violence, Butler (2020) captures this sentiment of enabling in a compelling way:

To safeguard the future of life is not to impose the form that such a life will take, the path such a life will follow, it is a way of holding open the contingent and unpredictable forms that life might take – what kind of life deserves an open-ended future? (Ibid.: 147)

This study engages that question with an openness to how the futures of the incarcerated women may have been narrowed or foreclosed by insufficient social resources, a form of social harm in itself. As noted in the introduction, this relates to the possibility of considering the incarcerated women as parties to the failings of the current harm preventive paradigm embedded in the Danish penal welfare state. This interest in enabling life paths challenges criminology's predictive impulse and desire to foreclose futures in the name of risk management (Agozino, 2010). Preventing harm to occur from a basis of zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice exceeds hindering to also concern enabling possibilities, making viable futures, and supporting people's relational autonomy and capacity to care for themselves and others.

Beyond affirming how the structural appears in the individual, this study is anchored in the challenge of linking scales; insisting that any meaningful engagement with prevention must grapple with how intimate experiences of harm are tied to broader institutional and systemic conditions. In attending to the past and present of the Danish penal welfare system—and in imagining possibilities beyond it—this research treats the state, and the supra-national

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<sup>21</sup> These arguments build on the growing feminist engagement with the concept *vulnerability* (Butler, 2004, 2009, 2020; Cavarero, 2011/2007; Mackenzie, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Petherbridge, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2020). As both an ontological condition and a socially constituted reality (Knight, 2021; Mackenzie, 2013), vulnerability links bodies, relations, and structures, offering a framework for understanding interdependence. Cavarero (2011/2007) argues that vulnerability evoke two possible responses: wounding or caring (p. 30). Acknowledging human's and other living being's vulnerability may compel us to rethink social structures and policies, to cultivate conditions to meet vulnerability with care.

formations within which it is embedded, not as fixed or inherently oppressive, but as mutable and contested terrains; what Cooper (2019: 6) describe as “polysemic concept[s]”. Furthermore, rather than assuming the state inherently will be an oppressive entity, this study takes seriously the proposition that it can be a site of both “profound violence and solidarity” (Lamuse, 2023: 95).<sup>22</sup> This orientation opens space for me to consider what might be reimagined and built within, against, or alongside existing systems, drawing from the insights offered by the research participants. As Lamuse (2023) argues, “to make abolition a reality, we need more than just critique or hyper-local solutions” (p. 65), which requires grappling with how to link different scales of governance. A helpful example comes from criminologist Anna Eriksson (2009) study of community justice processes in Northern Ireland, where she demonstrates how such initiatives “help participants to address the pieces of larger social problems which intersect with the criminal act under discussion” (p. 317). She frames these processes as exercises in deliberative democracy, emphasizing their potential to reshape structural conditions if acted upon, rather than merely responding to the single incident. Other scholars—such as Angela Davis (2011), George Lipsitz (2004) and Allegra McLeod (2018)—have turned to further develop sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of *abolition democracy* as they work to imagine governance structures that could support a society with less social harm (Lester, 2021). Du Bois argued that the abolition of slavery permitted racial oppression to persist, particularly through the operation of the criminal legal system, because new democratic structures were not sufficiently created. This strand of scholarship thus articulates guiding principles for governance structures that aim to be life-affirming through positive rights and practices. In this light, any engagement with prevention within the penal welfare state is necessarily an engagement with the broader reconfiguration of the Danish state and its institutions. The crucial question becomes: what kinds of social and political structures are generative of a society oriented toward enabling life and preventing social harm? This study enters that question by embracing abolition as an unfinished, ongoing practice; a continuous act of imagining shaped by evolving insights and lived realities.

## Concluding reflections

This chapter has woven together three overlapping traditions—zemiology, abolition, and transformative justice—to shape a theoretical approach capable of both critiquing experiences within the Danish penal welfare system and imagining what might lie beyond it. I have shown how these frameworks ground a critical engagement with the harm preventive paradigm embedded in Danish institutions—as encountered by incarcerated women and enacted by the prison staff—and for fostering imaginary capacities relevant to engage the research participants speculations. Together they aid this research endeavor by offering social harm as an alternative lens to crime, challenging the individualization of preventive efforts, and

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<sup>22</sup> Another strand of abolitionist scholarship and activism more straight forward rejects any such aspirations of a ‘just’ state structure; e.g. Kaba (2021) and Spade (Ansfield et al., 2023). I also sympathize with the argument that if the state were to dramatically transform, a different name for this form of governance could be useful.

envisioning ways of preventing and handling social harm beyond punishment. They built upon a relational ontology, which this study continues in, where autonomy is not an individual possession, but a co-constituted quality shaped within specific social, political, and relational contexts. Rather than reinforcing prevention as an exercise in control, these frameworks invite us to think about how to foster institutions that do not simply intervene in crises, but support people in ways that reduce the likelihood of harm occurring in the first place. Echoing S.N.'s call for ministers to focus on helping people and "opening up opportunities" rather than punishment, this study approaches prevention not merely as harm avoidance, but as the active fostering of life-affirming possibilities. The dominant action point exceeds merely *preventing* but also concerns *enabling*; tying the notion of justice to affirming life and expanding possibilities rather than predominantly foreclosing futures. Rather than treating harm as an inevitable outcome to be managed, the theories guide this study to consider how prevention itself could be reimagined and reshaped. This reorientation animates the speculations and longings for something more voiced by incarcerated women in this study. It affirms those longings as having political potential, as meaningful, and as foundational to a potential different vision of harm prevention.

As the next chapter will show, these traditions have shaped the design and direction of the research, particularly through the translation of this theoretical orientation into concrete research strategies. While the frameworks outlined here have been foundational to the overall becoming of the project, additional conceptual lenses were engaged in the interpretation of the empirical material. These are introduced in the sections on the becoming of the empirical analyses in the methodology chapter and further developed within the analyses themselves.

## From prisoner to appreciated

She is in doubt about whether she is doing the right thing  
She is in doubt about whether she is good enough  
She is in doubt about whether everything will succeed  
She is in doubt about whether everything will fall apart  
She is in doubt about whether they will accept her  
She is in doubt about her future  
She is in doubt about her past  
She is in doubt about whether she will ever move on  
She is in doubt about whether she can handle the pressure that awaits her

- Anonym

## She is in doubt

She is in doubt about whether she is a good person  
She is in doubt about whether people know she is in prison  
She is in doubt about whether she will ever get her life back—a normal life, like the one she had before  
She is in doubt about whether she has failed her family and her child  
She is in doubt about whether she can handle it; whether she will come out stronger or as a broken, empty soul  
She is in doubt about what she has done in her life to deserve this fate  
She is in doubt about when this nightmare will end  
She is in doubt about who she is  
But she does not doubt that she did not do what she is convicted of

- Layla

/Text 2

# 3. Methodological reflections on the research endeavor of the unfinished

Sharing unresolved feelings and situations requires courage and vulnerability. In their creative texts, Layla and the anonymous woman give form to their uncertainties, voicing doubts about being a “good person,” about whether they are doing the right thing, and about their capacity to withstand the pressures the future may hold. This chapter opens with doubt as a companion—present both in the lives of the incarcerated women and in the unfolding of this research. Doubt has accompanied me as well, shaping how this research was conducted and understood. Approaching the penal welfare system through uncommon theoretical traditions and centering the experiences of incarcerated women, alongside those of prison staff, opens a largely uncharted field of research. In this sense, the study echoes Mathiesen’s (2015/1974) descriptions of facing “unbuilt ground” (p. 58) when moving towards abolition. Entering such terrain, he suggests, is both liberating and fraught: a moment of freedom that simultaneously produces tension, evoking “anxiety and pleasure” (p. 58). In much the same way, this research has unfolded through the disorientation and fear of working without a fixed analytical script, tempered by the joy of discovering the generative potential of engaging incarcerated women’s experiences in untraditional ways. It is precisely in confronting this not-yet-constructed conceptual space that something generative may begin to emerge.

This chapter reflects on how the research came to be by unfolding the interactions and choices that shaped it, making the “I” behind the research more visible. Continuing with Mathiesen’s (2015/1974) thoughts, I will conceptualize this study as a research endeavor of *the unfinished* (Mathiesen, 2015/1974), emerging from a commitment to explore community-based research ideals (Lykes & Crosby, 2014), although not fully succeeding. Building on the theoretical anchor introduced earlier, the chapter develops three research strategies that extend and operationalize its insights: decentering the individual, replacing carceral concepts, and

engaging speculation and counter-spells. Having presented the overall research approach, the chapter then traces the creation of the empirical material, with particular attention to the relational nature of research and the contingencies that have shaped the material on which the analysis rests. It concludes by setting the stage for the four analytical chapters that follow, offering insight into the analytical sensibilities and processes that have guided the engagement with both the empirical material and the research questions.

## The legitimacy of a research endeavor of the unfinished

Reflecting on the process and purpose of this research, I found myself returning to Mathiesen's (2015/1974) notion of *the unfinished* as an active, guiding ethos. Inspired by Mathiesen's framing of abolitionist alternatives as necessarily incomplete and evolving, I have embraced the unfinished as both a methodological orientation and an epistemological stance. As Mathiesen states: the alternative exactly is found "(...) in the un-finished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing" (ibid.: 47). This ongoing transformation is essential for an alternative, he argues, to (1) remain relevant to the ever-changing present and thus avoid obsolescence, and (2) resist incorporation into the dominant order in a deradicalized form (ibid.). Rather than presenting fully formed and static solutions, alternatives—and in this instance also *analysis*—must remain in a state of continuous refiguration: adapting to new insights, resisting co-optation, and responding to shifting conditions. Viewing the unfinished as a research ethos allows legitimacy to be conceived through assertions that embrace doubt, revision, relationality, and reimagining—within both the research process and in its knowledge offerings. This ethos asks me to stay open as a researcher; willing to shift direction, to revisit assumptions, and to question whether the approach I pursued was fitting. One such shift occurred when I realized that relying solely on interviews would not provide a sufficiently generative way of engaging with the incarcerated women's experiences. This realization led me to initiate creative writing workshops inside the prison as an alternative mode of knowledge-making. The unfinished ethos invited me to be in movement with the research process and to let it grow beyond its initial frame. It asked me to pause with the doubts, and to resist closing interpretations too early. As Mathiesen (2015/1974) reminds us, by responding to current issues we may generate "(...) possibility for a new abolishment, and thereby for a renewed unfinished process" (p. 60). To me, this underscores the heuristic and ever-evolving nature of (abolitionist) thinking, in which responding to present conditions can expose previously unexamined structures and, in doing so, call for new understandings of how to address them and what alternatives might look like. As such, the unfinished research praxis strives to resist an arrogant posture that forecloses growth. It stays open to both learning and unlearning, drawing on what sociologist Liat Ben-Moshe (2018) describes as the *dis-epistemology of abolition*: an embrace of disorientation and of knowledge's inherent lack of full certainty.

Explicating the unfinished ethos compelled this study to move beyond simply analyzing current experiences with the penal welfare system, to also attend to what else could be imagined, built, and nurtured. This follows an epistemological stance that considers the value

and role of (academic) knowledge not only as explanatory but also as visionary (Lynch, 1999: 43). In that spirit, this study seeks to enact what Lamusse (2023) terms a *materialist abolitionism*, situating analysis and speculation within the concrete realities lived experience, and using the present material conditions as the basis for imagining unbuilt futures. This study presents alternative (qualities in) public institutions and interventions, shaped by incarcerated women's and secondly prison staff's experiences and speculations. What is envisioned is 'an otherwise' in close connection to the present. These sketches are provisional and suggestive; possibilities meant to stir thought, encourage experimentation, and resist the urge to impose definitive solutions. Seeing the unfinished ethos as integral to the research itself influenced how I came to understand the thesis's knowledge offerings: as contingent, relational, and arising from specific contexts, shaped through ongoing engagement with incarcerated women and prison staff. The analyses constitute one attempt rooted in a particular time, place, and set of relations to engage with the research questions. I consider the conclusion of this dissertation to be equally a generative starting point for future exploration, reworking, and collective thinking. With both humility and conviction, this study contributes to abolitionist conversations by offering grounded analyses and alternative orientations shaped through encounters with a group profoundly affected by the penal system. In doing so, it embraces both the possibility and the necessity that stronger, more refined versions of these arguments will emerge in the future.

Through this conceptualization, I situate this study within the postfoundational tradition (Butler, 1992; Mazzei & Jackson, 2023). Central to this tradition is a critique of universalism and positivism; intellectual frameworks that assume knowledge claims can be evaluated against stable, independent foundations. Postfoundationalism does not suggest knowledge exists post foundations, as if knowledge could exist in a vacuum, free from anchoring points. Rather, the prefix *post* signals a scholarly engagement that moves beyond the assumption that such foundations are neutral or self-evident. In this perspective, foundations are considered "permanently contingent" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2024: 1) which necessitate continuous reflexive inquiry. Rather than foregrounding theory in the manner of some post-qualitative approaches,<sup>23</sup> this study regards theory and practice as inseparable; each continually shaping the other. Moving with a "both/and" approach (Davis et al., 2022), this study neither fully embrace nor entirely reject traditional qualitative methodological design. I recognize that a simplistic focus on methodological rigor can echo positivist notions of knowing the world with full certainty (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2018). At the same time, I hold that generating empirical material is a valuable process in engaging with difficult questions, shaping new relations with others, and serving as a companion to theory in understanding and reflecting on the world. While this study draws on experimental approaches, it also builds on traditional qualitative methods. At its core, the empirical material comes from face-to-face interviews, which offered insights into incarcerated women's experiences with the penal welfare system, as well as staff perspectives that would have remained inaccessible without direct engagement. While I do not consider this material to be a truer reflection of 'reality' than

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<sup>23</sup> This is at least one possible reading of poststructuralist Elizabeth St. Pierre (2018).

what already exists around us, its deliberately constructed form, guided by the research questions, renders it highly pertinent to the concerns of this study.

Writing about others' experiences demands careful attention to how knowledge functions in the world (Lincoln, 1995). I align with anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup's (2004) argument that the narratives we construct—the analytical arguments we choose to tell—are not simply descriptive but ethical acts in themselves. Research responsibility is not just about creating intellectually coherent arguments; it also encompasses how these arguments resonate with participants and how the arguments may intervene or have an impact in the world. As Hastrup (2004) asserts: “[t]he ethical demand is to ‘get it right’, not in any ontological sense, but in being true to the world under study (...)” (p. 469). Knowledge production is therefore an ongoing process of understanding, relating, and responding to the world. Similarly, multispecies feminist theorist, Donna Haraway (1988: 557), in conceptualizing situated knowledge, seeks to navigate between relativism and objectivism, offering feminist scholars a means to reject modernist claims to detached objectivity while still affirming that some representations more accurately grasp a phenomenon than others. By making both the situatedness of this research and my position as a researcher visible, I aim to provide the transparency and accountability necessary for supporting the analytical arguments presented about the penal welfare system.

## Exploring community-based participatory research

As this research analyzes and theorizes from the experiences of a social group subjected to state control and punishment, it became vital to acknowledge and address the asymmetry inherent in research and to explore how it could be conducted more *with* them rather than *on* them. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) provided an archive of documented experiences attempting to do exactly that. By involving people with direct experience in shaping and co-creating how knowledge about their lives is done, CBPR offers ways to cultivate different relational dynamics (Hacker, 2013; Lykes & Crosby, 2014; McCracken, 2019). It invites a move away from treating people as passive informants and toward engaging them as co-thinkers, interlocutors, and partners in producing knowledge (ibid.). A few months into the PhD, I thus sought to establish a collaborative structure by creating a community advisory board. Its purpose was to share power over the conduct of the research and the interpretation of empirical material with individuals who have relevant lived experiences and who might remain invested in the study's findings beyond its formal conclusion. These participatory commitments also shaped my presence in Jyderup Prison, where I regularly asked the incarcerated women I engaged with what they felt the research should focus on. Many women emphasized aspects of their current living conditions in the prison. As this fell outside the primary focus of the study, I developed a side project aimed at documenting these conditions in a report-style format, with the intention of involving both incarcerated women and prison staff in its production. However, this strand was cut short because I had not secured the formal permissions required within the institutional framework of The Prisons of Denmark. While

frustrating, this experience highlighted how responsive research must remain attuned to institutional conditions and procedural requirements in order to fulfill its intentions. Lastly, I attempted to broaden participation by experimenting with art-based methods, which offered participants another agentic way to contribute than conventional interviews (Walsh et al., 2013). Offering merely a starting prompt, the texts could move in multiple directions and appear in this dissertation in the form created by the women themselves.

Exploring CBPR became an important site of learning about relational processes, institutional constraints, and the ongoing labor of doing research in alignment with the unfinished ethos. While the CBPR literature consistently highlights the importance of allowing time to build relationships for meaningful collaborative engagement (Hacker, 2013: 17), this was precisely the aspect I failed to honor adequately when establishing the community advisory board. I had envisioned the board to include two to three women or non-binary individuals currently or formerly incarcerated, two relatives of incarcerated people, and three representatives from grassroots organizations or NGOs. In practice, it consisted of one formerly incarcerated woman and two NGO representatives. The effort to establish this board was complicated by my decision to financially compensate participants with incarceration experience for their time and expertise, which conflicted with the Jyderup Prison access contract prohibiting any financial arrangements with incarcerated individuals. Consequently, the board could only include formerly incarcerated individuals. I reached out to Café Exit, a faith-based NGO that supports people during and after incarceration and was offered the opportunity to present the initiative at one of their “Culture Thursdays”; evenings that bring people together over shared meals and cultural activities. Despite informal conversations and expressed interest in the board, no one signed up. Then, I searched online for collectives of (formerly) incarcerated people but found no active organizing at the time. I did, however, find individual media contributions, and thus reached out to the newspapers to connect with authors. Only on a few occasions did this result in contact information being shared. One such instance led to a woman joining the board: Nathalie Mortensen, who has published a powerful piece on post-incarceration debt in *Information* on 14 September 2022. Attempts to involve relatives of incarcerated individuals also proved difficult. The NGO SAVN [MISS] had no current contacts with relatives of incarcerated women, reflecting both the overrepresentation of men in prison and the gendered specificities of incarceration, with comparatively fewer relatives of incarcerated women reaching out to the organization. My request to join the closed Facebook group Hjerterum [Heartspace] for relatives of incarcerated people was denied, which I understood as reflecting a desire to maintain a space free from researchers and institutional actors. Eventually, I accepted that no relatives would participate in the advisory board. In contrast, securing NGO participation was straightforward. I quickly managed to involve Flemming Wridt Jensen from the Danish Crime Prevention Council and Meline Alea Bloch Frederiksen, who works with ‘the women’s club’ [kvindeklubben] at Café Exit, with additional professionals expressing interest. This discrepancy highlights a deeper issue: while academic affiliation may facilitate connections with institutional actors, it does not necessarily make it easier to engage people with lived experience. Doing participatory research across the carceral divide holds challenges and my attempts to build the advisory board was likely too rushed.

With more sustained relational work—such as regularly attending Café Exit’s events—I might have fostered trust more organically, which could have led to different outcomes.

The board met twice, with the first meeting dedicated to introducing the research and inviting critique of its overall approach, including the inquiry and design. Involving them from the outset was intentional, ensuring that the board could meaningfully shape the foundational aspects of the study. The second meeting revolved around the draft report on incarceration conditions in Jyderup presented earlier. I invited the board to respond critically to the assumptions and direction of the work. Still, hesitations lingered on both sides. Some members were unsure of what was expected and how to contribute meaningfully, and I was at times unsure of how to facilitate meaningful participation. The board did not push for substantial changes to the research design, but they did encourage me and this study to be “brave,” as one member put it, in critiquing the political punitive drift in Denmark. Another member emphasized that I should not focus solely on risks but also consider so-called protective factors. This, to me, aligned with the study’s framing of prevention as a political issue which concerns social conditions. As the thesis approached its final stages, I invited the two members with the deepest insight into the lives of incarcerated women to review and comment on the analyses: Nathalie accepted the invitation. Chapter 4, which explores incarcerated women’s encounters with the penal welfare system, has thus been read and reflected on by someone who has lived through incarceration and residential care, and since worked pedagogically with others navigating similar experiences.

## Developing research strategies

Shifting from the analytical anchor toward concrete ways of engaging with the research questions, I sought an additional steppingstone to operationalize the theories. The doubt and ambivalence surrounding how to conduct the study became a vital source of momentum, prompting me to articulate three research strategies as a way of translating the insights of zemiology, abolitionism, and transformative justice into a coherent research approach. The strategies of (1) decentering the individual, (2) exchanging carceral concepts as analytical categories, and (3) engaging speculation and counter-spells, carry an ambition to weave together theory, ethics, and methods, offering direction throughout the process.

### *Decentering the individual*

This research approaches harm prevention as a fundamentally social and political issue; an issue that both includes and exceeds individual pathology and responsibility to address the structures and systems that shape lives. Decentering the individual allows the study to shift the attention from personal culpability to the entanglements between incarcerated women and the Danish penal welfare system. This strategy is sharpened by psychologist Tarek Younis’ (2022) call to reposition research around systemic conditions rather than individual suffering.

In questioning studies that focus solely on the psychological impact of Islamophobia, Younis instead asks, “What does Muslim distress reveal about psychology and the Global North?” (p. 6). Similarly, this research treats the distress shared by incarcerated women not simply as testimony of personal misfortune, but as a lens through which to examine the broader institutional landscape of harm prevention in Denmark. Decentering the individual has been key to the very design of the research. Yet, this analytical focus on state practices brings both possibilities and tensions. While it allows for a critical interrogation of how harm prevention is institutionalized and opens space for reimagining it, it also risks reaffirming the state’s role as the primary actor in preventing harm. Particularly as the speculative alternatives largely remain tethered to the structures of the penal welfare system. As shown in the preceding chapters, this study embraces a more complex perspective on the role of states. While prevention is undeniably political and inherently linked to questions of governance, the state is approached not as a fixed entity, but as a contested terrain; one that can be challenged and transformed.

By emphasizing public structures, this study foregrounds institutional mechanisms, somewhat at the expense of other dimensions of their lives, such as interpersonal relationships, group formation, norms, and experiences of structural oppression. This reflects the tension inherent in pre-defined research choices. As women are a minoritized group within the criminal legal system and often subsumed under analyses focusing on the overwhelmingly male prison population (Mathiassen, 2015a; Sander, 1976), there remains much to learn about their lives beyond what this research can capture. Yet, respecting their experiences, to me, involves more than amplification; it requires careful analytical framing. This aligns with the commitments of narrative ethics (Hastrup, 2004), which emphasize the responsibility not only through telling people’s stories but how they are narrated and what they are mobilized to do. Respect here relates to the analytical frameworks through which the stories are understood and engaged. As Lather (2008) argues, evoking empathy<sup>24</sup> is not the same as providing understanding. Western feminist scholarship has often framed ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ as their key intervention, but as she warns (*ibid.*), this can easily reproduce white savior narratives and be highly insufficient in contributing to understandings of systemic matters. While still believing in the importance of empathetic connection, this research aims to foreground collective experiences as a site of critical knowledge of systemic matters. Not from a safe distance from where “people’s experiences of violence become an ‘object’” detached under study, as decolonial scholars Icaza and Aguilar (2021) writes, but more so “from which one theorises and re-learns about the world” (p. 54). This methodological stance has informed the conceptualization of what I call hybrid storytelling, elaborated later in this chapter. Rather than presenting individual testimonies as isolated accounts, I craft collective, contextual narratives that foregrounds shared encounters with the penal welfare system. By decentering the individual, this study is able to explore the penal welfare state as the central context in

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<sup>24</sup> While I align with Lather’s (2008) overall analysis, like sociologist Carolyn Pedwell (2014) I differentiate between empathy and sympathy. I read Lather’s concern as directed at sympathy, which tends to collapse difference through overidentification, potentially obscuring the other’s subject position. Empathy, in contrast, acknowledges difference and enables relational understanding without assuming equivalence of experience. This distinction is vital for an engagement that honors the complexity of others’ lived realities while affirming the affective impact.

which women commit acts classified as criminal. This approach prompts an examination of how such acts are embedded within an institutional ecology that shapes people's conditions and choices. Thus, this research works against the individualization of 'crime' and spectacle of 'the criminal' (Jewkes, 2004; Kidd-Hewitt, 1995) and the criminal justice system (Binfield-Smith, 2022). While this analytical shift risks overcorrecting by sidelining other aspects of the incarcerated women's lives, redirecting the focus toward institutional context provides a crucial counterbalance to political and media debates on crime. By moving away from the individual as the central unit of prevention strategies, it allows prevention to be considered from a systemic perspective. This approach creates space for the experiences and aspirations of both women and prison staff to challenge and reimagine what prevention might look like beyond the current paradigm of the penal welfare state.

### *Replacing carceral concepts as analytical categories*

The second strategy involves replacing carceral language and its underlying logic as the basis for analysis. Currently, much scholarship on 'crime' and 'crime prevention' is shaped by, or in service of, governing bodies (Aliverti et al., 2021). Theories and models from such studies often cater to what is deemed 'useful' from a state perspective; namely, advancing control mechanisms or refining incarceration practices. As this study does not grant primary loyalty to the current way of handling harm but explores possible ways of moving towards a society with less social harm, it calls for alternative analytical categories. Language shapes what we understand harm to be and how we perceive people whose actions harm. While acknowledging the material and symbolic weight of terms like 'crime,' 'criminal,' and 'criminality'—terms that structure legal systems, institutional responses, and public sentiments—these terms are not employed as self-evident concepts. Carceral classifications are enmeshed in constructing a moral taxonomy that divides the social world into binaries of 'good' and 'bad,' by collapsing actions into subjecthood, and reinforcing the fantasy of a stable distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Jackson & Meiners, 2010). The 'good people' are, of course, you and I—the law-abiding citizens with good intentions and morals—while the 'bad people' commit criminal acts which we should keep locked up (ibid.). Layla, one of the incarcerated women, was likely affected by this moral taxonomy, as she wrote about her doubts about being a good person. Unlearning such carceral fantasies is not merely theoretical, but politically urgent. The language of the carceral system does more than describe; it classifies, disciplines, and constraints. It enacts *epistemic violence*.<sup>25</sup> by imposing rigid categories that obscure the nuances of people's lives. In contemporary political debates on harm in Denmark and beyond, quick arguments, simplistic solutions, and tough-on-crime rhetoric are prevalent (Smith, 2023). Such debate culture highlights the need to develop alternative grammars for naming and speaking about harmful acts and people who enact them. Exchanging carceral concepts with the language of social harm, and framing prevention as a concern of societal infrastructure, enables an analysis of current harm preventive practices using tools that are not produced from within

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<sup>25</sup> For an unfolding of this concept, I suggest reading critical psychologists Thomas Teo (2010).

the dominating justice paradigms. Working with and embracing the language of ambivalence and complexity felt fitting. This does not entail forsaking clarity or responsibility, but rather acknowledges that people—and their actions—are profoundly shaped by the broader contexts in which they exist. This perspective informed the decision to explore writing workshops as an arts-based method (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based approaches provide a means to resist the classificatory force of carceral language and to challenge the linearity and closure often prized in academic writing. The polysemy of creative expression creates rich possibilities for holding experiences of harm, regret, resilience, and hope, moving beyond what educational scholars Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2011) term a “clean methodological ideal” (p. 2). Through creative writing, the women were able to articulate themselves outside of—or in critique of—the identities imposed upon them. Many wrestled with having committed acts labeled as ‘crimes’ and actively resisted the identity of ‘criminal.’ The pain of being reduced to that single label was palpable, which I came to understand as connected to a longer trajectory of feeling misunderstood. Writing provided a way to reclaim authorship over their lives and to complicate the reductive link between harmful actions and fixed identities.

Yet, moving away from dominant vocabulary brought its own challenges. Carceral language offers a kind of shorthand recognition that is legible to institutions, policymakers, and the public. Alternative phrasings may feel alien or verbose, raising questions about accessibility, and translation of critique across grammar. I tried to navigate this terrain by balancing clarity with criticality, though I did not always succeed. For instance, although I critique the term ‘crime prevention’ throughout the project, I continued to use it when discussing my research with incarcerated women and prison staff, hoping it would foster recognition. In hindsight, alternatives like ‘prevention practices’ might have communicated the study’s intentions more clearly. This ambivalence illustrates a broader tension: how to communicate across epistemic communities while simultaneously resisting the very logics such language enacts.

### *Engaging speculation and counter-spells*

The final research strategy concerns venturing beyond lived experiences into a speculative realm. Drawing on abolitionist futurities (Abolition Collective, 2020; Crockett Thomas, 2022) and transformative justice’s commitment to prefigurative politics (Gerber, 2021), this study embraces speculation as a method and an act of world-making (Benjamin, 2016; Koro, 2022; Ross, 2022; Springgay & Truman, 2018). I understand speculation as inherently embodied and tied to spatial and material contexts which shape our speculations and visioning (Harrington & Dillahunt, 2021; Kind, 2016, 2025), far from an arbitrary or escapist exercise. It is more so useful to distinguish between the trajectories of *firmative* and *affirmative* speculation (Uncertain Commons, 2021). Firmative speculation, as seen in financial markets, seeks to enclose the future for purposes of calculation, gain, and risk management. Affirmative speculation, by contrast, engages creatively with uncertainty through intuition and play, opening possibilities rather than closing them. Following the ethos of the unfinished (Mathiesen, 2015/1974), this research works with affirmative speculation to engage

incarcerated women in envisioning different pasts with the penal welfare system—using their reflections as empirical material for imagining alternative futures.

This study engages speculation through a grounded empirical lens, drawing on the imaginative desires and speculative pasts of incarcerated women and prison staff. By attending to the pasts they longed for but never lived, the research sheds light on what could be brought into being. The interviews were designed to invite the women to reconstruct the encounters they wished they had experienced with the penal welfare system—encounters that could have supported the life trajectories they hoped to pursue. The central question thus shifts from simply ‘What happened?’ to ‘What would you have liked to have happened?’—inviting curiosity about how different public interventions and interactions might have led to alternative experiences and ways of addressing and preventing harm. Speculative storytelling reveals the contingencies of the present, suggesting that there could have been a different reality in which these women were neither incarcerated nor responsible for the acts deemed punishable. It offers a form of counter-historical method as well as future crafting. Similarly, staff reflected on how their roles and institutional conditions might have been different, offering insight into what could better support the women in thriving. Both sets of speculative reflections serve as generative starting points for reimagining public interventions and professional roles. In this sense, speculation becomes, as the designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013) describe, “a catalyst for social dreaming” (p. 189). Abolitionist scholar and poet Jackie Wang (2018) compellingly articulates that a counter-spell is needed to free our minds from the occupation of prisons, which constrains how we imagine responses to harm (p. 316). Rather than imposing a new spell—causing new alienation and occupation—Wang (ibid.) positions imagination as the counter-spell needed to disrupt carceral logics and open new futures. As already stated, this study animates a belief in the possibility of change. I consider envisioning, speculating, and imagining alternatives to be steps toward enacting, seeking, and inventing. In other words, speculation is not merely a thought experiment but a practice to envision, prepare, and enable material change.

This research strategy further led me to explore *figures* as both “critical diagnostic as well as prognostic tools of speculation” (Lury, Viney, & Wark, 2022, p. 10), drawing inspiration from feminist traditions that use figurations to animate both the critique of existing structures and the imagining of alternatives (Lundberg, 2012). I came to see that figures offer a useful way to deindividualize stories of illegality while still honoring their embodied and relational dimensions. Crafting a figure also became a method to analyze a specific enactment of a professional within the penal welfare system—both as a reflection of the present and as an invitation to imagine what might change if more professionals acted in a similar manner. Configuring an alternative public harm preventive paradigm became a way to sample and stage the alternative preventive possibilities derived from the speculations (Suchman, 2012). A paradigm with potential for wide reaching changes in institutional set-up and governance. In line with socio-legal scholar Davina Cooper (2023), this study embraces the possibility that “state bodies can also be reimagined, including as democratic, horizontal, responsible, caring, permeable and stewardly” (p. 231).

## Who is let into (a women's) prison?

Gaining access to a prison in Denmark is a layered and regulated process. It begins with submitting a formal research application to a unit within The Prisons of Denmark, outlining the project description, methodology, and theoretical framework (The Prisons of Denmark, N.N.). The unit then conducts what it terms a “professional assessment of the project” (ibid., my translation) and forwards a note to the specific prison in question, where the final decision rests. The authority to grant or deny research access is not unique to carceral sites but reflects a general condition for ethnographic inquiry across fields (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Yet there are unique qualities at play when we are dealing with accessing a site where the state monopoly on violence<sup>26</sup> is particularly present, not least through preventing people from getting out and getting in. As Henriksen and Schliehe (2020) note in their work on secure institutions in Denmark and Scotland, such sites are “particularly protective of their reputation (...)” (p. 838). Criminologist Kelly Hannah-Moffat (2011) similarly observes that carceral institutions often regulate research access to avoid inquiries that might challenge dominant correctional logics or “may bring the system into disrepute” (p. 446). Research projects that are critical of penal logics or attentive to experiences of incarceration are therefore far from guaranteed entry. At Jyderup Prison, the local management articulated a concern from another perspective: not turning the prison into an experimental research site, where scholars have free access to study those who cannot escape. This caution reflected considerations about the privacy and well-being of incarcerated people, and the ethics of running a total institution (Goffman, 1958). My path to access was facilitated by my co-supervisor, Charlotte Mathiassen, whose longstanding research on incarcerated women had fostered a strong professional relationship with the facility manager at Jyderup Prison. Before submitting my application, she arranged a meeting where I could present my project to the manager. The encounter felt like a sales pitch, where the research had to be framed in terms of potential institutional benefits. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the manager’s interest centered on the project’s operational relevance within the institution, rather than its broader sociological or critical insights. This divergence in interest between academics and prison staff has been found common in prison research (Stevens, 2020).

After our conversation, he led us on a tour of the facility, which lasted nearly three hours. The facility consists of three so-called “security regimes”: (1) a jail unit for people awaiting trial or transfer to prison post-verdict, (2) a closed prison unit with a so-called contract section,<sup>27</sup> a substance treatment section, and a mixed population section, and (3) an open prison unit mirroring the same sections. The facility has a total capacity of 143 cells, though due to double occupancy, it held approximately 160 people during my visit; 105 of whom were serving sentences. As we transitioned from the closed to the open unit, we approached a housing block where six or seven women sat on benches in two small groups. Their gazes momentarily met

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<sup>26</sup> Entailing that the state alone claims the legitimate authority to use (and sanction) violence within a given territory; a foundational element in the Weberian understanding of modern states, see e.g. Anter (2019); Pearce and Pearce (2020).

<sup>27</sup> Incarcerated people can apply to sentence in a contract section, where all have committed to be drug-free and refrain from drug sales. For further information, see Lodahl and Pedersen (2007).

ours before turning inward seemingly discussing who we were. The power imbalance was stark: I, a visitor under the facility manager's authority, could move freely, while they remained confined. During our visit to the jail unit, we walked past the security cell: a stark room equipped with a bed featuring belt straps for restraint. Although unoccupied at the time, its presence elicited a visceral reaction in me. Later, when reviewing my notes, I realized I had not recorded anything about the cell despite my immediate response. This absence seemed like an inverted mirror of the affective presence in my body and mind. I came to understand that it was more than an oversight; it highlighted the profound difficulty of putting (institutional) violence into words. Noticing this absence became a moment of sharpening my intentionality in note-taking. To avoid blurring or rendering violence invisible, I had to engage with the difficult task of putting force and institutional violence into words.

After the initial visit, I submitted my formal access application. Two weeks later, approval was confirmed, and I was invited to discuss logistics with the facility manager and the head of the open unit, with the stipulation that I carry an alarm and keys. Being handed keys might appear as an act of trust, yet it also exposes a pragmatic adaptation to a (perceived) shortage of prison guards (Gjørding, 2022; Gregersen, 2018, 2024): without keys, researchers depend on staff to unlock each door, adding to their workload. However, carrying keys poses a well-known dilemma in prison studies (Jewkes & Wright, 2016; Minke, 2010; Scott, 2015), as it pushes the researcher into taking an active part in carceral control, enacting the very system under study. Abolitionist David Scott (2015) thus avoided carrying keys to maintain distinction, an option he had as he was not required to do so. By contrast, criminologist Linda Kjær Minke (2010) was obligated to carry keys at Vridsløselille Prison in Denmark despite objections. She eventually conceded, noting that the keys themselves did not signify a *staff–inmate* relationship since "incarcerated individuals recognize who the guards are" (p. 59, my translation). Like Minke, I complied and thus pondered how to navigate carrying such. Should the keys be visible, as a way of acknowledging the authority they symbolize? Or should I cover them to minimize the association with prison governance? Either choice involved a negotiation of position. Initially, I opted for subtle concealment, wearing a loose sweater that covered both the alarm and keys, but the carceral materiality asserted itself in other ways. The metallic jingle of the keys, the occasional beep of the alarm were persistent reminders of what I had on me, in contrast to the incarcerated women. Shying away from the differences that were so evident felt contradictory, and consequently I often let the items be visible on me. The first few times I unlocked and locked doors, I experienced an acute awareness of my privileged mobility. Over time, however, the act became routine, echoing Henriksen and Schliehe's (2020) observation that the mundane materialities of imprisonment shape both the incarcerated and those who engage with the institution. This gradual normalization of carceral practice aligns with Hannah Arendt's (2022/1963) argument that bureaucratic participation fosters detachment from ethical considerations.

The formal access to the prison, did not include the voices of the incarcerated women. I thus wrestled with the ethical implications of conducting research in an environment where choice was already profoundly constrained. Given their forced cohabitation within prison walls, I was acutely aware of the risk that my presence could compound existing coercive dynamics; that

now research will also be forced upon them. To mitigate this, I sought ways to facilitate informed engagement. I asked staff to display an information sheet on each ward's bulletin board two weeks before my arrival, which the prison staff agreed to do. These boards typically hosted course announcements, NGO flyers, and prison visiting info. The sheet included both a description of the study and my photograph, offering incarcerated women the possibility to identify me—and thereby decide whether to approach or avoid interaction. Some recognized me from the information sheet and initiated conversations about the research, yet many had not seen the sheet. Indeed, this gesture, though an attempt at transparency, had limitations. To be in a continuing praxis of consent, I often asked if they were alright with me attending specific activities, and sometimes the prison staff asked them as well. None of the incarcerated women declined my presence, but some declined participating in interviews. Surely, one can wonder whether refusal felt like a genuine option, and if their apparent acceptance reflected a constrained form of acquiescence rather than active consent or comfort. In one case, I was informed of a woman whose case had received media attention and who wished to maintain her privacy, so I decided not to join the occupational activities she took part in. Such decisions reflected an effort to secure access beyond the institutional level—seeking permission, too, from those confined within.

Entering a “women’s prison,” I anticipated encountering not only women but also non-binary people and (trans)men. I also expected that (trans)women would not be granted to sentence alongside other women, as their inclusion in (cis)women’s spaces sometimes is met with fear and controversy (Francisco, 2021; Lamble, 2023; McNamarah, 2023; Toft, 2021). This fear is rooted in women’s experiences of sexual violence by men, yet frequently redirected onto (trans)women (Lamble, 2023; McNamarah, 2023). Staff confirmed this expectation, explaining that (trans)women who had been incarcerated in Jyderup when it operated as a men’s prison were relocated once (cis)women moved in. A few incarcerated individuals presented masculinely through gestures, speech, and clothing (Helgeson, 1994). One asked to be addressed by a name officially classified as a “boy’s name” (The Agency of Family Law [Familiaretshuset], 2023), a request that was generally respected by staff and peers, though a few staff members made derogatory jokes among colleagues. As only (cis)women opted to take part in this study, I refer to the participants as women throughout.

## Human first, then researcher

Prison researchers have long reflected on the complexities of being present in carceral settings, where interactions with different actors entail distinct navigational and ethical challenges (Bosworth et al., 2005; Liebling, 2001; Rowe, 2014). Mindful of these complexities, I decided to formulate a guiding principle to which I could return in ethically challenging situations. The phrase that emerged was a reworking of N.F.S. Grundtvig’s (1881(posthum)) famous dictum: “Human first, then Christian” [Menneske først, kristen så]. I encountered Grundtvig’s humanist ethos in school, and while I am not religious, it perhaps resurfaced as its simple structure easily lent itself to adaptation as a guiding compass. It reminded me that my

academic intentions should not overshadow my responsibility to show up as a responsive person. The dictum thus became: *human first, then researcher*. In this form, it affirms qualitative research as a “deeply personal enterprise” (Clark & Sharf, 2007: 399), one that demands not only analytical competence but also interpersonal and emotional acuity. For instance, some women recounted long stretches in isolation cells—marking 50 days on a yearly calendar—while maintaining a detached expression, sometimes even grinning as they spoke. Encountering such narratives required an ability to attune to emotional cues that did not align with intuitive expectations of distress or trauma. Navigating these moments required the ability to read emotional cues that did not always align with intuitive expectations of distress or trauma. I believe I at most times navigating this attentively, and at other times, failed to do so. As I discuss in Chapter 6, the incarcerated women frequently recounted encounters with professionals in which they felt unseen, unheard, or reduced to cases rather than recognized as individuals. Against this backdrop, embodying the principle of ‘human first’ became a deliberate effort to avoid reproducing such dynamics within the research encounter itself. When women shared painful memories, I could have maintained a neutral, professional demeanor; instead, I chose to respond intentionally, allowing my reactions to be informed by the affect that arose in me and between us. During my fieldwork in Jyderup Prison, my private life was marked by multiple losses, including the death of my mother, alongside different ways of coping with grief and the contexts of these (premature) deaths. In some respects, these experiences heightened my emotional attunement and receptivity to the women’s accounts and the affective weight they carried. At the same time, keeping in mind my role as a researcher anchored me in acknowledging and being transparent about the structures that shaped our interaction and the purpose of my presence. With an awareness of these two key identities, I aimed to engage in the prison as someone committed to reciprocal and accountable knowledge production (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Shange, 2020a).

Beyond body language, bodily readings are always at work in the production of empirical material, foregrounding both connection and distinction (Skeggs, 1997; Spanger, 2012). The incarcerated women read and responded to my presence—body, voice, movements—just as I read and responded to theirs. Some features were commented on more than others. My smiley piercing and teeth, for instance, were remarked upon repeatedly. One woman even decided to get a smiley piercing herself while on release and proudly showed it the next time she saw me. Many had never seen this type of piercing before and expressed admiration, often with links to my dental health. Comments like, “it suits you because your teeth are so white,” highlighted embodied class distinctions with teeth functioning as markers of histories of smoking, drug use, and dental care. Such aesthetic admiration contained not only praise but also the weight of inequality. My age also came up frequently. Some positioned me as young enough to be their daughter, while others—despite small age differences—stressed that I was older. I have wondered whether this positioning was a way to create a protective distance to avoid direct comparison. My clothing and lack of makeup were occasionally described as “hippie-like,” suggesting that I was perceived as both outside mainstream femininity and removed from conventional professional authority. Certainly, my whiteness also shaped how I was perceived, influencing expectations about my background, my capacity to hold their stories, and my trustworthiness. Historically—and currently—white researchers dominate the research field of

'crime' and (some) have been part of legitimizing the over-criminalization of black and brown people (León, 2021; Saleh-Hanna, 2017, 2022). More so, across welfare, legal, and research fields, white actors have often claimed to work in the 'best interests' of racialized communities, while sustaining or failing to challenge systemic racism (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Of course, I am not external to that. Research in carceral settings shows how racial dynamics shape narrative access. Criminologists Phillips and Earle (2010) conducting ethnography in an English prison, found that incarcerated men were more likely to share experiences of racism to Phillips, a black woman, than to Earle, a white man. In a Norwegian prison, criminologists Damsa and Ugelvik (2017) found that their differing whiteness (as Romanian and Norwegian) shaped their interactions with incarcerated individuals. Ugelvik's Norwegian background led him to be perceived as closer to state authority, whereas Damsa's shared national background with many of the incarcerated individuals in that prison allowed her to build trust more swiftly. With time, both researchers were entrusted with similar stories, including those concerning racism, which lead them to pose that racialized difference shapes, but does not fully determine, what people share (ibid.). My own experience at Jyderup perhaps falls somewhere between these two cases. At first, fewer black and brown women showed interest in participating. I interpreted this hesitancy as potentially rooted in a well-founded mistrust; could I, as a white researcher, truly listen, understand, and convey their experiences with care? I noted this hesitation with curiosity (Kofoed & Staunæs, 2015), while grappling with the possibility that a study with predominantly white participants could perpetuate the marginalization of racialized minorities' experiences with the penal welfare state. This posed a dilemma: should I actively encourage participation and risk overriding these refusals? Or should I accept the limits of what was offered to me? Over time, more black and brown women chose to participate. Perhaps time was needed to build trust. Still, their interviews were generally shorter, and less detail was shared about family or personal histories compared to those of white Danish women. Looking back, I wish I had asked more directly what it meant to them that I was a white researcher. Did they have concerns, expectations, or hopes about how I would approach their stories? That kind of question might have opened space for more trust. What I *did* manage was to ask about racism when it emerged in their narratives. Often, they did not name it as such themselves—but when I did, it seemed to open a door. In those moments, they often elaborated further, perhaps more at ease once their experiences of racial harm were recognized and named as structural. While it is impossible to know how the process might have unfolded had I been a black or brown researcher, it feels important to acknowledge the likelihood that different, perhaps more detailed experiences might have been shared (Razack, 1993). Indeed, other aspects of my personhood and personality, as well as how the research project was framed, also influenced the incarcerated women's willingness to participate. Ideally, experiences are shared only when trust is present, and some stories were simply not handed over to me. This withholding can be understood as a form of epistemic resistance—a quiet insistence that not all experiences should be available to white researchers at this point in time (Tuck & Yang, 2014a). I hold hope that the stories I did not hear will find their way to others who are better positioned to receive them. That hope is also a reminder of the importance of diversity in carceral research; a field still dominated by white researchers, while black and brown communities remain disproportionately incarcerated.

## Routines and relating in Jyderup Prison

Before approaching anyone for an interview, I found it important that they first had the chance to get to know me. I therefore joined various activities and waited until my fourth day there before asking about interviews. Given that 43.7% of women served sentences of less than four months (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024),<sup>28</sup> introductions were often needed. I frequently explained my presence to newly incarcerated women, and at times, others who already knew me helped facilitate introductions. Usually, I arrived at 07:40 or 08:40, depending on the hourly train from Copenhagen. At the gate, I rang the bell and waited. Once inside the fenced area, I stored my belongings (phone, computer, and other restricted items) in the visitor's entry before walking to the employee entrance. There, I waited again until a guard let me in, handing me an alarm and a set of keys. The women's workday began at 08:00 and ended at 14:30. In the open regime, many worked in the "multi-hall," sorting pharmaceutical plastics or cutting plywood into animal shapes, which were packed in pink boxes labeled with both the company name and the slogan "Quality Danish Design." In the smaller sewing room, old hospital gowns were repurposed into tote bags for a supermarket chain, but this activity was later discontinued, likely due to budget cuts. Other jobs included laundry work and the "outdoor team," which maintained the prison's green areas. In the closed regime, options were fewer. Some worked in the industrial kitchen, preparing meals known as "Jyderup trays" [Jyderup bakker], which were distributed to jails across Zealand where self-catering was not permitted. Others worked in "the workshop," where staff struggled to secure external company contracts, leaving the women to fill their time with their own small projects; sewing, solving crosswords, or coloring. Beyond these work opportunities, the school in both the open and closed regimes offered a few subjects, primarily in math and Danish, along with rotating AMU courses that ranged from photography and grammar to baking.<sup>29</sup> At 11:30, the women returned to the units for lunch; if they ate at all. Many snacked during the day and saved meals for dinner. In the treatment units, cooking was an integrated part of the treatment plan. Some formed cooking teams, while others prepared meals alone. Although incarcerated individuals are expected to follow the national 37-hour workweek,<sup>30</sup> Jyderup operated on a 27.5-hour schedule due to the limited availability of occupational opportunities for women. The workday therefore ended at 14:30. The afternoons offered limited access to the prison's small grocery store, the sports hall, and, for those in the open section, twice-weekly computer sessions. With only eight computers available, queues were common. The computers served multiple purposes: searching for housing, contacting lawyers, communicating with municipalities, staying updated on world events, and providing entertainment. By evening, the prison's

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<sup>28</sup> Comparable to the 40% of incarcerated 'men' with sentences under four months (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> From 2021 to 2022, teaching hours for AMU [Da: Arbejdsmarkedets Udviklingskurser/Eng: Labor Market Development Courses] within the institutions of the Prisons of Denmark increased by 70% (Ritzau, 2023). Staff at Jyderup critically discussed this prioritization over longer education, with some suggesting it was directed by the possibility for the Prisons of Denmark to obtain financial support through labor market taxation schemes.

<sup>30</sup> In 2023, incarcerated individuals received an hourly wage of DKK 11.45, which could be increased by a competence and a stability supplement of DKK 3.49 respectively (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2022).

common rooms filled with the sounds of television, conversations over dinner, crafting, games, and the occasional argument. In her study of incarcerated women across four Danish prisons visited between 2007 and 2009, Mathiassen (2021a) describes moments of care and solidarity that challenge the stereotypes at times ascribed to them by prison staff—such as being “hens’, ‘victims’, ‘bullying monsters’, or ‘hysterical conflict-makers’” (p. 290, my translation). In Jyderup Prison, I too witnessed interactions that disrupted these reductive labels. I observed women supporting one another: sharing the little money they had with those struggling to support children on the outside, preparing food for each other (as also noted by Smoyer and Minke (2019)), checking in when someone was unwell, and helping one another write letters to the authorities. Important acts, full of meaning. I remember how the women encouraged and complimented one another before prison leave when all dressed up, how seriously they approached conflicts, and how distressing unresolved tensions could feel. These were not women indifferent to their relationships; they were attuned, caring, and carrying a great deal. Reducing them to sexist caricatures like “hens” or “hysterical” is both dismissive and inaccurate. It erases the complexity of their personhood and the emotional labor required to sustain relationships under carceral pressure. Their life histories and current circumstances undoubtedly shaped how they related to one another—as they do for all of us—but not in the ways conveyed through such labels.

Interacting with different professional groups in the prison, I found it easier to connect with teachers, forepeople [værkmestre], and substance abuse counselors than with guards, caseworkers, and healthcare staff. This appeared linked to the spatial dynamics of professional roles: educators and counselors typically worked in shared spaces alongside incarcerated people, whereas guards, caseworkers, and healthcare staff were often based in offices behind closed doors. Prison guards often used humor as a way of relating to me. One example occurred while I was typing notes on the computer: a guard escorting a woman for weekend release passed by and jokingly said, “You can note down that the guard is especially kind today,” waving his hand in front of my screen and momentarily interrupting my writing. “I’ll write that right away,” I responded, attempting to engage in the banter. Later, he followed up with another practical joke: “How about you stay here until 19, and then I can take off?” I played along, responding, “Sure, I’m ready for that. I’ll just say ‘10-4’ to everything people ask.” He laughed and handed me his phone in a mock handover. These exchanges, while humorous, carried an underlying subtext. His reference to his “kindness” revealed a subtle anxiety about how I might portray him in this research; wanting to be seen favorably, perhaps fearing he would not. His physical interruption of my writing was also a subtle assertion of power, reinforcing that while in prison, he retained authority over space and movement. Through the joke of offering to swap roles, I received a message that he believes his job is tougher than mine—which, in some ways, I find entirely true—and that this perception calls for a certain humility on my part. Such interactions echoes studies on prison staff culture, which show that humor functions both as a coping strategy and as a subtle form of authority (Nylander et al., 2011; Pandeli et al., 2025). The guard’s unease about being included in my fieldnotes mirrored what Hans, another staff member, later articulated more directly. Referring to Jyderup Prison as “a somewhat complex story,” he expressed relief that I had spent ‘enough’ time inside: “You have, thank God, been here for so long that you have some

sense of how it is.” His words suggest a belief that only through prolonged immersion can outsiders grasp the institution’s layered and interconnected dynamics.

Marking the end of my time in Jyderup, I returned to the strategy of posting information sheets on the bulletin boards in each wing, announcing that I would soon stop coming. This included my work email, inviting anyone to reach out with questions or thoughts. I also decided to bring cake as a gesture of appreciation and an occasion to exchange final words. For staff, the gesture was simpler: I bought cake and left it in the staff entry building for anyone to grab at the start of their shift. For the incarcerated women, however, bringing something into the prison required formal permission. Once granted, I decided to bake the cakes myself in each wing. This act—baking for them—created a more personal farewell. It also created a different type of interaction, as I had to figure out where the kitchen items were and check for any allergies. It developed into a small ritual of closure. Responses to my departure varied. Some women expressed interest in maintaining contact, asking if I could visit or act as a mentor. Others simply said they would see me “on the other side.” Perhaps there were also those who felt relief at no longer being observed, though such sentiments remained unspoken. A moment that stayed with me occurred on the metro in Copenhagen, just over a year after I had left Jyderup. I spotted one of the women from the closed regime whom I had never interviewed but often exchanged words with. I kept my expression open, giving her the space to choose whether to engage. She smiled, mouthed “hi,” and soon came over to sit beside me.<sup>31</sup> “Isn’t it you I know from up there?” she asked. I smiled and confirmed, adding that I had not approached her in case she preferred not to engage. “But it’s so nice to see you out,” I said. She started sharing about her current situation: how she had served more time than sentenced, received 300,000 DKK in compensation for unlawful imprisonment, and currently was in touch with debt counselors from Café Exit. When my stop arrived, I gently squeezed her arm and said I was glad she had come. To me, her decision to engage in that moment reflected a small thread of mutual recognition carried beyond the prison walls.

### Across realities and speculations: Interviews inside the penal welfare system

In this study, knowledge emerges primarily from what was *said* rather than what was *seen*—from experiences retold, not directly observed. This approach reflects an interest in how incarcerated women have encountered the penal welfare system throughout their lives, using these encounters as an entry point to understanding the lived experience of public prevention efforts. As these encounters belong to the past, they are accessible through narration, not observation. This research considers subjective experiences—feelings, memories, and interpretations—as epistemic resources for understanding the lived reality of the penal welfare system. I approach subjectivity as a site of agency and sensibility, where individuals integrate and give meaning to experiences (Biehl et al., 2007), and thus consider the women’s and staff’s

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<sup>31</sup> Based on my notes, the quotes do not have verbatim accuracy.

experiences as dynamically carried within and affectively present. Furthermore, this study considers subjectivity as shaped by but not reducible to social forces (Biehl et al., 2007), which surface in the act of narration. As Butler (2005) argue “(...) when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, the account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.” (p. 6). In this light, when the incarcerated women and staff share their stories, they do more than recount events; they reflect on how institutions and structures have shaped their becoming. Their storytelling is, implicitly, a form of theorizing stemming from two different subject positions. Importantly, this research does not treat ‘incarcerated women’ and ‘prison staff’ as oppositional subject categories; any more than it accepts the binary of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ as stable. These roles are relational: distinct yet interwoven, shaped within and by the penal welfare system that both connects and separates them. Indeed, I met a woman who had formerly worked as a prison guard and now found herself sharing a cell with another woman in Jyderup Prison. Such an encounter highlights the instability of institutionally assigned roles, illustrating how porous and interchangeable they are over the course of a life. In line with abolitionist ethics that resist dichotomies and embrace “both/and” thinking (Davis et al., 2022), understanding the penal welfare system requires resisting simplistic oppositions to rather explore how they are co-constituted. As criminologist Alison Lieblich (2001) reason, when pondering about sympathy and taking sides in prison research, the process of synthesis—understanding a phenomenon in its wholeness—is crucial in empirical inquiry. This orientation has guided me toward an exploration of cohabitation within analysis, as I unfold later.

Deciding how to present the interview participants has involved careful reflection. While I recognize the practical value of providing an overview of the empirical material, I remain uneasy about using tables that list names, sentences, prison regimes, and ages. Such formats risk reproducing the logic of carceral documentation and media portrayals that reduce people to mere data points. During a research visit at the University of Glasgow, I shared this discomfort with criminologist Sarah Armstrong. She encapsulated my concerns with remarkable clarity: "The cells of the tables mimic the cell of the prison." Her words helped crystallize why the table format felt not just awkward, but wrong. Instead, the participants will be introduced through a simple list including only pseudonyms and ages, surrounded by space. This seemingly small shift is a deliberate attempt to offer a more dignified and spacious form of recognition, without any cells.

Camilla	28	Andela	41	Emma	28
Lissi	45	Dominika	40	Julia	21
Sofia	54	Lea	28	Tina	56
Hanne	68	Anna	31	Fatma	40
Louisa	28	Line	25	Sissel	30
Aisha	24	Hawa	23		
Nynne	33	Trine	38		

The interviews lasted around an hour on average, with the longest being one and a half hours. However, two were notably shorter, at around 18 minutes each. These formal interviews represented only a fraction of my engagements with the women. Many conversations occurred informally, arising from daily interactions rather than structured sessions. Some were directly relevant to this research, while others focused on whatever occupied the women that day—often related to, but not limited to, prison life and their futures. In terms of criminal charges, the majority had been sentenced for drug-related offenses, either on a larger or smaller scale, often alongside other charges. A few had stored weapons in their homes; one had been sentenced for traffic offenses, several for interpersonal violence, another for economic crimes, one had affiliations with so-called gang activity yet another for with so-called terror, and two had been sentenced for murder. These demographics largely align with broader statistics on incarcerated women in Denmark. Drug-related offenses and interpersonal violence are the most common punishable acts. In 2023, 24,5 % of all new prison sentences had legal ground in interpersonal violence and 26,4 % in drug offences (15,7 % for ‘serious drug crime’ and 10,7 % for law on euphoriant drugs) (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024: 11). Surely, these punishable acts alone provide highly insufficient information if we aim to learn about harm prevention from these women.

The first interview I conducted was with Lea. As she was sharing about an incident of experiencing neglect within the public system, I felt an emotional response—my eyes welled up, and a tear fell. Even in that moment, I questioned whether my reaction was appropriate. Did it offer validation, showing her that her words carried weight? Or did it center my emotional response instead of providing a more open space for her? When I voiced my concern, she said: “Why? No, no...”; a simple dismissal of my worry, an acceptance. Lea, however, was surprised by my reaction. It was clear she had rarely encountered professionals—whether social workers, researchers, or prison staff—who responded emotionally to her stories. Lea reflected on her own emotional restraint while sharing her stories: “You become very cold,” she said, referring to her experiences with municipal authorities. As I continued speaking with other women, a recurring theme emerged: the absence of feeling heard and the sense that their words and experiences truly mattered. Many described encounters with professionals who remained detached, where they felt treated like cases rather than individuals. In hindsight, I feel less concerned with ‘the appropriateness’ of the tear; it was genuine. It stood in contrast to the impersonal ways the women had experienced other professionals engaging with them before. It aligned with the ethics I had set for myself: human first, then a researcher. Another moment where my bodily reaction prompted a negotiation occurred during an interview with Hanne. She recounted how a police officer, called to respond to an incident of partner violence, asked her for oral sex. Although she initially reported him, she later withdrew the case out of empathy. Afterwards, he returned with 200 DKK and some food; what Hanne described as “a gift” for not pursuing the case. As she recounted the story, I was appalled. When I asked what she thought of this so-called ‘gift,’ my body language revealed disgust and resentment. She noticed my reaction but did not fully mirror it. Instead, she offered me a dose of her reality: “I don’t have a lot of money, so of course

I was happy about that. There I was, poor, on the 20th.” In that light, 200 DKK and some food—while perhaps deeply unsettling as a “reward” for silence—was still something tangible to be appreciated in an otherwise shitty situation. Hanne continued:

It’s something you also have to learn... Even though you’re as young as you are... It’s not always as it says in the book; in the books; what you read. It’s not always that it works as it should.

With this remark, I understood that she wanted me to grasp a broader life lesson; essential to understanding the lives I was in the process of writing about. She invited me to engage with the gap between how people and institutions ought to act and how they actually do. Where such disconnects exist, pragmatism becomes a necessary survival skill—something Hanne’s life, like those of many other incarcerated women, bears witness to. My bodily reaction thus became an opening for her to redirect my interpretation of the experiences I was gathering, calling for both nuance and pragmatic realism.

At the beginning of each interview, I introduced the idea of producing a timeline as a prompt. I brought A3 paper and various pens, inviting the women to map out their encounters with the penal welfare system. The papers themselves often sparked reactions, as when Nynne immediately said, “Oh... well! I don’t think you have enough papers for that,” emphasizing that she had many encounters to document. This approach was inspired by participatory visual methods, both to support participants’ narrative control and to aid memory through the visual prompt (Gray & Dagg, 2018). I imagined the timelines as a tool for sharpening focus and accessing memories of measures and encounters that might not emerge in a purely verbal exchange. Given how often these women had been written about by professionals, this exercise was also intended to turn the dynamic on its head; giving them space to write their own institutional story. In practice, most, however, asked me to do the writing, citing shaky hands, spelling anxiety, or simply a desire to focus on speaking rather than writing. Still, negotiating its use—who held the pen and what got recorded—became a subtle form of co-creation. Since linearity did not always suit the evolving flow of their stories, the lifelines were completed in a patchwork manner. Some disclosed childhood trauma alongside the presence or absence of penal welfare interventions halfway through the conversation, perhaps as they felt more trust. Others spoke in affective clusters, describing periods of despair or stress with little detail about the events that had caused those feelings. The timeline perhaps functioned more as an investigative tool for me, helping to track narratives and return to the encounters with the penal welfare system. The initial plan had been to draw two timelines: one charting past encounters with the penal welfare system, and another depicting an imaginative trajectory of alternative encounters. However, in practice, rather than enhancing envisioning, this speculative timeline often imposed demands that constrained speculative thinking. We thus explored speculative pasts based on what was already written and shared. The timeline of lived encounters served as a way of revisiting various points in their lives, asking what they had hoped for during each engagement with the penal welfare system. I treated it as a form of counter-memory, making small gestures toward imagining a system that could better support life-affirming possibilities. When I asked the women how they experienced the crafted lifeline, they spoke less about the object itself and more about the process of retelling. As Julia said:

Well, it always feels unreal to have to tell it because there have been so many things. But it's also nice to retell it again and again. Because it reminds me of how much I've accomplished in my life, even though I don't have a 9th-grade education. But how far I've come mentally.

For Julia, retelling her stories reminded her of how much she had endured and overcome, allowing her to feel pride. Some of the women reached for a cigarette immediately after the interview, while others later told me they had taken long naps. The emotional toll of engaging with such sensitive themes was evident, as existing research also touch on (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). These responses signaled how costly an hour of deep conversation could be, emphasizing the level of trust and emotional labor the women extended to this research.

Eight prison staff members were also interviewed, approached with a curiosity about how they perceived their roles in relation to the incarcerated women, and their knowledge of the women's backgrounds in areas relevant to their professional fields (such as health, work experience, substance use, and education). While these interviews focused on the staff members' professional experiences rather than personal life stories, they followed a similar overall structure. In the first part of each interview, we discussed their formal responsibilities, their perspectives on the system's preventive efforts, and their insights into the incarcerated women's backgrounds. The second part created space for speculation: What would change if they could redesign their roles? What structural shifts might allow them to support the women more meaningfully? Like the incarcerated women, several staff members found this imaginative task challenging. Their responses often circled around questions of legality, feasibility, and institutional rules—reflecting not only the practical limits of their work but also how deeply carceral logic shapes what is even imaginable. This was evident in my interview with Anni, who spoke with marked hesitation and ambivalence:

My reasoning tells me that, uh, that maybe I can't do it, I mean, if I had to choose in a dream scenario, right? And... that's just not possible because there's too much tied to security and all of that... And I know that, right? But... on the other hand, uh... I do think that, I mean, if I were to do the best I could for them, then I would need more time for each individual, right? (...) I think it's difficult. Again, because you have to think outside the box, right? What, what other possibilities could there be? Uh... I would wish for that, but it's also utopian to think it could be done, right?

But maybe also that there would be time to take a walk. (...) We are not allowed to do that here in the jail section, I know that. But also... walk and talk is a really good tool, right? If that were possible, uh. If there was something... yes... And the law is the law.

Anni's words hover between longing and resignation. Her repeated pauses and self-corrections reveal the strain of imagining life beyond institutional structures. Her mention of "walk and talk" gestures toward a more relational mode of engagement, which feels intuitively right to her yet remains out of reach. The statement "the law is the law" lands like a closing door, returning something as modest as walking side by side with an incarcerated woman to the realm of impossibility. And yet, the desire still flickers. The tension highlights her personal struggle: she wants to create supportive structures yet remains constrained by institutional rules "tied to security." In this way, Anni's reflection demonstrates how such constraints operate at the level of thought and language, limiting the very space to imagine or name what could be otherwise. Another staff member, Janna, experienced less internal inhibition in her speculative thinking, but was constrained externally by institutional messaging that

discouraged imagining beyond what was locally available. She recalled being told to relinquish her associations with Herstedvester, a closed prison known for offering more comprehensive rehabilitative resources:

I've sort of been told that I need to let go of that Herstedvester idea: *"This is not Herstedvester, and we will never have the opportunities that, uh, Herstedvester has"*. But, uh... but I don't think that should stop us from still talking about what would be best for these women [Merethe: mhm], and for, and for us to create better reintegration. Uh... Regardless of whether the resources are there or not.

When Janna speaks of the possibilities already practiced elsewhere, as a reference point for how prison might be done differently, she finds that such visions are swiftly shut down. The effort to imagine differently is met with a form of institutional disciplining, an insistence that the aspiration itself is misplaced. And yet, she resists this foreclosure. Her insistence on "still talking about what would be best for these women" enacts both a refusal and a sense of responsibility to keep the conversation open, even when the conditions to realize it seem absent. Her experience may reflect a broader institutional disengagement from imagining beyond the present reality; a kind of collective fatigue or resignation, a sense that dreaming itself has been abandoned. In this sense, the staff members' struggles with speculation reveal how the carceral institution disciplines not only actions, but capacities to dream, to wonder, to think differently. And yet, in the hesitations, in the trailing sentences, in the "maybe" and "if," there are glimmers of something else; a persistent, if fragile, impulse to imagine otherwise.

The interviews typically lasted around an hour, ranging from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 17 minutes, and took place in the staff members' offices. In one interview, a second staff member was present and occasionally contributed, consenting to the conversation being recorded. Including this person, the total number of staff participants was nine. To protect anonymity, I use pseudonyms for staff and list their sectors separately to avoid direct identification:

Sanne	Ulla	Janna	
Louise	Jørgen	Anni	
Hannah	Hans	Kim (no. 9)	
Health	Health		Education
Substance abuse	Occupation		Security
Case work	Substance abuse		Education

Engaging with prison staff provided a complementary empirical entry point to how the penal welfare system functions as an assemblage of people, policies, and practices. As these interviews are co-produced with people with a role within the carceral system, they were inevitably shaped by the frameworks imposed by the welfare penal state. Staff members, however, also displayed an awareness of the contradictions they navigate daily. Some spoke of

their frustrations with the limits of their roles, the constraints placed on the support they could provide, and their own experiences of institutional inertia.

### Creative texts as curated windows

Working with arts-based methods emerged from a methodological commitment to exploring alternative modes of knowledge production and to challenge carceral language. Sociologist Laura Pecenco (2018) observes that while arts in prison settings often are framed as therapeutic tools for individual reflection, incarcerated people use art not only to revisit their pasts but to craft a form of public address. Art becomes a means to shape perception and forge connections, to “build a window so that the rest of the world can look in” (p. 315), as Pecenco (2018) writes. Building on this outward-facing potential, I considered how writing workshops might produce alternative stories to engage with and counter the prevailing tough-on-crime rhetoric (Nilsson & Nagel, 2015; Smith, 2023). Some of the women were already engaged in writing—whether for school, in personal journals, or in letters—suggesting that writing could be a familiar mode of participation. It differed from the type of writing in the interview setting, as neither I nor anyone else would be observing the text as it was being produced. Moreover, women in the open regime had access to computers, creating different conditions for how their writing could unfold. With support from a teacher at Jyderup Prison and approval from the prison management, I began planning the workshops. Rather than leading the workshops myself, I envisioned an experienced writer who, in their own practice, draws on lived experience to align with the exercises and honor writing grounded in subjective truths. With crossed fingers, I reached out to such an author, Lee Langvad, who luckily agreed to facilitate. Lee Langvad is not least known for his<sup>32</sup> powerful book from 2014 *Hun er vred: et vidnesbyrd om transnational adoption* [She is angry: A testimony on transnational adoption] and his latest book *Tolk* [My translator] from 2024. In *She is angry*, Lee explores his personal experience as an adoptee from South Korea, raised by a Danish couple, which interweaves personal, structural, and relational dimensions of anger. Each sentence begins with “*She is angry...*” building a rhythmic, layered critique of transnational adoption. “*She is angry...*” naturally emerged as the opening writing prompt, which seemed fitting, as I knew many of the women were indeed experiencing anger. After our first planning meeting, however, I hesitated: would it be generative to ask participants to write from anger if other emotions were more present for them at that moment? And could such a prompt be interpreted as suggesting that the research was asking them to be angry? I shared these concerns with Lee, and he suggested to offer a second prompt: “*She is in doubt about...*”. This expanded the invitation and agency by offering two emotional entry points to explore. In the open prison, participants’ responses were evenly split between the two prompts. In the closed prison, everyone chose to write from anger. The second exercise asked participants to create a questionnaire directed at someone they held unresolved questions for; a person within the penal welfare system, or someone in

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<sup>32</sup> Lee now uses he/she pronoun. During the time of the workshop, Lee used his former name and the pronoun she.

their intimate circle. The final exercise was speculative: participants were asked to imagine themselves as professionals in the penal welfare system—guards, politicians, social workers—and write about how they would conduct themselves in this role. This can be seen as a type of figuration (Lury et al., 2022); a manner of articulating critique as well as desires an otherwise. It also invited the women to mentalize themselves in the providing—rather than receiving—end of the relationship, to engage with how the world might be experienced from that perspective.

Throughout the four-hour workshop, the exercises offered the women a chance to create their own “windows” (Pecenco, 2018) into their lives and their relationships with the penal welfare system. The women thus feature in this study not only as research participants, but also as authors and educators. In the open prison, eight of nine registered participants attended; the ninth had been placed in solitary confinement that morning. In the closed prison, the workshop was held in a temporary room with only six available seats. Though the workshop filled up, disruptions followed. One participant was placed in solitary, another was having a difficult day, and one had just been released. This left three participants. During the session, one found the exercises overwhelming and withdrew, while another who had expressed interest earlier joined. These fluctuations reflect the ruptured rhythms of incarceration, where participation is subject to institutional control, personal capacity, and the instability of daily life. The workshops provided a different kind of engagement than interviews. Some women who had declined interviews were open to participate through writing. Holding the pen and framing their own narratives offered a different form of agency than conventional research encounters (Leavy, 2020). Crucially, participation in the workshops was not tied to research inclusion. Each decided for themselves whether their writing would be part of the study. Most opted in, and a few even asked to revise their texts after receiving feedback from Lee before handing them to me. Each writing session began with Lee reading excerpts from his own work; texts written in response to prompts similar to those now offered to the women. Ahead of the questionnaire exercise, he shared a piece of heartfelt and unresolved questions to his biological mother. This struck a chord with other participants, many of whom had spent their childhoods in foster care or residential institutions and carried similar unanswered questions for their mothers. The vulnerability in Lee’s reading created a space where others felt comfortable also being vulnerable. When Lee finished reading the questionnaire, Louisa responded: “Those were some really good questions!”,<sup>33</sup> and Nynne added: “It moved me deeply.” In that moment, the shared experience of family separation created an immediate sense of resonance across other differences. Nynne, herself a mother, took the reflection further: “Maybe a questionnaire like this could help my daughter say the things she wants to tell me.” This moment showed how arts-based methods can open space not only for self-reflection and public address, but also for relational repair. After each writing exercise, the women were invited to read their pieces aloud. Sometimes all voices were heard; other times, just a few. But always, the women listened with attentiveness and care, offering each other affirmation and emotional presence. The dynamic extended to the teachers present. One staff member,

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<sup>33</sup> The quotes from the writing workshops are based on my notes and does not have verbatim accuracy.

Charlie,<sup>34</sup> participated in the writing exercises and used the questionnaire prompt to address a prison manager. Charlie shared that they initially felt blocked, as they “thought it would be inappropriate to share” but then realized they could write without reading aloud. Charlie yet did share some frustration; “There are things here that just don’t add up. I don’t understand why the solutions I suggest keep getting rejected.” This created a moment of solidarity and alignment, as the women witnessed a staff member grappling with institutional constraint. Nynne responded: “I think it’s brave that you did it.” The group honored Charlie’s privacy, showing how mutual respect was enacted during the workshop. Writing and storytelling thus became more than individual expression and outwards focus. It became a relational act; interwoven through listening, recognition, and mutual witnessing. Perhaps a temporary coalition, formed through both resonance and difference.

### Remaining in tension: Holding reformist and transformative desires in analysis

This research strive to remain within the tensions of the “both/ands” (Davis et al., 2022); *both* the reformist desires from the here-and-now *and* the more transformative restructuring; *both* focusing on the harm preventive landscape within the current penal welfare state *and* imagining prevention and governance structures beyond what currently exists. “Both/ands” inform the analytical approach itself, which moves between what the late queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (1997) describes as *paranoid* and *reparative* critique, employing both modes to read and respond to the world. Paranoid critique has helped this research examine how the penal welfare system operates not only through purported ‘good intentions’ for people’s well-being, but also through entanglements with broader interests, such as national agendas (Shammas, 2024). It enables a structural reading of institutions that may appear benign yet participate in racialized, gendered, and class-based modes of regulation. Yet, if the analysis remains solely in this paranoid register, it risks collapsing complexity into totalizing critique, overlooking the layered ways in which institutions operate. A reparative mode, by contrast, seeks out nuance, openings, and affirming possibilities (Raffnsøe et al., 2022). It has elevated the analysis beyond merely identifying what is wrong, fostering an interest in ambivalence, generosity, and possibilities for improvement.

Another important tension lies in how participants’ narratives are analyzed.<sup>35</sup> I have shared elements of the project’s orientation with the participants who expressed interests; exploring matters of harm prevention as a broader societal matter and thus decentering (without denying) individual responsibility. To my knowledge, the participants were unfamiliar with the theoretical frameworks of zemiology, transformative justice, and abolitionism shaping this study. Much like the focus of the prison manager, they were primarily—and understandably—interested in how this research could contribute to improving their conditions. The study

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<sup>34</sup> To secure anonymity, a gender-neutral name and pronoun is chosen.

<sup>35</sup> I would like to thank Ti Lamusse for urging me to center this tension as a site to think from.

therefore analyzes experiences through a lens selected not by the participants, but by me, in the effort to theorize from their experiences. It resides in this tension, remembering sociologist Les Back's (2007) critique of the often-romanticized notion that 'people are experts in their own lives'. As he notes, if this were true, we would all make decisions free of harm or regret, adding: "I am certainly not an expert in my own life, and who amongst us would make such a claim?" (p. 9). His provocation resonates with post-qualitative approaches that question whether simply centering 'voice' guarantees ethical representation or analytical adequacy (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). In that spirit, I do not claim epistemic authority; neither in my own life, nor in the participants'. Nonetheless, this study analyzes their accounts through theoretical perspectives that, while not named by the women themselves, provide resonance, friction, and depth to their experiences. At times, the women expressed pragmatic concerns; at other times, they gestured toward deeper transformation. The tension between immediate reformist desires—non-reformist reforms—and more radical restructuring is not simply a contrast between the participants' perspectives and the study's analytical framework; it is a tension that lives within many of the women's own visions. Rather than resolving these tensions, I take them as generative. They are openings into the ambiguities of hope, the practices of speculation, and the contingent realities of the present. They underscore the difficulty of envisioning justice from within constrained systems and social positions heavily influenced by them. Holding these tensions has fundamentally shaped the development of the analyses. As the following sections unfold, each research question opened a separate analytical pathway, offering ways of understanding and interpreting that are attuned to participants' experiences.

### Hybrid storytelling: Figuring lives entangled with the penal welfare system

This first empirical chapter, 4. *Incarcerated women's encounters with the penal welfare system*, addresses the research question of how the (then) incarcerated women experience their encounters with the penal welfare system; both before and during imprisonment. Guided by the commitment to decenter the individual, the chapter offers a way to hold both heterogeneity and shared patterns through what I term *hybrid storytelling*. This approach builds on the tradition of empirically grounded types (Kluge, 2000; Semenova, 2018) where empirical material is grouped around recurring patterns. In its conventional form, this method aims for in-type similarity by assigning each individual case to a single empirical type (Kluge, 2000). Yet, I found that this practice risks reducing the complexity of lives, flattening them by forcing each into a single empirical type. It could obscure the multiplicity both within and across experiences. In response, I adapted the method to allow elements of a single woman's story to appear in multiple types. It entails that parts of an individual's life can exist in more than one figure. This provided more space for the intersecting social categories, contradictions, and layered experiences that shape each life. Hybrid storytelling is thus an attempt to soften the epistemic violence (Teo, 2010) that typification can enact, by embracing hybrid configurations. By disentangling and reassembling elements of the women's lives,

*hybrid stories* resist tracing a singular thread from past to present. As such, this approach could be critiqued for obscuring linear causality. Yet this is a deliberate move. It reflects a core stance of this study: that seeking definitive causal explanations is neither possible nor desirable, as it fails to reflect the complexity of the becoming of life. A study of girls aged 13–22 who have used violence in conflicts observes that such actions emerge as “multi-linear, multi-causal, and involving multiple becomings” (Henriksen & Miller, 2012: 455), unsettling the notion that violence—or any behavior—can be attributed to a single set of triggers. Similarly, a large longitudinal study found that while it is possible to identify certain experiences and life situations as common “risk factors” for later committing punishable acts, using such profiles for prediction remains highly uncertain (Christoffersen et al., 2011). The study found that 72% of youth identified as “high-risk” never faced criminal charges in subsequent years (Ibid.: 12). Although this research avoids cause-effect determinism, it still seeks to illuminate patterns and common circumstances. Attending to typicalities and repetitions is part of understanding structure and systematic patterns. In this sense, hybrid storytelling conveys incarcerated women’s common trajectories within the penal welfare system while allowing for uncertainty, in keeping with the unfinished ethos of this study.

The hybrid stories were crafted attuned to the context from which each narrative fragment emerged and to the composite form they came to inhabit. The typology began with returning to the interview transcripts with a series of prompts: What kinds of contact had they had with the penal welfare system? What occupies their lives now? How do their stories relate to cycles of harm? How did the illegal acts emerge? And what other events shaped their lives? I built a table where each prompt became a column and each participant a row. The format enabled me to notice overlaps, contradictions, and divergences in the women’s lived experiences. From this process of identifying patterns, four hybrid types emerged. Each participant contributes to no more than two of the four figures, reflecting the particular overlaps and resonances across their accounts. To capture more diversity, the analysis also offers glimpses of lived stories from Jyderup that fall outside the hybrid configurations. The hybrid figures were named Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise. Additionally, a fifth figure, Naya-Ann, is offered as an open placeholder for those who chose not to participate, and whose stories remain untold. As these figures do not correspond to single individuals nor describe the committed penalized acts in detail, the hybrid stories hold a deliberate opacity<sup>36</sup> functioning as a protective strategy as it resists sensationalism and intrusive scrutiny. The stories are narrated with respect to the women’s own phrasings. While individual participants are not directly cited, I draw on their words and the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

In their role as figurations, the hybrid stories act as a “heuristic point of departure” (Lury et al., 2022, p. 11), offering four trajectories through which to comprehend and explore the institutions and harm preventive practices within the penal welfare system. These narratives trace a long arc across multiple institutions and initiatives, focusing on how the women have lived through these encounters, how the women have experienced and interpreted these interactions, and what they feel these systems have meant in their lives. They foreground

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<sup>36</sup> See critical scholar and archivist Maya Acharya (2024) for further conceptualization.

institutional entanglements, yet their strength does not rest in comprehensive detail or precise reconstruction of each encounter. Such completeness was neither possible nor desirable within the empirical material. Rather the stories foreground the cumulative weight of these experiences; what remains and lingers with the women in their current state of imprisonment, as they recount a lifetime of varied interactions.

### *Presenting what animates the penal welfare system*

Chapter 5. *Impulses animating the penal welfare system* continues to work in hybridity. Departing from a conventional literature review, this chapter positions the thesis within a wider analytical and empirical field. It begins by conceptualizing the political-administrative context of the Danish penal welfare state and by drawing on diverse bodies of scholarship, traces and rearticulates the common threads that run through its institutions and initiatives. The theoretical conceptualization of penal welfare work largely continues the theoretical framework constructed by pedagogical scholar Trine Øland and colleagues (2023) in the anthology *Velfærdsarbejdets paradokser* [The Paradoxes of Welfare Work]. In particular, it builds on their framing of the compensatory and individualized logics embedded in the penal welfare system, their ecological understanding of policy, and their attention to how past reconfigurations of welfare and penal practices continue to shape the present.

Through its analytical focus on incarcerated women’s lifelong encounters with the penal welfare system—and its interest in imagining prevention beyond criminological frameworks—this study moves across several disciplinary and theoretical terrains. To meet this ambition, I draw on a range of Nordic scholarship, assembled here into three thematic constellations: 1) welfare work and citizen encounters, 2) punishment and rehabilitation, and 3) bordered penalty. My engagement with the three strands of literature has been both structured and intuitive. It involved structured searches primarily through Google Scholar and citation tracking; focused on Danish empirical research from the past two decades, as well as relevant policy documents and media coverage. This process was further strengthened by peer input, as three colleagues working within related fields—Christian Sandbjerg Hansen, Lone Bæk Brønsted, and Charlotte Mathiassen—reviewed the literature for possible gaps. At the same time, the process remained intuitive, shaped by undocumented but purposeful search strategies that emerged through ongoing reading, reflection, and responsiveness to the material. The literature review evolved in tandem with the research itself.

Particularly within the field of welfare work and citizen encounters, scholars point to structuring patterns that shape penal welfare practices across sectors and institutions. These have been variously conceptualized; some refer to them as “drivers” (Bengtsson et al., 2015), or “transversal management rationales” (Brønsted, 2019, my translation), others use Bourdieu’s concept of logic (Brodersen, 2009), or Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury’s (2015) “institutional logics” framework (Christensen et al., 2024). Sociologist Nanna Mik-Meyer (2017) employ multiple words to describe these commonalities, arguing that the [penal] welfare encounters in Denmark are structured through “bureaucratic *principles*, market

*values and norms from psychology*” (p. 5, my emphasis). What struck me was not merely the recurrence of these patterns across welfare encounters, but their directional force; their capacity to orient, press, and propel interventions toward certain trajectories. To capture the dynamic, I offer the concept of *impulses*: structuring yet non-deterministic forces that animate and shape penal welfare work. As such, it is through the presentation of impulses that this chapter unfolds the existing literature. From engaging with the body of scholarship, I distill four dominant impulses that animate contemporary practices and institutions. These impulses are not uncovered here for the first time; they have been identified and theorized across existing scholarship. What this chapter offers is a rearticulation of these commonalities through the concept of *impulse*; emphasizing their directional, affective, and structuring qualities. Through the conceptualization and presentation of the four impulses, the chapter aims to provide a language and analytical framework suited to this study—and potentially beyond—for understanding and articulating the shared animating forces across different institutional contexts. Working through the four impulses enabled me to surface the structuring mechanisms that run through the women’s hybrid stories—patterns that might otherwise have stayed indistinct or hard to hold onto. Thus, beyond situating the study, the chapter offers a conceptual and analytical lens through which the incarcerated women’s experiences can be understood anew.

### *Depicting workings across institutions*

In chapter 6, *Depicting the penal welfare system*, I explore how this multifaceted system is experienced through the perspectives of two intertwined subject positions: incarcerated women and prison staff. I use the term *depicting* to signal an analytical process of rendering the penal welfare system visible through tracing patterns and repetitions across the accounts. The analysis of the interview material takes seriously both the women’s experiences of the life situations for which they sought support and their encounters with the penal welfare system, as well as the staff’s perspectives and experiences of working within it. While I was not present during the moments the women recounted—classroom incidents, court hearings, caseworker meetings, or interactions with staff in Children and Youth Homes—sitting with the women and listening attentively to what they emphasized offered a bridge to their lived pasts. Being present in the prison offered a third empirical vantage point, enabling me to witness how penal welfare work unfolded in the rhythms and routines of daily life. Together, these entry points is the basis of the analysis of the current workings, possibilities, and limits of the penal welfare state’s harm prevention paradigm.

The women’s stories often pointed to unmet needs, broken promises of care, and systemic failures that, in their experience, compounded rather than resolved harm. The reflections of prison staff offered a different, yet resonant, perspective. They spoke of the limits of their roles, the weight of institutional constraints, and their frustrations with what often counts as ‘support.’ This convergence encouraged me to treat these accounts as insights into a shared institutional world, viewed from two distinct social positions, rather than framing the

perspectives as oppositional. This approach affirms the thesis' ethical commitment to cohabitation (Butler, 2012) and to resisting binaries (Davis et al., 2022), as the perspectives are allowed to cohabit within the chapter and as the analysis explores how their viewpoints may at times support and affirm one another. It is further shaped by an understanding that both incarcerated people and prison staff are entangled—each in their own way—in broader socio-legal structures informed by retributive and rehabilitative paradigms (Bierie, 2012; Rodriguez & Clark, 2021). Had the staff's reflections diverged radically from those of the women, the analysis might have taken a different path, guided by curiosity toward these differences. But what emerged were often overlapping observations: women describing a lack of sensing genuine care from professionals, and staff reflecting on the frequency with which women encounter disruptions within the penal welfare system. These converging accounts illuminate how the system is experienced as inadequate both by those subjected to its interventions and by those tasked with carrying them out.

My initial approach to the analysis involved using NVivo to carry out a structured coding process. Re-reading the interviews and prison notes, I generated a preliminary coding framework to aid me in grasping the repetitions in how they experienced the harm preventive efforts. Through re-reading the interviews and prison fieldnotes, I developed a preliminary set of codes oriented toward tracing repetitions in how harm-preventive efforts were experienced. Seeking to open the early stages of interpretation to dialogue—and to resist the isolating tendencies of academic analysis—I shared the preliminary coding and selected anonymized interview excerpts with a few colleagues. These collective readings created space for hearing how the codes resonated beyond my own analysis and for attending to the associations they evoked. It affirmed me in my direction, but I soon sensed that NVivo's structured interface and workflow clashed with the ethos of this research. Its demand for coherence and fixed categories contradicted the more fluid, relational approach that had guided the process so far. It fell short of honoring the relational recognition and responsiveness the incarcerated women were asking for. I therefore turned back to a more manual, embodied approach, which the earlier analyses have followed. Having already spent time with the women's interviews, I turned to interviews with the prison staff guided by the following questions:

- How do staff describe their role?
- How do they relate prisons to other penal welfare institutions?
- What are their views on why the women currently are in prison?
- How do they consider matters of prevention?
- How do they believe the women have—or have not—been supported by the penal welfare system?
- How do they envision a professional role better attuned to support the women?

Using the questions as a loose framework, I identified and grouped key passages from the interviews. Some questions were easier to find answers to than others. This prompted me to read it again; tracing how each staff member spoke about their roles, their doubts, and the structural constraints they operated within.

After engaging separately with the women's and staff's accounts, I drew them into conversation. I compiled fragments from both interviews and prison notes into a new text document organized around thematic headings shaped by the initial processing of both sets of

interviews, the theoretical anchor of this study, and the earlier collective reading. Reorganizing the empirical material in this way allowed me to trace connections and resonances across interviews and prison notes. Patterns that recurred throughout the material gradually depicted the penal welfare system. This iterative and attentive approach enabled the analysis to emerge in close dialogue with the accounts lived experience. From this document, the chapter gradually took shape; not as a neatly coded output, but through iterative reading and reflecting.

Through this process, three themes crystallized: 1) The constraints of bureaucratic procedures, 2) The (im)possibilities of supportive relationships, and 3) The failure to address social harm. Unfolding these offered a suited way to tend the many experiences of how the penal welfare system both offers and withholds care, and at times exacerbates harm. The chapter's critical stance emerges not only from the dissertation's analytical interest in non-dominant justice paradigms, but also from the participants' narratives, which reflect their frustrations with and disappointments in the current penal welfare system. At the same time, moments of meaningful public support also appear in the interviews, particularly in descriptions of professionals whom the women experienced as genuinely engaged. These recurring accounts inspired me to assemble the figure of *The Engaged Professional* as a way of naming someone already present, while also explicating the embodied qualities that could be more robustly supported at an institutional level in the future. In this way, the figure is positioned both as a mirror of existing realities and as a prompt for envisioning more equitable and responsive futures.

### *Forging support structures through longings and speculative pasts*

Chapter 7, *Longing for other public structures and responses*, turns from analysis of existing practices toward the women's own reflections on how their encounters with the penal welfare system might have unfolded differently. Already in my early visits to Jyderup, it was clear that the women carried deep longings connected to the penal welfare system. The most striking longings—to be listened to, and to be seen—felt palpable, something I sensed in my body during our conversations. *Longing* seemed the right word, as it captures a sentiment of a strong, persistent desire for something that has been experienced as largely unattainable. It therefore felt natural to explore their speculative pasts through the lens of longing. This perspective opens the possibility to reflect on what kind of institutional set-up would be capable of meeting and supporting such longings.

In the interviews, I invited the women to reimagine and redesign their interactions with the system by constructing speculative pasts. Although I had considered introducing a more structured, game-like approach to facilitate the speculative work, I ultimately chose to provide minimal scaffolding. This decision was driven by an intention to allow speculation to unfold openly and to avoid imposing the theoretical commitments of the project onto the women's imaginaries. The speculative exercise was based on the co-written timeline of their lived encounters with the penal welfare system, which they were asked to reimagine had those

encounters reflected the forms of support they had hoped for. Similarly, the opening prompts exercises in the writing workshop did not demand radical imagination but instead left it to the women to determine how they wished to approach the creative writing. For many of the women, articulating a reality that does not (yet) exist felt overwhelming, which appeared to inhibit their capacity to imagine or express what they longed for. Nynne illustrated this tension clearly. She first expressed a desire for radical change with conviction: “I think the whole system should be reformed!”. Yet just moments later, she withdrew into uncertainty, saying: “And then I just think, uh, yeah... I don't know what I think. Because it's pure utopia, right?”. In response, I tried to affirm her uncertainty while underscoring the value of utopian exercises: “Yes, but it is important. It is important to be utopian sometimes. Otherwise, you won't be able to rethink things.” She replied immediately: “Exactly!”—perhaps welcoming the encouragement.

The women's explorations of their speculative pasts were comparatively brief, often overshadowed by more detailed recollections of lived encounters with the penal welfare system. Their reflections also rarely extended to broader visions of societal change, such as global reparations, economic redistribution, or ecological reform. I understand these limits as closely tied to the interview context itself, which offered insufficient scaffolding to support cross-scalar connections in speculative thinking. The speculative invitation was oriented primarily toward their personal experiences and encounters with the Danish penal welfare system. It would therefore be misleading to interpret the absence of broader systemic visions as an absence of such thinking on their part. Rather, the research process reaffirmed for me an insight into how ‘openness,’ when insufficiently supported, can delimit the very forms of participation it seeks to enable. What emerged from these speculations were glimpses of imagined alternatives largely tethered to the contours of the existing penal welfare system, where social work is positioned to compensate for deeper structural inequalities (Kim et al., 2024; Thygesen & Brønsted, 2023). Stepping back from guiding the speculations beyond the initial invitation made visible just how difficult it is to imagine otherwise. The systems we are entangled in do not merely govern our actions; they shape our inner landscapes and the boundaries of what we believe is possible. Philosopher Amy Kind (2016, 2025) argues that such constraints on imagination hold epistemic value, revealing insights about the society we inhabit and the social positions from which we attempt to imagine alternatives. The women's hesitation to articulate alternative support structures may reflect that their longings have rarely been realized, and that the invitation to dream touched a particularly vulnerable nerve. It may also reflect anticipation that such dreams would be dismissed—as abolitionists have long experienced (Mathiesen, 2015/1974: 84)—as idealistic or naïve. Nynne captured this fear succinctly when she referred to her own wish for systemic change as “pure utopia”. Abolitionist thinkers remind us that the carceral state has extended its reach into our intimate lives and thought-worlds, shaping how we conceive of justice, harm, and repair (Chartrand & Rougier, 2021). Given how central the penal welfare system has been in these women's lives, it may be considered part of the occupation of their imaginative capacities. In this light, their speculative accounts can be read as somewhat retrained by the governing rationalities of the very system I asked them to reimagine.

Yet, the women's speculations and longings hinted at support systems profoundly different from anything they had previously encountered. These imagined alternatives offered entry points for rethinking how public support systems might be designed and enacted. As with earlier analyses, the process was iterative: I worked with a living working document, experimenting with various thematic headings, collecting quotes, and annotating notes until the women's longings coalesced into a substantive analytic form. This process drew not only on passages describing interactions with the penal welfare system, but also on reflections about relationships with family members and others outside institutional contexts. Additionally, I attended to moments observed within the prison—instances when activities or experiences sparked hope, relief, or a renewed sense of joy in the women's lives and selves. These observations were treated as analytic resources, helping to illuminate the forms of recognition the women yearned for and providing insight into how institutional actors might have responded differently. While some longings became apparent early in the analytic process—as already highlighted—others surfaced more gradually through sustained engagement with the material, including revisiting transcripts, creative texts, and field notes. In this way, the analysis presented in chapter 7 is highly empirically driven. It not only traces what the women longed for, but also treats these longings as analytic orientations, suggesting how alternative public responses to social harm might be envisioned and enacted.

### *Contemplating an alternative harm prevention paradigm*

The final empirical chapter moves into a more contemplative mode, weaving together insights from the previous analyses. It addresses the last research inquiry: What do the incarcerated women's longings and critiques invite us to imagine in terms of public prevention efforts? Rather than presenting fixed conclusions, I offer a provisional answer—drawn from what this research has learned from the women and prison staff—about what it might mean to reshape public structures toward a harm prevention paradigm that is attentive to relational care and fosters institutional responsiveness. The approach is intentionally exploratory, with writing serving as a tool for imagining and extending possibilities. In this exploration, I sketch an alternative I term a transformative harm prevention paradigm. Framing it as “transformative” builds on the previous chapter, which traced connections between the women's longings and principles embedded in transformative justice. I remain acutely aware that, once researchers begin recommending or endorsing specific approaches, we have skin in the game. While all research inevitably foregrounds certain methods over others, I emphasize that working toward a society with less social harm is not about proving one approach superior. Rather, it is about cultivating a form of persistent curiosity—one that listens carefully to what is needed, remains open to being wrong, and allows us to shift and adapt in response. When I draw on the transformative justice paradigm in this contemplation, it is not to romanticize it or present it as a universal or final solution, but to think with its guiding principles. The tradition itself resists being turned into a rigid or final model, insisting instead on being grounded in and shaped by local context and lived experience (Pelsinger, 2025; Piepzna-Samarasinha & Dixon, 2020). Reflecting on what the women's longings could translate into guided me both toward

the types of institutions in which the Engaged Professional could thrive and toward how institutions might be encouraged to listen and incorporate lived insights into their practice. The notion of *configuring* is useful for describing the process of writing out an alternative harm prevention paradigm; it captures the assembling of diverse elements into a form that is never final or fixed, even when temporarily stabilized, as occurs in writing (Lury et al., 2022). Wang (2018) reminded us that imagination functions as the counter-spell needed to loosen the grip of carceral logics and open space for alternative futures. In this spirit, chapter 8 can be read as an extended act of casting a counter-spell—a weaving together of critique, longing, and speculative vision—to disenchant the retributive myths.

## Concluding reflections

Navigating tensions between aspirational methodological commitments, institutional constraints, and my own limitations, this study has unfolded in the unsettled space between conventional academic inquiry and the transformative possibilities I hoped to actualize. Anchored in an ethos of the unfinished, I have drawn on Mathiesen's (2015/1974) notion of abolition as an ever-evolving orientation—a method of staying with the trouble as Haraway (2010) might phrase it—remaining open to disruption, trial, and reconfiguration. This sensibility has informed both the knowledge produced and the relational, reflexive form of the research process itself. To explicate the analytical approach from the analytical anchor previously described, I developed three research strategies: (1) decentering the individual, (2) replacing carceral concepts as analytical categories, and (3) engaging speculation and counter-spells. Functioning as both methodological tactics and ethical commitments, these strategies reimagine harm prevention beyond surveillance, discipline, and individual responsabilization—toward public infrastructures and professional relations founded on care, co-responsibility, and collective flourishing. At the heart of this study's methodology is a commitment to “both/ands,” a deliberate strategy to move beyond binary thinking, which is deeply entwined with carceral logics. This orientation also underpins the ethics of cohabitation, aiming to hold the experiences of incarcerated women and prison staff within a shared analytic frame. I argue that this approach allows for a more multi-dimensional reading of the penal welfare system—one that draws on distinct yet entangled empirical vantage points. The ethics of cohabitation shaped my presence in the research, calling me to act not only as a researcher but as a relational participant: listening, being affected, and contributing to the creation of spaces for varied forms of expression. It informed both the design of the study and my decision to explore community-based research approaches. Although this endeavor remains unfinished and might not be considered fully “successful,” it marks progress toward a collaborative, situated approach to research. Through arts-based methods, the incarcerated women were able to explore, both descriptively and speculatively, elements of their life journeys and their experiences with the penal welfare system. Their creative texts appear as curated windows scattered throughout the thesis, offering glimpses into personal and institutional worlds that are otherwise difficult to access. Alongside interviews and relational interactions, these contributions animate the research with layered temporalities:

past, present, and future; lived, imagined, and longed for. Together, they illuminate what was, what could have been, and what might yet become.

This chapter has not least reflected on the difficulties of imagining alternatives, as voiced by both incarcerated women and prison staff throughout the research process—and I include myself in that reflection. If, as this study suggests, imagination is a form of counter-power, then fostering spaces for speculative practice is needed to disenchant carceral myths and put words to the otherwise. Research of this kind becomes a modest yet vital contribution to strengthening the collective muscle to think otherwise. Precisely because of difficulties of imagining how harm can be differently handled, this research seeks to exercise our capacity to imagine otherwise.

## **She is angry**

She is angry about how her mother treated her when she was little.

She is angry that she was subjected to brutal and cruel things when she was little.

She is angry that no one intervened and stopped it or paid attention to her.

She is angry that the choices made for her were not healthy and sensible, instead, actions were swift and selfish.

She is angry about being tossed around in the system—again and again and again. She quickly felt alone and insignificant; why was she made to feel that way, did she really deserve it? Was it on purpose?

She is angry that she wasn't listened to, that she wasn't understood or heard. She often was tossed around by the system. She quickly felt abandoned.

She is angry because those who said they loved her, did not look out for her. They didn't listen, they didn't see her when she needed it.

To be seen.

They didn't feel her.

She is angry because she is going through the pain again now. She is still processing the pain, the violation, the loss, the hope, etc.

She is angry that other people were allowed to fill up her backpack, that she didn't choose what would go into it. She has to carry around the choices and decisions of others, which she became a part of without getting to make her own choices.

She is angry that they could overlook the severe neglect she was subjected to.

- Emmelie

*/Text 3*

## 4. Incarcerated women's encounters with the penal welfare system

Tending to the past stirred deep and complex emotions for the incarcerated women—often evoking anger, but also sorrow and a profound sense of frustration. As Emmelie's words illustrate, this anger was layered: directed not only toward particular people—often primary caretakers or specific professionals—but also toward the penal welfare system itself. Emmelie's account of being “tossed around” within public institutions resonates with many others who shared similar experiences of childhood neglect that had gone largely unrecognized. This chapter presents four reconfigurations of life stories of incarcerated women; namely those of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise and their encounters with the penal welfare system, both prior to and during their time in Jyderup Prison. Each story expresses anger in its own way, shaped by distinct experiences. Naya-Ann, who chose not to share her story, will also be introduced through an open space that acknowledges and invites reflection on the significance of what is not told.

By unfolding Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise's trajectories entangled with the penal welfare system, we can gain deeper insights into the systemic challenges and possibilities. The hybrid stories illuminate the public system's role in the lives of incarcerated women, through its presence and absence. Still, the hybrid configurations could not contain all the stories I heard. Brief glimpses into lives less common within the prison population offer nuance, complexity, and contradiction to those presented through the hybrid narratives. The chapter also offers brief speculative imaginings of life trajectories that could have been analyzed, had the Danish penal welfare state approached social harm differently, resulting in prison's being differently populated. Such accounts disturb the sense of inevitability around Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, Maja-Louise, and Naya-Ann being the ones behind bars, revealing the contingencies that sustain carceral and harm-preventive realities.

## Hybrid stories: Lives within the penal welfare state

In this chapter, you are presented with four hybrid stories, each emblematic of life trajectories intertwined with the penal welfare system as experienced by the incarcerated women who participated in this study. The hybrid figures give shape to the different trajectories common within the prison population of Jyderup. You will be introduced to the 34-year-old Anna-Maria, who endured a tumultuous childhood marked by frequent moves between municipalities and institutions. When she became a parent, she saw it as an anchor for a new life, though this strategy proved fragile. You will also meet the 49-year-old Sarah-Johanne, whose family life was disrupted by her father's death and who later turned to (illegal) amphetamines to manage back pain during a period marked by multiple work capability assessments. The story of 23-year-old Uzma-Aicha reflects a youth spent in social housing areas, where she experienced a lack of recognition from penal welfare professionals toward the struggles faced by her and her peers. Then there is 29-year-old Maja-Louise, who was removed from her home as a child, only to continue living in environments where adults were neglectful and sometimes abusive. Her life has been heavily shaped by substance use and homelessness. Finally, there is Naya-Ann, who represent the women behind the stories not-told, but whose story can be written on the blank pages, alongside the other hybrid stories. The varying ages of the hybrid figures offer different lengths of glances back in time, providing insights into experiences with the penal welfare system across different eras (Villadsen, 2004). Following the four hybrid stories, the individual voices of the incarcerated women join in, attending to the shared threads and distinct differences in how they encountered and related to interventions and public forms of support.

### *Anna-Maria*

These are some of the stories of “the Anna-Marias”. Telling me and us her story with the penal welfare system, she is now 34 years old and currently incarcerated in Jyderup Prison.

During her childhood, Anna-Maria had little contact with her father, who, she shares, had a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, struggled with substance addiction, and was frequently in and out of prison. She and her three younger siblings lived with their mother, moving repeatedly across Denmark; from one municipality to another. Between the ages of four and ten, they relocated at least seven times, though Anna-Maria finds it difficult to recall the exact number. She believes her mother deliberately moved them to avoid scrutiny from social services. Each time caseworkers began to suspect something was wrong at home, her mother would relocate, succeeding in resetting the oversight. Anna-Maria suspects that these frequent moves were her mother's attempt to avoid losing custody of her children. She, however, was adamant that her mother did not know how to parent them either. She recalls that some caseworkers even seemed to enable her mother's evasion by keeping social service

interventions at bay, perhaps out of pity. But for Anna-Maria and her siblings, the result was a persistent feeling of being unseen and neglected.

On one of these moves, Anna-Maria brought her schoolbooks with her. She wasn't always enrolled in a new school immediately after relocating, and although taking the books may have been technically considered stealing, her intention was simply to keep up with her learning. In the early years—preschool and elementary—she had loved school. She enjoyed learning and felt at ease there. But over time, her relationship with school grew strained. She found herself in repeated conflicts with teachers and felt increasingly misunderstood. In one of the many schools she attended, she became close friends with a girl who had a contact person from the municipality.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes Anna-Maria would join them when they went to a café or the cinema. As the contact person got to know her and became more aware of her situation, Anna-Maria believes she initiated a case in the municipal Child and Youth Unit. At some point, a caseworker contacted her mother—who became furious and accused Anna-Maria of “snitching.” That confrontation triggered yet another move, cutting her off from her new friend and once again uprooting her life. Later in life, Anna-Maria requested access to her case files, searching for answers. In one file, Anna-Maria found it plainly stated: her mother lacked parenting skills. She was so stunned that this was documented, while so little support that had happened. Why hadn't she been removed from home earlier? Why had her mother been allowed to keep custody—or even to carry out pregnancies—when it was noted that she lacked the ability to parent?

Life in Anna-Maria's family was far from easy. Her father was never really in the picture, and she experienced that her mother lacked the capacity to be a caring and attentive parent. Struggling with anxiety and borderline personality disorder, as she herself names, her mother also drank. She was often absent from home and emotionally unavailable, never cooking for Anna-Maria and her two brothers, one older and one younger. Sometimes, it felt better when her mother wasn't home because at least it was calm, quiet, and more predictable. Her mother would sometimes take her and her siblings to a bodega. Anna-Maria shares memories of changing diapers on her younger brother at the bodega because they smelled so much. Neither her mom nor the other adults at the bar did anything about it.

A significant shift occurred when Anna-Maria was 10 years old. For the first time, caseworkers at her then-current municipality managed to intervene, and she was referred to a support family.<sup>38</sup> The referral followed an incident where her mother, while heavily drunk, got into a big fight with a neighbor, leading to police involvement. Until then, no penal welfare worker had successfully intervened or countered her mother's strategy of moving. Anna-Maria

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<sup>37</sup> The contact person scheme is managed by municipalities and applies to both children and adults, in accordance with either the Social Services Act [Serviceloven] or in the new Child Act [Barnets lov]. A contact person is hired for specific hours per month and engages in one-on-one interactions with a citizen, with the aim of providing psychosocial and relational support in daily activities, and building bridges to e.g. education, municipal authorities, and the healthcare system. For individuals under 18, the contact person may also be more involved with the family.

<sup>38</sup> A support family [støttefamilie]—formerly known as a relief family [aflastningsfamilie]—typically hosts a child every second or third weekend and collaborates with the child's parents, the social worker, and the foster care consultant. The family must be pre-approved by the Social Supervisory Authority [Socialtilsynet], while the municipality is responsible for monitoring the child's well-being (Københavns kommune, n.n.-b).

remembers being very fond of her time with the support family. She was especially relieved that her older brother had been placed elsewhere, which allowed her to enjoy the experience without having to attend to his needs. It felt as though she was experiencing what it meant to be part of a family. Her younger brother, however, remained at home, and no support was extended to him at the time. A few years later, at age 13, Anna-Maria was placed in a Children and Youth Home,<sup>39</sup> without fully being aware of the process behind it. She was deeply unhappy there. She recalls the place as awful; not a safe or caring environment, but one marked by loneliness and anger. She felt, then as now, that the adults did little for the children other than keep the basic routines of institutional life in place. She doesn't recall specific activities or meaningful engagement, except for one exception: a pedagogue student who made a lasting impression. What set this person apart was that she invited Anna-Maria into her own home, creating a sense of a personal, caring relationship, which Anna-Maria didn't experience with the other staff. Adjusting to the institution was a struggle. Having spent years fending for herself at home, the structure and rules of the youth home felt stifling and overwhelming. She often tried to run away. Around this time, she also learned that her mother had willingly agreed to her placement in the institution. That discovery left her unsure of who truly loved her. Looking back, she sees her boundary-testing and attempts to escape as ways of asking: Would the adults still care about her when she was difficult? Would they continue to show up? During one escape attempt, Anna-Maria's friends came to pick her up in a car, but the situation quickly escalated. The social workers used what she describes as excessive force to stop her. She vividly remembers the violence: one of her friends was thrown across the front of the car and struck in the head. She was dragged out of the car by her hair. While Anna-Maria knew that staff were legally permitted to use force [magtanvendelser], she also knew that what happened that day went beyond what was allowed. Years later, she read in the news that the head of the institution had been fired. The dismissal was related to repeated incidents where staff had used force on the young people in care, which were ruled to be unjustified. Anna-Maria had experienced it firsthand, and it left a lasting mark.

At 16, she was assigned her own youth apartment. Friendships and being part of a close group of peers became central to her life. She had started smoking weed while still at the Children and Youth Home, and by age 15, she had begun selling weed, cocaine, and amphetamine. It was easy money, and she entered into it willingly. She also took pride in being good at it—thinking about customer service, product quality, and building trust. She managed to position herself relatively high in the local drug economy, especially notable, she says, given that it's a male-dominated field. Although she used drugs herself, Anna-Maria doesn't consider herself addicted. She says she never struggled to stop and never experienced heavy withdrawal symptoms. At 19, she was sent to prison for the first time, following being sentenced for participating in a group assault. She recalls not being granted parole, and that nothing had been prepared for her release. There was no housing, no secured income, no plan. She

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<sup>39</sup> With the implementation of the Child Act in January 2024, Children and Youth Home [Børne- og ungehjem] became the collective term for residential institutions. Children are placed here either temporarily or permanently. In 2024, 1 percent of all children aged 0–17 in Denmark—that is, 11,629 children—were placed in either a Children- and Youth Homes or a foster family (Lausten, 2025).

arranged to move in with a friend and knew that she would keep selling drugs—both for the money, and because she was good at it.

In her early twenties, Anna-Maria became pregnant with her then-boyfriend, which became a turning point in her life. Determined not to repeat her mother's mistakes as a parent, she returned to school. She proudly recalls the moment her son placed the graduation cap on her head as she completed her upper secondary degree [HF]. During her pregnancy and in the early stages of parenthood, both she and the father were involved with a social service unit supporting so-called vulnerable parents. They underwent assessments to evaluate their parenting abilities, which they passed. Anna-Maria understood this to be standard procedure for parents who had grown up in institutional care, as they both had. After their son was born, they were referred to a Family House [familiehus]<sup>40</sup>, where they should bring their child to be observed and guided by social workers. Anna-Maria speaks positively about her experience there—she appreciated the advice and encouragement the staff offered, especially around parenting and caring for her son. Leaving the Family House, however, was difficult. She felt intensely protective and was worried about the risks her child might face in the world.

Despite her efforts, the relationship with her son's father fell apart. One day, when she went to pick up her son from kindergarten, she discovered he had already been picked up by his father, who then refused to let her see him. Anna-Maria believes he used their son as a way to pressure her into getting back together. Sleepless and desperate, she turned to weed to find rest. In a vulnerable moment, she confided in her ex about how not seeing her son was affecting her and how she was coping. He later used her marijuana use against her in the custody case, which ultimately resulted in her losing custody. This loss devastated her, as she felt her child was her lifeline. Anna-Maria described how her borderline personality disorder, diagnosed during pregnancy, flared up. When she sought psychiatric help, she was told she did not fit into any of the existing programs and was turned away.

Without her son and struggling with her mental health, Anna-Maria returned to selling drugs. This eventually led to her current sentence. Currently, she is not in contact with her child, which continues to cause her deep pain. Yet she says she understands his need for distance. She holds onto the hope that one day, they might reconnect. She has now been incarcerated at Jyderup Prison for two years, following a period of several institution changes; four different jails and prisons over the course of ten months. The relative stability of being in the same institution, she says, has finally allowed her to use her time for something more meaningful. She is studying upper secondary subjects (HF-fag) and hopes to complete a full education. Still, it's difficult within the limitations of the prison's education and work unit, as it does not offer many options.

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<sup>40</sup> A Family House serves as a unified entry point—either physical or organizational—intended to make services for families with young children more accessible and coherent, coordinating efforts across municipal, regional, and civil sectors (Danish Social and Housing Authority [Social- og Boligstyrelsen], n.n.).

## *Sarah-Johanne*

These are some of the stories of “the Sarah-Johannes”. Telling me and us her story with the penal welfare system, she is now 49 years old and currently incarcerated in Jyderup Prison.

For the first years of her life, Sarah-Johanne lived with her mother, father, and two older siblings. Life at home was tense. There was a strict sense of order, and it was easy to do things “wrong.” She recalls one evening during a family dinner when she took the last glass of lemonade. In response, her father flipped her bowl of soup over her head and twisted it into her hair. She can still remember the sensation of the soup running down her cheeks. School offered little relief. Sarah-Johanne struggled to keep up and never felt at ease there. Much later, as an adult, she was diagnosed with ADHD, something teachers hadn’t recognized at the time. It was not that known back then, she adds. Looking back, she believes that if she had received support or treatment earlier, her school experience might have been very different.

When Sarah-Johanne was eight, her father died of a heart attack. The loss hit the family hard. Overwhelmed by grief and unable to care for all three children, her mother contacted social services. Her two older siblings were sent to a boarding school, while Sarah-Johanne remained at home. She believes her mother thought she was too young to be sent away. Ironically, the boarding school her siblings were placed in—one of Denmark’s largest in the late 1970s—has since been converted into the very prison where Sarah-Johanne is now incarcerated. As a child, she did not fully understand where her siblings had gone and, for a time, even feared they might have died like their father. Her mother never spoke about it, and no penal welfare workers explained anything either. Left in the dark, she felt confused, abandoned, and painfully alone. Living with her mother was difficult. Her mother, still reeling from grief, grew increasingly withdrawn. Sarah-Johanne suspects she became depressed and anxious. She gradually took on more responsibility around the house. Eventually, her mother stopped working, and they relied on social benefits to get by. Years later, as an adult, Sarah-Johanne spoke with her siblings about that time and shared how much she had longed to be with them in Jyderup boarding school. Her brother, with a bittersweet sense of humor, reminded her, “Be careful what you wish for”; a reference to her current incarceration there. Through their stories, she’s come to understand that life at the boarding school wasn’t easy for them either. They had their own struggles. Still, she had missed them deeply, and their visits home were rare.

After finishing 10th grade, Sarah-Johanne found herself uncertain about the future. She held a few part-time cleaning jobs and moved out of her mother’s home at the age of 17. During those years, she had almost no contact with penal welfare workers beyond her schoolteachers. At 19, unsure of her next steps and without stable employment, she sought help from the municipality. She remembers the meeting vividly; what stayed with her was the young caseworker’s dismissive tone. She had told her she wasn’t smart enough to pursue an education and should simply find a job. Sarah-Johanne was frustrated. She had tried to explain how she had taken on adult responsibilities as a child, managing the household after her father’s death, which of course had affected her grades in primary school, but felt completely

unheard. Determined to prove the caseworker wrong, she soon enrolled in a culinary education program and completed it. She found joy in traditional Danish cuisine and worked in various kitchens for the next ten years. During this period, she got married and had two children. Wanting to address the emotional wounds of her past and avoid repeating her parents' patterns, she began psychotherapy outside the public healthcare system. At the time, she could afford it, and she credits this therapy with having a profoundly positive impact on her well-being. However, by age 34, years of heavy physical labor in kitchens had taken a toll on her body. She suffered several disc herniations and experienced that she no longer could work. That marked the beginning of a long and exhausting struggle to be granted early retirement.

Throughout her late thirties and early forties, Sarah-Johanne was caught in what felt like an endless loop of negotiations with the Job Centre.<sup>41</sup> She lost count of the number of work trials and assessments of her work capacity. Each time the phone rang, it seemed to be a new caseworker, and the whole process would start over again. She remembers feeling completely drained and desperate for peace. Despite living with chronic back pain, this aspect of her situation was rarely addressed in her interactions with the system. Around the age of forty, she went through a divorce. Her children split their time between households. During this period of instability, ongoing occupation interventions, and rotating professionals, she began using amphetamines obtained illegally. She experienced that the amphetamines worked better, more so than the prescribed medications she had taken for back pain. She found it easier to get up in the morning and manage daily tasks like cleaning and cooking. Living on benefits for so long had left her in a tight financial situation. Eventually, she began selling amphetamines to earn an income. This allowed her to better provide for her children, which she explains was a top priority. Sarah-Johanne describes that from that point on, her kids did not lack anything—they got everything they needed.

Sarah-Johanne fell in love with a man she later discovered was deeply involved with a biker gang [rockergruppe]. Looking back, she believes he took advantage of her vulnerability; particularly her need to feel needed. At the time, she thought it was love. Now, with distance and reflection, she sees it differently. A few years into their relationship, the man was sentenced to prison. Just weeks after his incarceration, men connected to the gang appeared at her door. With her boyfriend gone, they told her she now owed his debt. She had no way to pay. Instead, they demanded that she keep weapons in her home and begin selling drugs on their behalf. It was that or she could “sell herself” as a sex worker—or, more accurately, they would be in charge of “selling her”—as another way to settle the debt. She chose the first option. When we spoke, Sarah-Johanne was serving the third year of a sentence for drug and weapons charges in Jyderup Prison. Her children, now young adults, are an ongoing source of pride and joy. One has just begun a professional bachelor's program, and the other recently completed upper secondary school [HF]. They remain in regular contact. Inside, she shares her small

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<sup>41</sup> Job Centres carry out the active employment efforts, aiming to get unemployed people into work and young people into education (Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment [Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering], 2025). The government is currently discussing a reorganization that includes closing the Job Centres altogether (Engelund, 2023)

prison salary with another incarcerated woman who has young children on the outside; hoping to help, even in small ways. Before being transferred to Jyderup, she spent three months in Vestre Prison, an experience that still haunts her. The constant shouting in the hallways, the frequent outbreaks of violence among incarcerated people, and the heavy-handed use of force by guards left lasting marks. What haunts her most are the screams of other women; sounds that still echo in her mind. For the past three years, Sarah-Johanne has woken up almost every night with a sharp gasp at 5 a.m.; a pattern she says is common among many in Jyderup. She takes medication to manage her sleep and anxiety, but the trauma lingers. When she gets out, she hopes to finally receive early retirement.

### *Uzma-Aicha*

These are some of the stories of “the Uzma-Aichas”. Telling me and us her story with the penal welfare system, she is now 23 years old and currently incarcerated in Jyderup Prison.

Uzma-Aicha’s experiences with the welfare state are marked by feelings of neglect, frustration, and anger. She grew up with a mother overwhelmed by the task of raising six children alone after their father left. Still, she recognizes that her mother tried hard and did her best. Living in a social housing area, much of Uzma-Aicha’s childhood and adolescence unfolded outside the home—in the streets of the neighborhood and, from age 12, in the local youth club.<sup>42</sup> She describes that the youth club was specifically intended for children who did not thrive. Those she calls “the lost kids.” Although pedagogues were employed to engage the young people, she never felt they genuinely cared or tried to build meaningful relationships with her. Rather, they mostly let the youngsters be, which made her feel even more invisible. She recalls older teens openly smoking weed inside the club, without intervention from staff. By age 16, she too was smoking regularly; something she attributes to both peer normalization and the absence of stimulating activities or adult attention. Rather than offering support, the space reinforced her sense of disengagement and neglect. Some of her friends eventually filed a formal complaint to the municipality, requesting that the club be replaced. They were invited to a meeting at City Hall, but nothing came of it. That inaction, too, became a significant disappointment for her and her peers. In school, she noticed how teachers spoke differently to black and brown students than to white students. She recalls several instances where she and her black and brown friends were blamed for things white classmates had done. She found strength and solidarity in her friendships. When the youth club closed at 17:00, she and her friends would often head to the public library as the only indoor space that they experienced as available to them and which—importantly—did not cost money. For many of them, home wasn’t a place where they could be together, and the library became a kind of refuge.

Uzma-Aicha’s mother was in regular contact with the municipality for social benefits, and she also tried to get support for her children; applying for help with things like football gear or

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<sup>42</sup> Youth clubs are an after-school activity center organized in the municipalities which aims to "promote the individual young person's versatile development, independence and understanding of democracy." (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2024, my translation).

educational support. Uzma-Aicha knows that her mother told social services multiple times that she wanted someone to help her daughter. Between the ages of 12 and 14, some of the people Uzma-Aicha spent time with were older and had been involved in criminal activities, though she herself had not yet been in trouble with the law. She suspects this might be why social services didn't initially intervene. Still, at age 14, she was assigned a contact person. Having someone to talk to—without being pressured to talk—was very important to her. They would sometimes go to cafés or the movies together, building trust gradually. In the beginning, though, she struggled to keep their appointments; she simply didn't know how to follow through. Despite liking her first contact person, she was eventually assigned a new one. Uzma-Aicha is aware that the purpose of the program was crime prevention, to steer her away from certain people and situations. As a teenager, she often found that reasoning silly and overly simplistic. The arrangement ended automatically when she turned 16, as was standard policy.

During her teenage years, Uzma-Aicha experienced frequent conflicts at home. Unsure of how to cope, she made the decision to move out at the age of 17. She moved in with a friend whose parents agreed to let her stay. Wanting to move to a more permanent place, she went to the social services office and explained to a caseworker that she could no longer live at home. What surprised her was the silence that followed; she never heard back. Uzma-Aicha had assumed that the caseworker would follow up, help her secure housing, and support her transition, but nothing happened. A year later, her friend's parents intervened and contacted the municipality. Only then did it become clear what the office could and could not assist her with. Uzma-Aicha was told that the municipality couldn't help her find housing, and that her only option was to move into a homeless shelter. She was devastated. It reinforced her sense that no one truly cared, that the system had failed her again.

She spent increasing amounts of time in neighborhoods that were designated police visitation zones, which for her meant being stopped and searched regularly. She knew the municipality had arranged with the police to receive reports each time she was searched. This left her deeply frustrated: while she was being monitored and surveilled, no one was actually offering help. She was aware that peers living in other municipalities had received far more meaningful support and guidance. Under this pressure, Uzma-Aicha's stress intensified, and her weed use turned into what she considers addiction. Her frustration sometimes erupted into violent outbursts. Though she had completed elementary school, her path through further education was turbulent. She was expelled both from 10th grade and later from a business-oriented secondary school due to aggressive behavior.

At 19, she moved out of her friend's parents' home and in with her boyfriend. She began to feel stuck; disillusioned with how her life was unfolding and increasingly disconnected from her friend group. Around this time, she was charged with burglary, which led to a long and stressful court process. She was convicted in city court and received a prison sentence, along with a conditional deportation order. The deportation clause is deeply distressing to her. Though born and raised in Denmark, she now faces the possibility of being expelled to her parents' country of origin; a place she has visited only once, briefly, in her preteen years. She struggles to comprehend the fact that she could be removed from what she considers her home country. The thought of being sent away and the fear of falling back into old patterns weigh heavily on

her. Yet, just before her prison sentence began, things had shifted in her life. She found new friends and which entailed getting different habits; going to cafés or visiting a spa. These activities that initially felt strange in their calmness but gradually became part of her life. When speaking about the future after Jyderup, she expresses a strong desire to get an education and lead what she calls “a regular life.” She is currently enrolled in a substance use treatment program in th prison. While she fears what lies ahead, she also just want to get done with this sentence, so she can begin to lead her life.

### *Naya-Ann*

Here is space for some of the stories of “the Naya-Anns”. As she has chosen not to tell me and us her story with the penal welfare system while currently incarcerated in Jyderup Prison, the next pages are blank. While her story is not typed out, it still deserves space. Perhaps you already know or will meet someone who would like their story to be written here. Perhaps it is your story. Feel free to jot it down.





## *Maja-Louise*

These are some of the stories of “the Maja-Louises”. Telling me and us her story with the penal welfare system, she is now 29 years old and currently incarcerated in Jyderup Prison.

Maja-Louise’s story with the penal welfare system begins even before her birth, as there was already a social case concerning her mother and two older siblings. She was born while the family was living in a crisis center for women subjected to violence. Her father was an aggressive man. Her siblings told her about times when he had been very violent toward their mother while they were present. She more vividly remembers one of her mother’s later boyfriends. He often watched porn on the TV in the living room. As a young child, she and her older siblings ended up watching a lot of the porn he played. She says that she knows it has affected her view of herself and her relationship with her body and sexuality. Her childhood remains hazy in her memory, which she understands as a response to trauma. She does, however, know that her mother’s boyfriend sexually molested her from around the age of six. She finds it strange that these types of memories are black boxed in the brain. Maja-Louise also knows that some caseworkers suspected that she had subjected to sexual abuse, but she does not recall receiving any therapeutic or pedagogical support to process it. This suspicion might, however, have been one of the reasons why she eventually was placed in a Children and Youth Home.

Throughout her childhood, social service workers occasionally visited their home. She appreciated these visits because, for those hours, things improved with her mother, and she received more attention. However, she felt the visits were largely performative, as nothing substantial followed them. She knew things were not okay at home but did not tell the full truth to the social service workers, trying in a twisted way to protect her mother. When she was 10, an intervention finally happened. She was transferred to a Children and Youth Home, where she lived for three years. Maja-Louise felt relieved to be moved away from home but doesn't remember much about the decision to remove her. Dining became a central pedagogical activity for her, with staff sitting alongside her as she struggled to eat. At home, she and her siblings were not allowed to take food from the fridge, and often there was little food anyway. Her relationship with food was so distorted that it took two to three years before she stopped fearing that the food on her plate would be stale. She regards the staff’s support with eating as helpful and essential. However, other aspects of the Children and Youth Home were far from generative for her. Maja-Louise clearly remembers the staff’s use of force on her. She believes it was even worse than what she now experienced as an adult in Jyderup Prison. When you are a child and have three full grown men holding you down, it is scary, she says. She also was not allowed to participate in sexual education classes because the staff believed she was overtly self-sexualizing and that it would not benefit her. She remembers feeling frustrated by this decision, believing they did not know how to handle the impact of the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child. For Maja-Louise it was a big letdown that she was not allowed to obtain insights about biological functions and her own body. Till this day, she still thinks there are gabs in her knowledge. When she was 13, she got very close to one of the other children, a 10-year-old boy, who she refers to as her little brother. Years after, as they both had

moved out of the Children and Youth Home, he shared with her that he was raped by one of the staff members, a 45-year-old man, and that one of the other, a 60-year-old man had sexually transgressed his boundaries. At the time, it had not been stopped nor even addressed. Maja-Louise is still deeply troubled that all of this happened at the Children and Youth Home. She also experienced sexual abuse there, not by staff but by the other children. One time, one of the boys had told her that she could borrow one of his games. As she entered his room to get the game, three other boys were behind the door. They groped her, beat her, and raped her. The Children and Youth Home was a massive facility, and there were not that many staff present. Maja-Louise thinks this was why the rape was not caught and stopped by the staff. The following days she hinted to the incidents to the adult there, but they did not pick up on the hints, and she never told it explicitly.

When she turned 14, she was placed in a foster family [plejefamilie],<sup>43</sup> but she doesn't recall how or why the decision was made. The experience was overwhelming, one that stayed with her vividly and with great grief. The family she was matched with seemed almost too good to be true: warm, attentive, and resourceful in ways she did not know how to receive. She remembers arriving just before Christmas, the house beautifully decorated, and being astonished to find that they had already bought her a present. Having her own room, hearing about a vacation to Spain they planned to take her, and being told that "dinner would be ready soon"; it was all too much. The leap was too great; it felt too luxurious. She could not trust it. After just one night, fear set in: what if they wouldn't love her once they got to know her? The fact that they had biological children only deepened her anxiety about not belonging, about being seen as less important. The next morning, she acted out, yelling at them, accusing them of only getting a foster child because of the payment, and declared that she wanted to leave. Despite their attempts to invite her back, she ultimately moved out. Looking back, she describes this as a moment where she could have had it all, and she grieves and blames herself for not staying. After that, she was moved to another institution. It was not a place where she thrived. She longed for her own home but still spent several years there. When she turned 17, the staff told her she would be getting her own room. Believing she was being offered a youth apartment [ungdomsbolig],<sup>44</sup> she agreed. However, during the drive to her new home, she realized through conversation with the social worker taking her there that it was actually a room within a new foster family. At that point, she considered herself too grown to be part of a new family as a foster child and resisted this decision. She told the social worker that she would definitely leave the family, and that the social worker might as well drop her off at the nearest train station. And that's exactly what happened. From then on, being 17 and without an income, Maja-Louise lived with friends, but eventually in shelters and on the streets.

Maja-Louise's twenties were shaped by addiction and homelessness. Drug use had been part of her life since she was 12, but in these years it escalated. Living in shelters was often rough and dangerous, demanding constant vigilance to protect herself from others in similarly

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<sup>43</sup> A foster family provides full-time care for a child, either temporarily or permanently. The family must be pre-approved by the Social Supervisory Authority, while the municipality is responsible for monitoring the child's well-being (Københavns kommune, n.n.-a).

<sup>44</sup> Young people between 16 and 23 can be placed in independent, often dormitory-like housing, with support from a designated contact person (The Child Act).

desperate circumstances. Eventually, her drug use intensified, and she began injecting heroin. Despite the chaos, there was a turning point. For a time, she managed to get “off the needle.” This shift began when she started selling *Hus Forbi*, a street newspaper that shares the voices of and supports people experiencing homelessness in Denmark. She took the job seriously, determined to embody the qualities of a good salesperson. Out on the street, interacting with customers, she felt something shift: people saw her. They saw her humor, her persistence, her capabilities, and she cherished those interactions. Selling the paper gave her a sense of purpose, and she wanted to do it well. She knew she couldn’t be too high if she wanted to be present and convincing, and that made another path with less reliance on drugs begin to feel possible. Violence have been part of her entire life, and committing serious interpersonal violence is the reason why she is incarcerated. It appears to have happened in a frantic and desperate episode, but she is not saying much about it. In prison, she is on an extended detox program, receiving methadone as a substitute treatment. She expresses a desire to become drug-free, and to receive support in addressing her trauma. As she shares her story, there’s a quiet hope running through it: that by telling it, someone else might be spared from going through the same.

## Summaries of suffering

One way of describing the common threads across the hybrid life stories of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise is to note how each has been shaped by demanding childhoods: often marked by absent fathers, mothers who, in different ways, struggled to provide a nurturing environment, difficult schooling experiences, serious mental health issues, substance use, experiences of physical and sexual violence, limited economic resources, and strained relationships with the penal welfare system. Such summaries of suffering are familiar within the criminological literature on incarcerated populations, as many imprisoned individuals across the globe share these life circumstances (Agboola et al., 2022; Basto-Pereira et al., 2022; Wolff et al., 2022). Most of the women participating in this study would likely recognize such summary as capturing aspects of their own lives. When reflecting on their pasts, they used words like “neglect of care” [omsorgssvigt], “abuse”, and “psychological terror” to describe what they had endured. Perhaps these words also speak to a broader social vocabulary of harm that many have had to adopt to be recognized, or maybe they felt as accurate terms to describe their experiences. One of the incarcerated women, Julia, uttered a remark which captures both the weight and the weariness of that naming: “Everything you can check off on a list—I’ve been through it. Sexual abuse, violence, psychological violence, physical violence, all of it.” Her comment not only affirms the presence of these harms in her life, but also gestures towards approaching such experiences through assessment, classification, and risk evaluation; lists. This risks flattening and reducing lived experiences to a catalogue of symptoms or discrete events, stripped of emotional nuance or complexity. Julia’s own phrasing mirrors this institutional language: a checklist of suffering, recited with a kind of blunt detachment. Nynne, too, noticed common threads among the women incarcerated at Jyderup: “We’ve all had a troubled upbringing”, she said. Yet she also was attuned to the

limitations of such generalizations, pointing instead to the need to understand how harm is lived and felt for different people. She illustrated this with a reflection from her own life:

I once had a friend for whom the worst thing that had happened was that her parents got divorced! [Merethe: mhm] But I can't say that my problems are worse than hers. I can feel that they are, and rationally speaking, if you laid it all out without emotion, then yes—I've had more problems, and bigger ones. But! You can never really know if my problems hit me just as hard as her parents' divorce hit her.

Nynne's reflection reveals an attempt to relate empathically to the experiences of others—even when, compared to her own, those struggles might seem privileged or small. In doing so, she challenges the idea of suffering as something that can be neatly compared and ranked. While harm may be assessed in scale or severity, she reminds us that its emotional weight and psychological impact cannot be so easily compared across lives. To abstract commonalities through an uncommented summary of suffering risks creating a detached account of the experiences. These events have all been individually lived, carried, and endured. Each experience deserves more than a passing mention, in order to grasp their lived weight. Perhaps they cannot, and should not, be confined to a single sentence at all.

Another of the incarcerated women, Lissi, shared an experience that offers an important insight into how painful experiences might be approached with greater care; both in therapeutic contexts and in writing. She spoke about her participation in *Strengthen and Win [Styrk og Vind]*, a Norwegian-designed rehabilitative course for incarcerated women implemented at Jyderup Prison (Jørgensen et al., 2015). The course is structured around thematically exploring difficult life experiences with the aim of supporting participants to understand how experiences of violence are connected to their substance use and criminalized actions to be better equipped to make future choices (Ibid.: 41). Yet for Lissi, the structure of the program itself became a source of distress. She experienced the pace as too rapid. There was little time to process one painful memory before being pushed to confront the next. She described this through a powerful metaphor: just as one wound was opened, another was asked to be exposed. There was no time to tend to what had already been laid bare.

Lissi: Well, I've also told them that I thought there were too many topics. Too many heavy topics. You see, we attended twice a week, Tuesday and Friday, so on Tuesday, we'd talk about sexual abuse as a child, and then on Friday, we'd talk about all the people you've, uh, lost throughout your life. And many girls who've lived in substance abuse circles and such, they've lost many young people [Merethe: mhmh], and then the following Tuesday, we'd talk about violent intimate relationships and things like that. So, that means three heavy topics in one week. That's just not for me. You talk about it for three hours; there were only three of us in the group, so it was vulnerable, you know.

Merethe: Yeah.

Lissi: Uhhh... Yeah, it was difficult...

Merethe: Yeah, I can understand that.

Lissi: Yeah.

Merethe: When I think about it, I imagine that you—I don't know if this is right—but maybe you only get to talk about all the bad stuff, and maybe you don't...

Lissi (finishes the sentence): ... get to wrap it up again, yeah.

Merethe: Yeah, and in a way, to process it further [Lissi: yeah] so you can...

Lissi (interrupts): Yeah, the way I've described it to them is that... We all carry some wounds inside us, so it's like having a band-aid ripped off... and there wasn't really anyone to help put the band-aid back on.

Lissi's image of a band-aid being ripped off an unhealed wound with no one there to gently help place it back, captures something essential about how we engage with painful experiences. Her metaphor invites us to slow down, to linger with what has been exposed, and to offer care rather than mere exposure. It reminds us that attention alone is not enough. What matters is how we attend to harm; what kind of holding, support, or repair we make possible, whether through relationships or analytical practice. Rather than focusing solely on the accumulation or enumeration of suffering, we might ask: what do we offer in return? What is needed now? What might we bring in terms of cleansing, soothing, and gently reapplying the bandage, so to speak? While the patterns across the women's stories are important—speaking clearly to structural inequality in Danish society and the deeply skewed realities of incarceration—it is not easy to find the right way to name them. Presenting the women's own words of both their personal and shared experiences is one way of resisting a detached or disembodied classification from above. Based on the analytical anchor, we may also consider how these experiences are social harm and autonomy-undermining injustices (Anderson & Honneth, 2005) that deserve attention. The women's formation as subjects has indeed been shaped by sufferings that might have been prevented, alleviated, or at least addressed differently. While this study do not trace how demanding life experiences live on inside each woman, as Nynne's comment points toward, it gestures in that direction by honoring their metaphors, their voices, and their sense of what it means to be seen—and at times, painfully unseen—by the systems and people around them. Lissi's metaphor challenges us to consider what must be offered back now that these wounds have been revealed. The soothing this thesis offers—what is needed now—is particularly taken up in Chapter 7, where the women's longings for public response are articulated and unfolded.

## Expecting external intervention

Throughout their lives, the women have sought external support, hoping for interventions that could provide relief from the social conditions they found themselves in. Indeed, in principle, public welfare institutions (also) function as protective and compensatory mechanisms, stepping in when personal and community resources fall short (McNeill, 2019). The women grew up in a country where, in principle, their parents—and now themselves—had access to a wide range of publicly funded services: mental health support, substance use treatment, parenting programs, universal healthcare, and educational opportunities. As children, they were entitled to public schooling, subsidized daycare, and free medical care. Yet it is precisely in this context—of what commonly is referred to as a welfare state—that the women's stories emerge. It invites reflection to attend to the relationship between this societal formation and the unfolding of these life trajectories. As the women's stories suggest, the mere presence of such mechanisms does not guarantee supporting their flourishing. Perhaps what the hybrid stories guide us to tend how vulnerability and autonomy are not only shaped by policy in the

abstract, but by the relationships and environments we are held within. It is in the everyday textures of care, recognition, and responsiveness that support becomes real or remains out of reach.

Sometimes the penal welfare system intervened at the request of the women themselves or their families, sometimes at the initiative of penal welfare workers. This mirrors findings from a 2018 study, which notes that nearly half of the girls placed in Danish secure institutions had initially reached out to Child Welfare Services themselves (Henriksen, 2021: 213). Many experiences that the institutional responses failed to meet their expectations or address their needs in meaningful ways (ibid.). These accounts resonate with the stories gathered in this study: the women's critique is rarely directed at the nature and quality of the interventions they experienced. If hope is, as Muñoz (2019: 3) suggest, an affective structure geared towards what one anticipates, the women have thus had embodied an element of trust in the possibility of a positive outcome; desiring resources, protection, and stability. Many of the women in this study did not reject public support and intervention; they expected it. For readers unfamiliar with the Nordic context, this may seem surprising. But it reflects a broader cultural and institutional landscape in which the state is widely regarded as a legitimate source of protection and care, and trust in public institutions remains relatively high (Edlund, 2006; Sønderkov & Dinesen, 2016). At the same time, the women's hope may also be considered as not necessarily trustful but instead pragmatic. For many, there were few alternatives. The women experienced that their family and local communities often lacked the capacity or willingness to provide sustained and meaningful support. In this light, turning to the state may not signify confidence in the system so much as a response to constrained choices: to grasp at whatever possibilities might be available.

Many of the then-incarcerated women's relationships with the penal welfare state had evolved from initial openness into disillusionment. Their early hope in public support gradually gave way to frustration and mistrust. When an intervention never happened or played out in way that felt hollow or mis-attuned to their needs, the women felt unseen, unheard, and unsupported. Their emotional responses varied—from anger to resignation—followed by a recalibration of expectations. As unmet hopes accumulated, many of the women stopped anticipating that engagement with the penal welfare system would lead to meaningful or affirming outcomes. Their stance hardened into something more cautious, even strategic: what I will call a kind of *protective pessimism*. This concept, which inverts cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of *cruel optimism*, should be understood as a self-protective orientation adopted by individuals who have learned—through repeated lived experiences—that hope can be highly painful. Being pessimistic, in this light, is not simply cynicism; it is a form of care for the self, a survival tactic in conditions of structural disregard.

The absence of intervention carried a particular weight towards developing such a protective pessimism. But the absence also went further, shaping their sense of self-worth. It was interpreted as indifference, a message that their suffering did not register as significant enough to warrant a response. Anđela voiced this with stark clarity:

(...) they are almost, honestly, indifferent. I've experienced through my own body that the municipality... the state!... doesn't care about us [laughs]. The prison itself, I've also had very negative experiences with the prison.

For Andela, the sense of indifference—the feeling of being overlooked or dismissed—cut deep. Her laughter, perhaps defensive or bitter, illustrates how she speaks from a more guarded place. Similarly, in Emmelie's text, this sense of abandonment is articulated as moral outrage: "She is angry that one could overlook such severe neglect as she was subjected to". Both quotes depict the state and its representatives as bystanders situated close enough to witness harm, yet failing to intervene. In doing so, they highlight the moral responsibility of these systems, not only for their actions but also for their inaction. Inaction raised unsettling questions for many of the women: *Is my situation not seen and recognized by others? Do I not matter enough for someone to react?* This foregrounds an ethics of attention and responsiveness, underscoring the relevance of the theoretical framework guiding this study, which situates prevention as a fundamental political question. Across the women's reflections, a recurring theme emerges—not a generalized distrust of the welfare state, but a specific disillusionment with the forms of recognition and care—or their absence—that they have encountered. Their stories reveal a persistent gap between institutional ideals and lived realities, highlighting the personal costs of this disjunction for individuals' sense of worth, belonging, and possibility.

One way to understand the profound impact of institutional inaction is to consider how, for the women, the failures of the state often feel more abstract or systemic—and perhaps less personally devastating—than the failures of their own families. While many expressed anger toward the state, a smaller group directed comparable rage at family members. Unlike institutional failures, which were articulated as external, family failures were intimate and immediate. Most of the women conveyed ambivalence and conflicting emotions when speaking about their parents or parental figures. About a quarter expressed strong resentment toward a family member, as reflected in Emmelie's poem. Their anger was predominantly directed at the present parent—the mother—rather than the absent or more distant parent—the father. Two poems featured before chapter 8 exemplify this distinction. This pattern may arise because with the mother there was at least an active relationship: a tangible source for anger, pain, and complex feelings. Relational harm is harder to hold at a distance; it lives closer to the bone. In contrast, the state's failures, while consequential, are experienced as more generalized and abstract, creating a different texture of emotional response.

## The municipality as a monolith

When the women shared stories about their experiences with the penal welfare system, their many encounters were most often grouped under the broad label of "the municipality", and less frequently, "the state". Whether the contact concerned employment services, drug treatment, crime prevention, or family support, institutional distinctions rarely shaped how they recalled or narrated these experiences. When the women recounted being placed in residential institutions as children, they often used the names of different types of institutions interchangeably. This suggests that the formal organizational divisions of the municipality—

its specialized units, policies, and professional roles—did not translate into the lived reality of navigating it. Such monolithic naming may reflect a sense of disorientation or even exhaustion in the face of administrative complexity. It may also signal that, when support is urgently needed, internal distinctions between units or professional identities are perceived as irrelevant—or even obstructive. In the Danish context, this phenomenon has been discussed as a form of system complexity, recognized as a barrier to effective preventive work for both service users and professionals (Hjelmar, 2013; Hjelmar et al., 2020; Jensen & Hansen, 2024). When I asked which specific unit had made the decision or what professional role was involved, they either did not know or did not remember. This further points to a broader tendency: penal welfare workers were less remembered for their specific profession or individual character than for their embodiment of institutional power. They were experienced not as distinct agents, but as conduits of a system. This dynamic is evident in an interview with Hanne, who recalled an impactful encounter with a penal welfare worker. Yet even in this case, her memory was shaped not by the individual’s name, title, or department, but how that person acted in the moment; how she responded and related to her.

Hanne: I was on welfare benefits until they said—back when I was 20—that I wasn't smart enough to attend school, and I didn't want to put up with that, so I found myself a job. They said, uh... I wasn't smart enough for school. So I said, “One thing is going to primary school, but now I'm an adult, so I'm more motivated.” Then she said, “No, it said that I only got a 7.”<sup>45</sup> So, I got mad! Later on, when I studied for an upper secondary degree [HF]. I got... all 9s and 10s in the important subjects.

Merethe: So, who told you that you weren't smart enough?

Hanne: The municipality did!

Merethe: Who from the municipality said that?

Hanne: It was those who were supposed to assess whether I should go to school or not.

For Hanne, the statement “you’re not smart enough” came to embody the system’s judgment of her; it was, as she recalled, “the municipality” that told her so. This particular moment was not simply experienced as an isolated comment, but as a distillation of how she was seen; an encounter that stood in for a broader societal assessment of her. Several of the women described similar experiences, where specific interactions with professionals or evaluations of them came to feel representative of a wider system. This kind of almost *pars pro toto* experiencing—where one encounter with one worker in the penal welfare system is registered to reflect the whole—was reinforced by the perceived repetition across encounters. The women experienced that their interactions with penal welfare workers followed a similar pattern, and the individual encounters thus became less distinguishable, fading into a generalized sense of being managed, dismissed, or misunderstood. Lea captured this impression when she reflected, “It's as if, at the municipality, they all have the same mentality.” Her comment illustrates how the perceived sameness across units and professionals contributed to a broader feeling of systemic interchangeability, in attitude and ways of relating. In the chapter to come, I turn to one possible way of understanding this “sameness” by introducing the concept of *impulse*. This concept aims to articulate the directional tendencies that animate and are

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<sup>45</sup> In her records of grades, a 7 on the former Danish grading scale corresponds to a D, a 9 to a C, and a 10 to a B.

enacted across the penal welfare system. By tracing these impulses, we may better grasp how the incarcerated women come to feel met in consistent, patterned ways, even across different bureaucratic settings. Yet, a few exceptions more often stood out in the women's otherwise broad references to "the municipality." The Job Center was frequently named in relation to negative experiences with coercive activation. Psychiatric services, sometimes regional rather than municipal, were also more clearly recalled, particularly by women who had struggled to access treatment. Finally, when a contact person or mentor had made a lasting impression, women often referred to them by title or name. These more personal, relational interactions prompted distinction, as I also turn to in chapter 6.

Raising the horizon, my supervisor Dorthe Staunæs once asked what might be lost in the common translation of the Danish term *kommune* as "municipality"—the English term used throughout this thesis. Etymologically, *municipality* stems from the Latin *municipalis*, referring to a town with "corporate privileges of local self-government" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019). *Kommune*, by contrast, directly translates from the French *commune*, which refers to a "community organized and self-governed for local interests, subordinate to the state" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020). As such the different words point to different imaginaries: the *commune* as a relational, community-serving body; the *municipality* as an administrative, authority-driven structure. In the Danish context, *kommune* names the political-administrative unit tasked with education, health, housing, and social welfare. Although terms like "commune school" [kommuneskole] or "commune library" [kommunebibliotek] are rarely used today, they evoke ideals of shared, accessible institutions—ideals that may, of course, serve different functions. As scholars have noted, the very emergence of the welfare state can also be understood as a project of social pacification, strategically designed to respond to working-class demands in the late 1800s without fundamentally challenging class hierarchies (Sørensen, 2020: 47f). Inspired by Bismarckian reforms, Danish policymakers sought to prevent revolutionary unrest by introducing selective forms of social protection (Ibid.). Drawing on this history, the varied translations of the word *kommune* invite a reconsideration of the expectations, anticipations, and tensions that shape the experiences of the incarcerated women. The women's initial hopeful anticipation of state interventions aligns with the supportive connotations of *commune*, whose primary purpose is to attend to local needs. Their later skepticism and disappointment—shaped by various encounters with the penal welfare system—resonates with the more authoritative implications of *municipality*. In this sense, *municipality* reflects how the penal welfare state was experienced by the incarcerated women, while *commune* reminds us of what might be otherwise.

## The other stories and encounters with the penal welfare system

Not all encounters with the penal welfare system are included in the hybrid figuration presented in this chapter. Some were omitted because they were less indicative of broader patterns, others due to limited empirical depth. Yet, as these accounts still matter, this section briefly gestures toward the fragments and experiences shared by incarcerated women that did

not lend themselves to full narrative development. Taken together, these fragments of life stories from Jyderup Prison underscore the need for heterogeneity in encounters with the penal welfare system, allowing space for stories that do not neatly fit. They hint at other pasts—lived experiences that cast different light on the traits of the penal welfare system and the ways it intersects with harm, prevention, and possibility. They remind us that no typology can fully hold the complexity of people’s lives. Beyond the Anna-Marias, Sarah-Johannes, Uzma-Aichas, and Maja-Louises, there are incarcerated women who...:

... had committed financial fraud from middle- or upper-class backgrounds with a very different path to penalized acts and relationship with the penal welfare system

... became involved in illegal activities through religious fundamentalism, originally in search of identity and belonging

... had an upbringing and led a life similar to most, yet struggled with untreated mental instability or personality disorder, eventually leading to acts violence

... were caught by authorities in Denmark but live elsewhere, involved in illegal activities across national borders out of perceived financial necessity

... in their past were on the other side of the carceral divide as a social worker or prison staff, until their life took a deroute

... were raised in families where illegal activities were central to the family’s structure, serving as a source of income and means of social reproduction

... are not women, but non-binary and (trans)men, yet due to the binary gender division embedded in the institutions of The Prisons of Denmark, are placed in a women’s prison

... are (trans)women, yet due to specific way of doing gender division are placed in a men’s prison

... have family members that have acted as an intervention force and resource, taking them on travels or supporting them in their interactions with the penal welfare system

... had a boyfriend engaged in illegal activities, leading to their conviction as an accomplice despite their claims of not being implicated or guilty

... did not have a common language with me, and I therefore cannot present much on their stories and struggles

... are severely mentally challenged and might not even know that they have committed an illegal act

While the hybrid stories encompass multiple encounters with the penal welfare system, not all of the women I met in Jyderup had experienced such trajectories. Some of these fragmented stories belong to women who lived most of their lives outside Denmark and had little or no prior contact with the Danish penal welfare system before their conviction. Language at times posed a major barrier. Occasionally, fellow incarcerated women stepped in to translate, which offered glimpses into their situations. With one woman, the extent of my verbal contribution was limited to two Bulgarian words—*zdravei* [hi] and *kotka* [cat]—remembered from an Erasmus exchange a decade earlier. Still, this small gesture seemed to matter. She greeted me warmly and offered snacks when I passed through her wing. Exploring how women from

Eastern Europe end up incarcerated in Portugal, criminologist Sílvia Gomes (2018) highlights how their involvement as so-called “drug mules” in international drug trafficking is often driven by the need to support their families amid conditions of poverty (Ibid: 93). These lives testify to global human interdependence and challenge the nation-state focus that continues to dominate much criminal justice research—including this study. These cross-border lives remind us that some pathways to prison in Denmark arise not from domestic policies and institutions, but from global structures of inequality (Franko, 2021; Goyes, 2021; Heimer, 2019) and by the bordered penalties that sustain the Global North (Walia, 2021; Aas, 2013).

There were also those who had grown up in Denmark, but had no experience with specialized units of the penal welfare system<sup>46</sup> prior to being incarcerated. Although abuse and trauma are often central to incarcerated women’s lives, not all had experienced such harm—echoing findings from criminologist Kathleen Daly’s seminal 1992 study on women’s pathways into felony court in the US. A few women stood out, both in how they described themselves and in how other incarcerated women described them, as “different” or “not like the rest.” These women often came from more resourceful socio-economic backgrounds and had been convicted either of financial crimes or of acts of violence committed in moments of emotional rupture. Another group whose stories remain underrepresented in the hybrid narratives includes women living with severe mental health challenges or personality disorders. While Danish law formally considers such individuals unfit for traditional punishment—mandating psychiatric treatment instead (The Prisons of Denmark, N.N)—some women with complex mental health needs are nonetheless incarcerated in Jyderup Prison. Prison staff described the ongoing difficulties in securing transfers to psychiatric institutions, citing long waiting lists and systemic overload. One woman, whose storytelling and behaviour suggested a profound detachment from shared reality, had been waiting for months without adequate support. This situation is not isolated. The number of individuals sentenced to psychiatric institutions in Denmark has increased significantly in recent years (Capital Region Psychiatry [Region Hovedstadens Psykiatri], 2021), correlating with a broader rise in demand across adult and child psychiatric services between 2011 and 2020; by 20% and 33%, respectively (Danish Regions [Danske Regioner], N.N-a). With psychiatric units often operating at full capacity, early discharge has become a practical response to the shortage of beds (Jensen & Hansen, 2024). One national review found that 74% of people who underwent court-ordered psychiatric assessments had received insufficient mental health care in the period preceding their alleged offense (Ahle, 2019). These numbers speak to the hybrid story of Anna-Maria, who was dismissed when seeking psychiatric support beyond medication. This more so aligns with findings that individuals who later face criminal charges often have a history of not being “taken seriously” within the psychiatric system (Møllerhøj et al., 2020).

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<sup>46</sup> Institutions beyond the public school system, health sector, etc.

## The ones who could have been incarcerated

For some of the women, arriving in prison did not feel like a sharp deviation from their life trajectory but rather its logical extension. One woman, who had spent ten years in and out of eight different residential institutions during childhood, put it plainly: “I’m an institution child. Well, it couldn’t really have gone any other way than me ending up here.”<sup>47</sup> Her words carried a quiet resignation, as if the arc of her life had been scripted early on. The possibility of another future seemed remote, perhaps never truly available. Others described similar connections between early experiences and incarceration, but with a more layered sense of their own agency. Lissi’s reflection, which introduced this thesis, sits within a tension familiar to many of the women: between individual accountability and the shaping force of accumulated harm:

(...) And I think, had I processed it [her childhood] earlier, I would never have gone along with the things I’ve agreed to. It’s not like I’m blaming others for it because I’ve made the bad decisions myself... but there’s been a lot of external influences...

Lissi does not excuse her decisions, but gestures toward how unresolved trauma, unmet needs, and systemic neglect create conditions in which her capacity to choose was impaired. This reflection can be understood as emerging from the embodied perspective of social harm—that is, the denial of social resources hindered Lissi to exercise the life choices she now would have chosen (Pemberton, 2015: 3). Psychological and trauma research has long illustrated how unprocessed experiences can manifest through reenactment, withdrawal, or forms of acting out—often continuing the cycles of harm (Borbón, 2022; Denson, 2021; Van der Kolk, 2014). As Louisa reflected, “Everything has traces from your childhood. You can’t really run away from that.” Failing to address past and present harms carries consequences that often ripple across generations. Several women in this study spoke about this intergenerational transmission: how their mothers or fathers had lacked care, support, or protection, and how that absence shaped their own lives. On the other side of the generational line, some reflected on how their own struggles—with substance use, mental health, or instability—had affected their ability to parent. Despite efforts to offer their children something different, many acknowledged the difficulty of breaking these entrenched patterns.

While it may have felt inevitable to some of the women that they would end up incarcerated, this ‘inevitability’ is not natural, but contingent upon the possibilities and hindrances in the currently societal set-up. Other realities could have unfolded. This section creates a brief speculative space to consider who might be incarcerated, and whose stories might have populated this chapter, under different laws and policies. These speculative reconfigurations of Jyderup’s population serve to challenge prevailing narratives about the nature of the “criminal.” They are intended to intervene in the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004) of ‘crime’ and ‘criminality,’ drawing attention to the selective enforcement of law and the uneven recognition of harm. Most women in this study were convicted of visible, street-level harms such as drug offenses or interpersonal violence, which to correspond to the fact that larger-

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<sup>47</sup> Based on my notes, the quote does not have verbatim accuracy.

scale harms committed by corporations, institutions, or states are less criminalized and partly structurally enabled. In line with Muñoz's (2009: 1) proposition that "[t]he here and now is a prison house," these speculative fragments aim to imagine other possible 'nows.' They imagine what the incarcerated population could be if shaped by an alternative political architecture.

Imagine if the creation of laws enabling pollution were itself illegal. At this time of writing, Danish environmental policy includes compensating farmers *not* to pollute; essentially paying them to refrain from contaminating our shared and vital resource: groundwater (Thomsen, 2024). This peculiar arrangement rests on a troubling premise: that farmers possess a right to maximize profit, even through environmental degradation, and that the state's role is to financially incentivize restraint. In such a legal framework, it might be likely that 95% of current and former members of the Danish Parliament would be incarcerated for exactly allowing and enabling pollution.

Or consider another speculative shift: what if the United Nations enforced a binding regulation that no individual could accumulate more than 5 million euros; a sum that remains extraordinary. Such a policy might arise from a recognition that extreme wealth accumulation under late capitalism perpetuates structural inequalities, deepening divides both within and between the Global North and South. Excessive wealth fuels harm: from exploitative labor practices that produce housing precarity, to driving political corrosion and climate collapse; surely in complex and nuanced manners (Pemberton, 2015; Slater, 2013). In this world, tax evasion, offshore banking, and financial manipulations would be seen as systemic forms of harm – highly regulated and in need of redress when committed.

Even without rewriting the laws, the prison population could look markedly different if existing legislation were enforced in ways that did not reproduce classist or racial hierarchies. This chapter then could have introduced you to Lulu-Maj, born into a wealthy, hyper-competitive family, attending elite private schools, receiving private tutoring, and juggling so many after-school activities that she burned out. Despite—or because of—these pressures, she built a highly successful career in the tax department in a major Danish company, which she helped evade millions in taxes. In this alternate scenario, where her white-collar crime would be equally as regulated and criminalized as selling drugs, there could have been many women in Jyderup Prison sharing such stories. While such a short speculative rendering is painted with a simplistic brush, they paint the contours of other possible prison populations.

Of course, these sketches are raw and incomplete. It is important to emphasize that they do not account for the interdependencies that shape how harm is experienced and regulated. Changing a single legal, economic, or cultural condition would ripple across countless others. If we imagine that environmental destruction was addressed with the same urgency as interpersonal violence, then the very foundations of our socio-economic order—its institutions, values, and legal scaffolding—would be reconfigured in order to enable such a change. A transformation of this magnitude would likely shift not only who is held accountable, but also how accountability itself is conceived. Rather than centering on punishment or confinement, such a society might orient toward practices that emphasize collective responsibility, care, and repair. In such a world, Lulu-Maj's story perhaps would not

be part of this study—or at least not from inside a prison. The interdependencies illustrates Garland’s (1990) point that penal institutions are both a product of culture and a force that produces it—‘causes’ as well as ‘effects.’ Moreso, such entangled dynamics illustrate why critical scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004) remind us that abolitionist thought is concerned with “the abolition of a society that could have prisons” (p. 114), rather than focusing only on the prisons themselves. It requires envisioning a different social life altogether—one organized around repair, relationality, and redistribution.

## Concluding reflections

From the vantage point of being incarcerated in Jyderup Prison, the women reflect on lives shaped by repeated and often disillusioned encounters with the Danish penal welfare system. Through the hybrid stories of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise, we see lives marked by structural forms of marginalization: family-based abuse, social exclusion, and long-ignored mental health needs. These women are not passively caught within these cycles of harm, but they struggle to navigate them. As Emmelie writes in her creative text, they “carry around the choices and decisions of others”; a burden that continues to press heavily on many of them. Encounters with the penal welfare system often began in hope. Many of the women had actively sought help or welcomed institutional involvement, anticipating that public systems would offer protection and useful support. And the state did intervene—through institutional placements, benefit assessments, parenting classes, and youth programs—but these interventions rarely led to long-term stability or meaningful flourishing for any of them. Their accounts rarely dwell on the technical distinctions between different penal welfare units or professional roles. Instead, what emerges is a perception of the *municipality as a monolith*; a bureaucratic entity whose internal complexity fades in the face of repeated experiences of being met with the same mentality, often feeling misunderstood, overlooked, or disciplined. Despite contact with a wide range of professionals from child protection workers to psychiatric staff, the women often recalled these as variations on a single, undifferentiated experience. As these encounters repeatedly failed to meet their needs or failed to materialize at all, their anticipation shifted. A posture of hope gave way to one of guarded realism, where lowering expectations became a form of self-preservation; what I term *protective pessimism*. Initially, their orientation toward the penal welfare system seemed to align with the associations carried by the term *commune*; a translation of the Danish *kommune* suggesting cooperation and communal care. With time, however, this anticipation faded, and what remained resonated more with the impersonal, bureaucratic weight of *municipality*. Rather than perceiving the penal welfare system as a series of discrete services, this chapter propose that the women initially considered and hoped it to be an active bystander system. They held out hope that it would act, both proactively and upon request. When it failed to act, the impact was often experienced as existential. Several women described the absence of intervention as a message that their suffering did not matter. Their anger and disappointment stemmed not only from missed opportunities for support but also from a deeper sense of being denied recognition and care.

The chapter closed by enriching the hybrid stories with nuanced glimpses of lives within Jyderup Prison and by speculating on those who might have been incarcerated, had legal definitions, harm conceptualizations, and intervention thresholds been different. This speculative move aimed to denaturalize the narratives of criminalization and interrupt their presumed inevitability; without diminishing the significance of the women's hybrid stories. In sharing the experiences of harm woven through the hybrid stories, this chapter has sat with the tension of how to write without reducing the women's lives to a catalogue of suffering. Lissi's metaphor—of a band-aid being ripped off an unhealed wound, with no one there to gently replace it—served as a methodological and ethical guide. It reminds us that analytical attention must be paired with analytical care—care for how exposure is done, and for what follows. To stay close to wounds is not only to reveal them, but to ask how they might be tended to: with gentleness, with insight, and with imagination. This work of aftercare continues in the chapters to come, where we continue listening to what the women's experiences reveal—not only about what the penal welfare system fails to prevent, but also about the futures they long for and what those longings might teach us about care and harm prevention. However, the next chapter will move deeper into how we can understand the emergence of the penal welfare system, and how this conceptualization may aid us in considering patterns across the hybrid stories.

### **Casper, student and listener of the texts**

Your poems make me think that it could be anyone sitting in that prison. It could be me, my mother, my sister, my partner. They make me think that while the prison and its inmates are locked away, they are by no means excluded from reflection.

They make me think that these people are being treated unjustly, and it makes me consider prison sentences to be profoundly unproductive on a humane and emotional level. They make me think that essentializing, politicizing, and monetizing human identity is utterly reprehensible.

No human being is less human than another.

They make me think about the ones close to them. Of parents and children and friends.

### **Anonymous, student and listener of the texts**

After hearing your poems, I feel a tension in my body—my jaw was clenched, and my arms crossed so tightly that my T-shirt left marks on my skin.

I am frustrated by the duality of the individual who is incarcerated: someone who has suffered unimaginable neglect and loss but has also done something deemed severe enough to warrant punishment. How can one person inhabit both of these realities at once?

I struggle with the duality of someone who is a daughter, a mother, grieving, and curious, yet also punished. Why does this duality frustrate me so deeply, and how do those incarcerated endure a daily life where such complexity might be overwhelming?

I am frustrated by a system that so clearly doesn't work. I am frustrated that we don't take better care of each other. I am frustrated that the most critical professions in our society—social workers, police officers, and more—are not adequately valued. I am frustrated by the lack of compassion between officers and inmates.

I am frustrated that this project has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for your voices to be heard outside the prison walls. I hope you will read this and know that I was here, I listened, and I am here, recognizing that you are here too. You have the right to exist—and to exist in a world where your voices can be heard as clearly as mine.

## 5. Impulses animating the penal welfare system

As the students listened to the women’s creative texts, their reflections reached beyond the words themselves—to the women’s lives, their relationships, and the penal welfare system that structures their everyday realities. One student noted how little appreciation penal welfare workers receive, despite the critical roles they carry out. Another student, Casper, questioned the very premise of imprisonment, calling it “profoundly unproductive on a humane and emotional level.” In a similar move, this chapter turns toward the societal infrastructure itself, transitioning from the hybrid stories introduced earlier to the structural forces that contour them. As this research is grounded in incarcerated women’s experiences of the penal welfare system—supplemented by insights from prison staff—it demands close attention to how this system itself is conceptualized. Building on the introductory chapter’s initial framing of the penal welfare state, the discussion here turns toward a more sustained engagement. It offers a deeper theoretical account of policy as it operates in practice and examines how particular issues come to be constructed as legitimate ‘social problems’ warranting public intervention. Drawing on existing empirical literature, I explore how the penal welfare system comes into being—how it is constituted and enacted as a system in which penalty and welfare are intertwined. In doing so, this chapter provides both a contextual backdrop for the women’s hybrid stories and the subsequent analyses, and a conceptual lens for identifying cross-sectional commonalities. To this end, I introduce the concept of *impulses* to denote the specific, animating forces that orient the penal welfare system toward certain inclinations and responses. By naming and unfolding these impulses, I offer a framework for grasping shared patterns in how the Danish state intervenes and what harm preventive efforts are offered. With this conceptual and empirical scaffolding in place, the chapter returns to the women’s hybrid stories to illuminate how the impulses can be seen to give these encounters their shape.

### Populated policies and prevention practices

The penal welfare system is not merely a reflection of the policies that govern it. Rather, it is a living, populated landscape; inhabited and enacted by a diverse range of workers across prisons, education, probation services, social work, and physical and mental health care. These workers operate within, across, and at times at the margins of institutional frameworks, shaped by their training, professional ethos, interactions with citizens, and the regulatory, economic, and material infrastructures that define their roles. While the mid- and senior-level workers have been named “technocrats” and “bureau-professionals,” (Lea, 2008), workers directly engaging with citizens have been conceptualized as “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010/1980) and “front-line workers” (Durose, 2011). In the Danish context, studies show that many of those working directly with citizens—that is, the people the incarcerated women encounter—are often motivated by a desire to help, repair, and foster change (Thygesen, 2021; Øland, 2008). They do not carry out state policies as neutral functionaries, but also bring their personal conviction, navigating the constraints and possibilities of the system. From the Australian context, Lea (2008) similarly found that public health workers were often driven by a wish to help, describing the world of social service bureaucracy as animated by a certain “enchanted rationality”; a belief in the “magic of intervention” (p. 16). Such enchanted rationality provides a belief in fixing, of reforming lives through targeted programs and preventive strategies and institutional expansion. Indeed, by framing policies and prevention efforts as populated, the notion of the state and the penal welfare system as unified, abstract entities is deliberately unsettled. This kind of anonymized understanding makes it difficult to locate responsibility and raise meaningful critique. Policies are not the product of a distant, faceless state, but are created and sustained by people – situated differently across bureaucratic and institutional hierarchies – who write, interpret, enact, and sometimes contest them in their daily practice. Drawing on Lea (2020), this study understands policies as an ecology; relationally formed, enacted, and thus composed by multiple actors. While the previous chapter showed how the women often describe their experiences with numerous workers and initiatives in a monolithic way, this should not be read as a glossing over of the many specific individuals on the other side of these encounters. Rather, it reveals something important about how the populated and human nature of policy seems to be bureaucratically tamed and obstructed. It speaks to the accumulated experiences with administrative procedures that dominate the interactions, and a pervasive absence of felt personal engagement from penal welfare workers; an issue the next two chapters explore in greater depth.

As we move closer to understanding the formation of the penal welfare system, and how certain conditions come to be recognized as ‘social problems’ or potential sites of social harm that the state seeks to address, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1994) offers a valuable lens. He (1994) conceptualizes the state as a structured space unfolding within a bureaucratic “field of power” (p. 5), where various agents struggle to define and enforce legitimate actions. In this light, what is considered a “social problem,” and what forms of prevention are imagined as legitimate and necessary, are all outcomes of ongoing bureaucratic negotiations and broader societal power struggle. This perspective complements Lamusse’s (2023) argument for conceptualizing the state “as a site of conflict” (p. 95), by noticing how it indeed already functions as such. Building on this, political scientist Carol Bacchi (2009) reminds us that how

a problem is represented shapes which solutions are made relevant and legitimate; not necessarily because they better respond to the roots of the problem, but because they align with dominant representation of what the problem is. The framing of a social problem is thus not a neutral act; it is formative, shaping which interventions seem reasonable, necessary, or even imaginable, while closing off others that challenge the status quo. Political philosopher Nancy Fraser (1989) complements these insights by conceptualizing the struggle over social problems as a staged process and by emphasizing that it is fundamentally a contest over what counts as legitimate human needs. According to Fraser, this struggle unfolds first as a debate over what constitutes a legitimate need and how such needs should be conceptualized; and second, as a contest over which kinds of solutions can or should be enacted to address those needs (Ibid: chap. 8). Together, these perspectives offer a valuable framework for understanding my decision to forego the language of crime and instead center the experiences of harm. The representations of social problems form the ground from where we envision what kinds of solutions are relevant, desired, and possible. Within this framework, it becomes clear that through a variety of practices—across institutional hierarchies and sectors—bureau-professionals and front-line workers participate in framing political goals, qualifying social problems, assessing citizens' cases, and advocating for specific decisions and harm preventive practices. In doing so, they actively (re)produce the institutional landscape and the everyday realities of the penal welfare system.

Viewing the penal welfare state as an ecology shaped by ongoing struggles over which harms and human needs the state should assume responsibility for and how, reveals it as the product of complex, layered negotiations. Given the intimate link between how social problems are framed and how they are acted upon, the Danish Crime Prevention Council's<sup>48</sup> (2009) model: "The Prevention Triangle" becomes highly relevant. The model outlines three levels of preventive work: 1) build-up, 2) preventive, and 3) crime preventive. The build-up level concerns the so-called universal societal structures like education, health, and welfare services that are understood as foundational as robust public systems contribute to human and societal thriving and indirectly reduce 'crime'. The second level, preventive measures, proactively and reactively targets specific "condition, event, or problem" (Ibid.: 3, my translation). The third level, crime preventive measures, focuses on direct interventions aimed at deterring 'criminal acts'. This tripartite model closely resembles criminologists Brantingham and Faust's (1976) influential framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Yet while Brantingham and Faust explicitly argue that primary (build-up) prevention is "the most fruitful" approach to addressing crime (Ibid.: 295), The Danish Crime Prevention Council refrains from prioritizing the levels in their model. One might wonder whether this lack of prioritization risks marginalizing the importance of structural foundations, elevating reactive,

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<sup>48</sup> The Danish Crime Prevention Council was established in 1971 by the Ministry of Justice and the National Police Chief in response to a rise in crime during the 1960s (Danish Crime Prevention Council [Det Kriminalpræventive Råd], 2023). Although its Rules of Procedure (§2) describe it as "an independent, expert council" (my translation), its chair and deputy chair are appointed by the Minister of Justice, and its executive committee includes senior leaders from the National Police and the National Association of Municipalities.

individualized responses to a level of equal significance within the Danish preventive paradigm.

The institutional and policy landscape that this model both reflects and seeks to shape is deeply complex and multifaceted. Governance of penal welfare institutions is distributed across three political-administrative levels: municipalities, regions, and the state (Blom-Hansen et al., 2024). At the state level, responsibilities include the Prisons of Denmark (covering prisons, jails, and probation services), the Courts of Denmark and the Danish Police, including institutions in the Faroe Islands and Kalaallit Nunaat. The five Regions<sup>49</sup> oversee somatic and psychiatric healthcare, while the 98 municipalities are responsible for a broad spectrum of social and coercive welfare service. Although these services are regulated by the same national policies, they differ significantly in both content and organisation, and there is no comprehensive national overview of these variations (Kankaala, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2018). Penal welfare initiatives operate under a range of legal frameworks, including The Service Act, the Child's Act, the Act on Active Social Policy, Public Order Act, the Legal Security Act, and the Criminal Code.<sup>50</sup> These national frameworks are further nested within international institutions, such as the UN and the EU, which influence policy at both state and municipal levels through binding legal obligations as well as soft governance mechanisms.

## Key impulses in the penal welfare system

Research on Danish frontline penal welfare work has demonstrated that although institutions and practices are formally separated across different administrative sectors, they function in interdependent and interconnected ways (Brodersen, 2009; Øland et al., 2023). Conceiving the penal welfare system as a densely populated terrain of policy enactment, I suggest that attending to its *directional modalities* emanating from policy texts, professional conventions, and institutional rhythms alike, can illuminate how harm preventive work is steered. In this section, I therefore introduce the concept of *impulses* to describe the directional forces that move through and animate practices across institutional contexts. These impulses do not dictate action but create inclinations and orientation. This concept draws inspiration from Lea's (2008) observation that, for penal welfare workers "the compulsion to do something to fix the problems of target populations (...) exceeds all other impulses" (p. 16). Her argument portrays the compulsion to act, to intervene, to offer care or correction as an embodied urgency that overrides other impulses present in the field. While Lea does not further develop the notion of impulse, I find it particularly fitting for capturing these directional forces that animate the penal welfare system. By naming these forces *impulses*, I aim to foreground the current drivers that propel penal welfare practices in specific directions; shaping how social problems and harm are understood, how responsibility is assigned, and what kinds of institutional responses are seen as legitimate or possible. These impulses emerge from

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<sup>49</sup> The regions and municipalities do not encompass the Faroe Islands and Kalaallit Nunaat.

<sup>50</sup> Danish: serviceloven, barnets lov, lov om aktiv social politik, ordensbekendtgørelsen, retsikkerhedsloven og straffeloven.

somewhere, but not in a linear or unilateral fashion. Although power is unevenly distributed across the field—with dense concentrations in legislative and bureaucratic centers and in the policy objects that travel from Parliament—impulses are not merely transmitted from the top down. Rather, they are enacted, interpreted, negotiated, and at times resisted by penal welfare workers, those subject to their interventions, and social movements. Impulses call on us to move in specific directions, but can also be resisted, slowed, or redirected. Building on Garland’s (1990) account of how practices and sensibilities co-constitute one another (in his case, how punishment and cultural formations are mutually shaping) we can understand impulses as both emerging from and feeding into broader societal sensibilities in material and immaterial ways. The concept of *impulse* thus provides a useful image to understand the tendency to follow the inclination as well as the resistance required to move against it, and the headwinds faced by those who push for alternative approaches. The concept thus becomes an analytical entry point for comprehending the current harm prevention paradigm and workings of the penal welfare state as well as potential contestations.

Building on three overlapping Nordic scholarly fields—welfare work and citizen encounters, punishment and rehabilitation, and bordered penalty—I have abstracted four impulses that shape current penal welfare practices: 1) Fragmenting social issues, 2) Individualizing culpability and enforcing productivity, 3) Differentiating reactions towards different social categories, and 4) Regulating the population through bordered penalty. Whilst these impulses animate *present* understandings and practices, there are other temporalities at play. Policies and institutions are not invented anew but mutate<sup>51</sup> across time, sedimented through reforms, restructurings, and political shifts. Building on sociologist Avery Gordon’s (2008) notion of *ghostly matters* and Lea’s (2020) reading of policy as hauntological (p. 30), I consider past iterations as reverberating within present-day impulses. These hauntings underscore that the penal welfare state is not static but continuously in flux; moving, mutating, and persistently marked by what came before. Gordon directs our attention to how “repressed or unresolved social violence” (ibid.: xvi) haunts in the present. What surfaces in today’s impulses may thus be remnants of past injustices; old baggage and injuries still not sufficiently reckoned with. The impulses presented below therefore also offer occasional glimpses into the past, appearing as examples of seemingly unresolved social harms.

### *Fragmenting social issues*

An enduring impulse within the penal welfare system is its inclination to compartmentalize life circumstances into distinct bureaucratic sectors. While this tendency is often treated as an implicit backdrop in existing empirical studies, it emerges prominently in the empirical material of this research, making it a fitting place to begin. Instead of responding to the full complexity of people’s lives, the penal welfare system tends to divide issues such as mental health, housing, and substance use into separate administrative silos (Bømler, 2015; Järvinen

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<sup>51</sup> I would like to thank prison ethnographer Andrew Jefferson for introducing me to the concept of *mutation* in thinking about institutional reformation.

& Mik-Meyer, 2004). In practice, this means public services often address isolated aspects of an individual's situation. While such compartmentalization enables professional specialization, it can obscure the interconnections between social problems and harms, leaving individuals without integrated support systems capable of meeting their complex needs. Research highlights that those whose needs cross institutional boundaries are especially vulnerable to falling through the cracks (Jensen & Hansen, 2024), as they must navigate multiple agencies, interpret shifting responsibilities, and advocate for themselves within a patchwork of disconnected systems (Kankaala, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2018). Within single institutions, such as units focused on substance use, professionals often lack the mandate or the tools to address co-occurring psychiatric challenges, despite the high prevalence of these intersections (Mik-Meyer, 2018).

Another example of compartmentalization is the legal divide between interventions appointed under the Criminal Code [straffeloven] and the Social Services Act [serviceloven]. A study of eight Danish residential care institutions housing children placed under both legal frameworks found that professionals did not differentiate pedagogically between the groups (Danish Appeals Board, 2020). Rather, they identified overlapping challenges and support needs across the groups, leading them to adopt a unified pedagogical approach (Ibid.). This echoes longstanding critiques of how welfare and criminal justice systems construct artificial distinctions and problem framings between 'children in danger' and 'dangerous children' despite their shared vulnerabilities (Donzelot, 1979/1977). Such divisions and fragmentations generate legal and institutional splits that can lead to bureaucratic inertia. A study of the coordination of multiple crime prevention initiatives within a Danish municipality demonstrates that this can lead one unit to hesitate in acting—assuming responsibility lies elsewhere—or to duplicate interventions without coordination, resulting in inefficiency (Kankaala, 2015: 158). A study of crime prevention efforts in Ishøj municipality highlighted fragmentation as a central obstacle to effective practice and recommended more integrated strategies that bridge the divide between 'crime prevention' and the prevention of wider social issues (Mehlbye et al., 2012). Notably, this also reveals how 'crime prevention efforts' overwhelmingly target socially marginalized populations where various social problems are often visible, while local governance pays little attention to corporate harm, including financial fraud and environmental degradation.

The impact of this fragmented structure is further compounded by the separation of institutional budgets. Operating under distinct financial constraints, different domains are frequently incentivized to prioritize cost reduction than the delivery of integrated services. (Mik-Meyer, 2018). Research shows that socially disadvantaged groups are often involved with multiple service units yet do not receive the full support they are entitled to (Benjaminsen et al., 2018). In particular, services such as social pedagogical support under the Social Services Act—which offer practical and relational assistance and help individuals navigate the penal welfare system—are frequently underprovided (Ibid: 19). Another common issue arises when municipalities dispute responsibility for homeless citizens who have lived in different cities, strategically avoiding the financial burden of housing and welfare benefits (Mik-Meyer, 2018). These perhaps here-and-now savings (from the perspective of the unit) are however

challenged by studies which show that that holistic, well-funded interventions are more cost-effective in the long run (Okholm et al., 2021).

The challenges caused by the impulse to fragment social issues are, to some extent, recognized by policymakers. In response, recent initiatives designed to foster collaboration across sectors and address these gaps have been termed “holistic-oriented initiatives” [helhedsorienterede indsatser] (Hjelmar et al., 2020; Miller & Haslam, 2021; National Association of Municipalities [Kommunernes Landsforening], 2021a, 2021b). Kankaala (2015) explored one such initiative that brought together five municipal crime prevention units within a shared organizational structure, transforming how practitioners understood their roles. As one penal welfare worker reflected, “If we are to inspire youth to want something else with their lives, we have to inspire ourselves to think new” (Kankaala, 2015: 148). This insight points to a wider paradox generated by the system’s impulse to fragment: institutions often aim to change individuals while remaining rigid in structure. Emerging restorative practices represent another response to these challenges, emphasizing collaborative engagement with social issues and solutions shaped by participation and lived experience, rather than by rigid, predefined procedures. Since 2018, restorative methods have been integrated into all public schools in Albertslund Municipality, providing a framework to address both minor disputes and serious conflicts (Albertslund Municipality, 2023; Felholt, 2024). Since, a head of the middle school department observed that, “(...) when we bring people together and listen to each other, it saves time and effort because it creates more sustainable and long-lasting solutions” (Felholt, 2024, my translation). The penal welfare system’s impulse for fragmentation is thus in dissonance with an emerging force that moves practices towards more organic and interconnected ways of approaching ‘social problems.’

### *Individualizing culpability and enforcing productivity*

Another impulse animating penal welfare work is the drive to individualize culpability and enforce productivity; an impulse that has been further intensified by neoliberal transformations and punitive logics in Danish social services and public governance since the 1990s (Bengtsson et al., 2015; Petersen & Hjelmar, 2013; Rasmussen, 2018; Vitus, 2018). The neoliberalization of social work is visible, for example, in the growing reliance on competitive tenders to privatize public service (Brogaard & Helby Petersen, 2022), a model vulnerable to companies prioritizing cost reduction over quality of care (Enghausen, 2025). Recent revelations of neglect and fraud in privately run residential institutions (Arnfred & Justesen, 2024; Wang & Aagaard, 2025), underscore the concrete dangers of treating welfare as a market commodity. This impulse has more so contributed to a shift in welfare from a near-universal right to a conditional system, in which individuals are expected to prove themselves as “active clients,” demonstrating compliance, effort, and adaptability (Marston et al., 2005). Staff, in turn, are tasked with enforcing these expectations through a “coercive authority” (Ibid.: 149), imposing sanctions on individuals who fail to meet behavioral requirements tied to benefits. Underpinning many services is the taken-for-granted notion that employment serves as both the primary objective and the solution for a variety of social challenges (Abrahamson, 2009;

Andersen & Larsen, 2024; Kvist et al., 2008; Mujinovic, 2024). Mandatory activation policies are, not least, justified as measures to prevent so-called “free riders” from taking advantage of welfare provisions (Larsen & Caswell, 2022: 59). Yet this demand collides with the lived realities of some individuals facing structural marginalization, chronic illness, psychological distress, etc., as it exceeds what they experience as within their capacity (Larsen & Caswell, 2022; Nørup, 2014). Conditionality, in these cases, entrenches rather than relieves such positions. Caught between institutional expectations and the lived realities of their clients, some frontline workers nonetheless continue to engage with “the social and environmental issues confronting their client” (Marston et al, 2005: 154). While this impulse is strongly animating policies, it is subject to critique, and efforts exist to foster alternative practice. A study on six municipalities found that moving away from centralized productivity monitoring toward greater frontline autonomy—allowing workers to co-produce services with the individuals involved—led to support that was more responsive and better attuned to people’s actual circumstances (Larsen & Caswell, 2022).

When it comes to penalized acts, the focus on individual culpability animates politicians to position themselves as protectors through tough-on-crime rhetoric that appeals to public fears (Carvalho & Chamberlen, 2018; Smith, 2023). Criminologist Flemming Balvig already pointed to this shift in 2005, noting that: “[s]ocial deprivation is no longer the common explanation for crime – instead, we speak of lack of control” (p. 180). While post-WWII understandings of ‘crime’ were more attuned to social and economic precarity as shaping forces, recent decades have increasingly centered individual culpability and punitive responses (Balvig, 2005; Fransen, 2021). Despite these shifts in discourse, there is striking consistency in who ends up incarcerated. Most come from structurally marginalized backgrounds, shaped by poverty, families with various forms of abuse, limited education, and labor market exclusion (Christoffersen et al., 2011; Lachenmeier et al., 2023; Mathiassen, 2011; Tranæs, 2008).<sup>52</sup> Incarcerated women, in particular, tend to have even weaker ties to formal employment than men (Lund-Sørensen & Clausen, 2014), and those living with substance abuse are described as being “(...) particularly burdened socially, mentally and health-wise” (Dahl & Pedersen, 2006: 10, my translation). This impulse has shaped material realities through longer sentences, reduced access to parole, and an increased focus on cognitive-behavioral programs aimed at “correcting” individual (Feldtmann et al., 2024; Laursen, 2016; Nilsson & Nagel, 2015). It more so continues to fuel carceral expansion. While the overall number of reported crimes in Denmark has decreased steadily<sup>53</sup> since the 1990s (Denmarks Statistics, 2023), and new annual admissions to prisons have declined since at least 2014 (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024), the total prison population increased. Between 2014 and 2023, the incarcerated population rose from approximately 3,800 to 4,200<sup>54</sup> (Ibid: 18+19). In 2025, 50 new cells opened at Ringe deportation prison; Sønder Omme prison is set to add 200 more cells, and a

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<sup>52</sup> In the absence of official statistics on incarcerated people’s socio-economic backgrounds in Denmark, this argument draws on a range of qualitative and quantitative studies illuminating aspects of their background.

<sup>53</sup> With the caveat that the number has been on a rise the last two years, yet a remaining decline since the 90s.

<sup>54</sup> This number includes those sentenced under the criminal code and special laws. Beyond are 686 incarcerated asylum seekers convicted under immigration law (The Prisons of Denmark, 2024: 6).

new facility in Viborg will contribute an additional 400. Most controversially, the Danish state will rent a prison in Kosovo by 2027, providing 300 deportation-designated cells (Hørkilde & Tidemann, 2025). These expansions—totaling 950 new cells—will accompany a further 1,000 cells proposed under the Government’s (2025b) latest penal reform. This reform exemplifies the system’s persistent emphasis on productivity. As lead negotiator Jakob Engel-Schmidt puts it, “hard [physical] labour” [hårdt arbejde] is proposed as an alternative to imprisonment for those who have not committed interpersonal physical violence, while longer prison sentences are recommended for those who have (Løvkvist, 2025). Given that productivity is often valorized in social policy, it is notable that Jyderup Prison—designed to provide better rehabilitation for women—offers few meaningful opportunities for occupation. The introduction of “hard labour” as a punishment evokes earlier mutations of the Danish prisons. From its outset, incarceration functioned not only as a moral and behavioral corrective but also concerned economic utility and state-building. As historian Johan Heinsen (2018) notes, Danish penal institutions formalized monarch-led penal labor practices that emerged in the 16th century. These institutions were designed to manage so-called surplus labor and to serve both royal and military interests by repurposing the labor of the unemployed (Heinsen, 2018, 2023b). In 1558, the right to apprehend vagrants was even codified into law—those without stable employment or fixed residence (Heinsen, 2018: 13). For the ruling class, those without work were cast as threats to order—figures of social disruption to be contained and put to use (Heinsen, 2018: 12). Though the rhetoric has evolved, control and productivity still haunt and shape incarceration practices today (Goos, 1904; Nilsson, 2017; Shammass, 2017). These dynamics intersects with another impulse of the penal welfare system; the regulation of moving bodies (Ugelvik, 2013), as we will return to.

The impulse to individualize culpability more so extends beyond those legally recognized as responsible; that is beyond adults and youth over 15. In the newly issued Executive Order on the Promotion of Good Order in Primary and Lower Secondary Schools, teachers are encouraged to discipline students through individualized sanctions, such as assigning cleaning duties or initiating rapid school transfers (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2024c). Professionals, however, have criticized these measures, calling instead for increased investment in staff and supportive infrastructure to meet the needs of children and youth (Sohn, 2024). Overall, the impulse to individualize and enforce productivity shifts attention away from the broader context of actions, harm, and social conditions, toward a focus on individual responsibility and performance—an orientation evident across institutions of the penal welfare state.

### *Differentiating reactions towards different social categories*

A further impulse shaping penal welfare practices is the tendency to differentiate responses based on prevailing social categories. This pattern is visible, for example, when citizens fail to comply with welfare regulations, as research shows that individuals of Middle Eastern origin are more likely to be sanctioned or punished than those of Danish origin (Pedersen et al.,

2018). Historian Lea Cecilie Brinkgaard (2023) notes that the drafting of The Children's Law [Børneloven] in 1905 was driven by concerns about 'youth crime' among working-class children, while penal policies from the 1990s onward centers on boys from migrant backgrounds and their parents; particularly those classified as 'non-Western'. This shift underscores how ideas of 'crime' and 'dangerousness' evolve alongside broader cultural and political anxieties. It is particularly visible in Denmark's so-called ghetto laws: a complex of punitive and regulatory measures animated by fear of the second-generation migrant—above all, the young Muslim male from the MENA region (Blankholm et al., 2024; Johansen & Jensen, 2017; Lundsteen, 2023; Risager, 2023). These interventions include intensified policing, heightened scrutiny of parenting practices, potential evictions, reductions in welfare benefits, and restrictions on nursery and school choices (ibid.). Such policies carry significant consequences for the individuals and families they target, shaping their relationship with the Danish penal welfare system through distrust and suspicion toward the motives behind state attention (Birk Haller et al., 2020; Bregnbæk, 2022; Johansen, 2022; Johansen & Jensen, 2017; Perry, 2012).

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on how regulatory and penal systems differentiate in their treatment of girls and women. Henriksen's (2017, 2018) studies on Danish secure institutions reveal gendered patterns in professional understandings of children and young people. Boys are typically framed through a risk-oriented lens—associated with violence, substance use, and criminality—whereas girls are more often understood through a pathology-oriented lens, emphasizing emotional instability, deviant sexuality, and psychiatric fragility (Henriksen, 2017: 684). These narratives may partly mirror present-day gendered realities, but they are also informed by persistent stereotypes. In both instances, they influence practices of care and control, guiding rehabilitative interventions for girls and women toward pathologizing harm and framing it in individualized, psychological terms. Although professionals frequently recognize girls' histories of severe parental neglect and exposure to sexual and physical violence, Henriksen (2021b) found that such knowledge rarely shapes how they engage with or support them. A similar pattern is evident in social psychiatric residential care, where Steno and Holen (2023) found that psychiatric diagnoses frequently overshadow the social roots of young women's distress. Consequently, institutional responses fail to meaningfully address the structural and interpersonal social harms these women have endured. This reflects a long-standing pattern of "unresolved social violence" (Gordon, 2008: xvi) where women's suffering is interpreted as pathology rather than as a response to social harm. Looking back at earlier iterations of the penal welfare system, historian Bolette Frydendahl Larsen (2017) found that Danish government reports from 1911 to 1956 largely framed the so-called problem of "delinquent girls" as a psychiatric concern, whereas "delinquent boys" were seldom subjected to the same pathological lens. When the Danish state assumed responsibility for placed children in 1905, corporal punishment was permitted (Kragh et al., 2015). However, girls over the age of 16 were to be shielded from server corporal punishment and could only be caned in exceptional cases (Ibid). Shaped by prevailing gendered ideas, girls' reformatories were less resourced and relied on less restrictive physical controls than those for boys (Frydendahl Larsen, 2017, 2020). Yet, this did not spare girls from punishment; instead, isolation cells became a frequent disciplinary tool in girls' reformatories

(Jensen et al., 2025). More so, staff increasingly turned to diagnoses of psychopathy in girls to justify demands for specialized treatment and to argue for additional resources to manage these so-called “difficult” cases (Frydendahl Larsen, 2017, 2020). One may wonder how the inflation of such a stigmatized diagnosis has shaped broader cultural perceptions of girls and women. Even today, staff at secure institutions continue to describe girls ‘at risk’ “more complex and demanding than boys” (Henriksen, 2018: 436). Although isolation is commonly viewed as a gentler alternative to physical punishment, its enduring psychological impact is well-documented (Smith, 2006). When institutional harm is less socially recognized, it risks compounding, providing fewer avenues for redemption. It also influences how individuals interpret their own experiences, as reflected in formerly institutionalized women who often describe their treatment as less severe, despite its lasting effects (Jensen et al., 2025).

The notion that girls and women experience “milder” treatment is unsettled when we consider the actual practices of confinement and institutional measures, past and present. Between 1922 and 1983, Denmark had one of the highest lobotomy rates per capita, with 70% of the roughly 4,500 procedures performed on women (Klingsey, 2010; Kragh, 2010). These women were disproportionately subjected to this extreme, pacifying intervention; at times even against their will (Kragh, 2010). Historian Jesper Vaczy Kragh links this to the way women’s behaviors—such as speaking out, swearing, or expressing sexual agency—were viewed as doubly deviant, violating both legal and gender norms (cited in Klingsey, 2010). In this way, gendered expectations were leveraged to legitimize enforced state control. Denmark’s first state-run youth correctional for girls, Vejstrup, confined in 1908-1940 not only girls who had committed crimes but also those deemed “sexually corrupted” or “of a particularly difficult character” (Frydendahl Larsen, 2020: 22, my translation). Likewise, from 1923 to 1961, approximately 500 women were institutionalized on the island of Sprogø, labeled as “feble-minded” or “erotically abnormal” (S. G. Jensen et al., 2025: 24, my translation). As historians Stine Grønbæk Jensen and Sarah Smed (2024) note, “[i]t was the daughters of the proletariat who ended up on Sprogø” (p. 13, my translation), highlighting the intersection of carceral control and class. Crucially, some of these women were not institutionalized due to their own sexual behavior, but because they had been subjected to incest or sexual abuse, while the men who committing it were left unaddressed (ibid.: 14). This historical pattern persists today: girls are still more frequently placed in carceral institutions under social law—due to familial neglect or behavioral difficulties—rather than under the criminal code (Taxhjelm & Frandsen, 2020). As a result, girls experience the same punitive institutional regimes as boys placed there based on the criminal code. While there is considerable overlap between these groups—since criminalization disproportionately affects the socially marginalized—it remains crucial to recognize that punitive responses are often triggered by girls’ social needs. Being placed in a carceral institution may further entrench criminalization, as behaviors like running away or resisting force must be reported to the police (Bengtsson et al., 2025). This raises pressing questions about how caregiving is entwined with criminalization practices, and how this produces specific disadvantages for girls.

The long-standing tendency to frame girls’ behavior as pathological—linking it to emotional instability, mental fragility, and sexual deviance—has been contested but, as I will argue, not

fully replaced. A prominent example of this shift emerged in the late 1990s with the rise of the “wild girls” narrative: marked by heightened media and political focus on violence committed by girls, especially in so-called “girl gangs” (Moesby-Johansen, 2004). This was framed as an unprecedented and alarming development, sparking public debate and moral panic (Hansen, 2016). As a primary school student at the time, I recall classroom discussions prompted by teachers asking whether these “wild girls” were “acting like boys.” There was an undercurrent of anxiety in these conversations: if gender equality meant that girls were becoming more like boys (and therefore more violent) was gender equality itself turning dangerous? Professionals working directly with the girls countered the dominant media narrative. They argued that the heightened attention did not reflect a real rise in violence, but rather a shift in how girls’ behavior was interpreted, reported, and criminalized (Kongstad, 2008; Magnussen et al., 2008; Malmberg & Hansen, 2003). They argued that public responses were improving but remained insufficiently equipped to address these girls’ specific situations and needs, highlighting the need for more gender-responsive interventions (Magnussen et al., 2008). Yet, these calls appear to have gone largely unheeded. A decade later, Mathiassen (2011) noted a continued absence of an “explicit gender perspective” (p. 15, my translation) within prisons, alongside insufficient access to education, employment, and recreational opportunities for incarcerated women. Another decade on, Henriksen (2021a) found that secure institutions still often fail to meet girls’ vital needs. She further notes that staff fatigue in working with girls has become a normalized sentiment, influencing not only staff behavior but also peer dynamics and the girls’ own self-understanding (ibid.). These findings suggest that when girls and women are in the minority within institutional settings, as in carceral institutions, their specific needs are frequently marginalized—a dynamic reinforced by the impulse to pathologize and psychologically frame their behavior. Such framing strengthens individualized regulation while obscuring the broader social contexts that shape the issues they face.

### *Regulating the population through bordered penalty*

As both part of and distinct to the impulse to differentiate reactions towards social categories, there is an increasingly pronounced tendency to sort people into those deemed deserving of support and rehabilitation and those considered deserving of harsher, retributive punishment. Criminologist Mads Madsen (2023) contends that the Danish criminal justice system has become “bifurcated,” punishing people along two divergent tracks. Similarly, sociologist Vanessa Barker (2013), drawing on Bourdieu, characterizes the Nordic states as Janus-faced, wielding care and coercion unevenly. Crucially, this distinction is not merely about correcting behavior or morality; it is deeply entangled with ideas of national belonging. In effect, this impulse operates as a mode of population control. Sociologist Victor Shammas (2024) characterizes Nordic countries as welfare-capitalist states privileging national citizens “while extracting resources, low-cost labor, cheap goods, and financial profits from the global hinterland” (p. 66). This formulation highlights the geopolitical asymmetries that sustain Nordic welfare systems and underscores how the driving forces behind the penal welfare

apparatus extend far beyond concerns for individual well-being. Rather than being guided solely by rehabilitative ideals, the system also serves broader state interests—managing populations, securing borders, and delineating who is entitled to care and who is rendered punishable.

Since the 1990s—and with increasing intensity after 9/11 2001—criminal justice institutions have functioned as mechanisms of border enforcement extending beyond traditional sites of punishment (De Genova & Peutz, 2010). The Prisons of Denmark now manages institutions detaining asylum seekers and migrants who have not violated the Criminal Code (Dahler, 2022; Freedom of Movements Forskningskollektiv, 2018). Recent legislative reforms further blur the line between asylum, migration and criminal law, enabling authorities to move more individuals into criminal justice regimes and restricting pathways to citizenship for non-citizens who transgress the law (Bendixen, 2025). The carceral system thus operates as a central part of what anthropologists De Genova and Peutz (2010) describe as the “deportation regime”, and what criminologist Katja Franko Aas (2013, 2014) terms “bordered penalty”, highlighting how punishment extends beyond imprisonment to encompass state control over who is permitted to remain within national territory. A clear example of this is Denmark’s agreement to rent a prison in Kosovo, designated for individuals sentenced prior to being deported (Danish Ministry of Justice, 2024; Minke & Vanhouche, 2023). The bifurcated criminal justice system also takes concrete form in Ringe Prison, where, since 2018, non-Danish citizens and former Danish citizens have been segregated and systematically denied access to rehabilitation (Schmidt, 2017; The Prisons of Denmark, 2018). While incarcerated people with Danish citizenship are—at least in principle—offered education, therapy, and treatment programs, those without are excluded from such support (ibid.) The 2021 regulatory agreement between the Danish Government and the Prisons of Denmark reveals a clear bifocal logic. It introduces a new security classification targeting “the most challenging and dangerous inmates”—often linked to gang affiliation —calling for increased security and harsher sanctions (Danish Government, 2021: 16, my translation). At the same time, rehabilitation efforts are reserved for those who “fulfill their obligations, take responsibility, and demonstrate a willingness to change” (Ibid.: 24, my translation). This framework marks a divide: some are cast as salvageable and thereby reaffirmed in their national belonging, while others are positioned primarily as punishable and deportable subjects (De Genova, 2002), their exclusion underscored through the rejection of national affiliation. Through this impulse, we can note how retributive justice dominates for the “deportable” and the “challenging,” while rehabilitative justice is reserved for those the state deems salvageable and “willing.” In her study of non-citizen women incarcerated at Vestre Prison, criminologist Dorina Damsa (2023a) finds that the Danish penal welfare state straightforward favors punitive measures and deportation over safeguarding those at risk if returned to their countries of origin. These policies reflect what Arendt (2017/1958) described as the erosion of the “right to have rights,” where the state decides who counts as a rights-bearing subject. Rather than addressing the socio-economic inequalities that underline some criminalized behavior, the penal welfare state’s impulse to regulate the population through bordered penalty can exacerbate these conditions by excluding certain groups from welfare support and subjecting them to deportation.

While the visibility of this logic has sharpened in recent times, it is inseparable from the historical project of state formation. As political scientist James C. Scott (1998/2020) aptly puts it, “the state has always seemed to be the enemy of ‘people who move around’” (p. 1). The roots of Denmark’s carceral system reach back to the penal institution Trunken, established in 1620, where an overrepresentation of migrants was already evident (Heinsen, 2018, 2023a). From 1690 to 1830, impoverished migrant workers, particularly Germans who had been recruited under coercive conditions by the military to support imperial endeavors, were criminalized (Heinsen, 2023a). Often imprisoned for petty theft, their experiences illustrate how early penal practices were tightly entwined with imperial labor economies while simultaneously sustaining structural inequalities (Heinsen, 2016, 2023a).

### Impulses structuring lives

It is through these impulses that the penal welfare state and system emerge as distinct formations; characterized not just by the institutions, but by the inclinations and affective economies<sup>55</sup> that animate them. This is the system, the incarcerated women in this research repeatedly have encountered throughout their lives. When we hold together the empirical research on the penal welfare system presented through the conceptual framing of impulses with the hybrid stories, we can discern patterns previously less visible; how the impulses have animated the incarcerated women’s experiences.

The persistent impulse to *fragment social issues* appears in all hybrid stories when the women have experiences been approached through isolated problems rather than interconnected parts of complex lives. This is especially visible in Anna-Maria’s attempt to seek help within the psychiatric system, only to be told she did not fit into any of the available programs. Her experience reflects a broader structural tendency: rather than systems adapting to the contours of an individual’s life, individuals are expected to conform to rigid institutional categories in order to receive support. This fragmented logic meant that when Anna-Maria was in acute need of care, the system failed to accommodate her. Similarly, in Sarah-Johanne’s case, the welfare system’s fixation on employability overlooked her debilitating experience of chronic pain. Although she received medication, the deeper impact of living with constant pain was left unaddressed. Her eventual decision to use illegal amphetamines can be seen as a form of self-management; an attempt to cope with the physical and social demands placed on her, which the system neither recognized nor supported. We also see this fragmentation in Maja-Louise’s story, where a series of placements in residential institutions ended with her being dropped off at a train station after refusing to become a foster child at age 17. Rather than being met with consistent, relational care, her journey through state institutions was—surely despite intentions—marked by disconnection and abandonment.

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<sup>55</sup> Concept by Ahmed (2004), e.g. employed on matters of punishment by Agathangelou et al. (2008), and unemployment regulation by Pultz (2020).

The impulse to *individualize culpability and enforce productivity* can also be traced across the life trajectories of all the women in this study. Their current incarceration reflects how they have been punished and held personally responsible for penalized acts; acts that, when viewed through a broader lens, often have complex and entangled histories involving multiple actors, institutions, and systemic conditions. Sarah-Johanne's story reveals how the penal welfare state's focus on productivity manifests in everyday life. She described being caught in endless cycles of work-ability assessments, reflecting a system structured around the presumption that anyone who can work, or can be rehabilitated to work, must work. This constant evaluation of her capacity to be economically productive demonstrates how deeply the logic of productivity penetrates welfare practices. In Anna-Maria's case, the impulse to individualize culpability becomes especially visible in how staff at her residential institution responded to her escape attempts. While Anna-Maria reflected that these acts were not simply rebellious, but a way to test whether the pedagogues truly cared about her even when she was 'difficult', the staff instead responded with excessive force. Their reaction suggests a failure to recognize the emotional and relational dimensions of her behavior, opting instead for control and punishment over understanding and support. A similar dynamic is present in Uzma-Aicha's account. She experienced the police presence in her neighborhood as a method of surveillance and reminder of potential retaliation. At the same time, she did not encounter professionals who took an interest in her well-being or attempted to understand the underlying causes of her actions. This mirrors the systemic tendency to address harm through individualized responsibility

Perhaps somewhere between the impulse to fragment social issues and the impulse to individualize culpability and enforce productivity, some of the women were caught in a psychological dilemma of loyalty. The hybrid story of Maja-Louise illustrates how, as a child in a household marked by instability and harm, she longed to be acknowledged but struggled to disclose what was happening to caseworkers. In Anna-Maria's case, her mother explicitly warned her not to speak to welfare professionals, framing any engagement with state actors as betrayal. In both stories, silence became not only a form of protection for the parent but also an expression of necessary familial allegiance. These accounts reveal a deeper structural dilemma: they show how trust and fear are profoundly entangled in interactions with the penal welfare state. Withholding becomes a strategy to evade punitive forms of state control. If public services operated less through centralized authority and more through co-creation with those directly affected, it might not have been necessary for Anna-Maria's mother to offer that warning.

Uzma-Aicha's experiences with the police also reflect the impulse to *differentiating reactions towards different social groups*. One mechanism of this differentiation involves both place of residence—such as social housing areas labeled as “ghettos,” where one of the criteria is the proportion of “non-Western” residents and where police presence is notably higher—and the overall racialization of black and brown people. It is telling that police were far more present in her life than in the lives of the white women in this study. As she recalls, this pattern of racialized scrutiny began long before her imprisonment—in schools and other welfare institutions, where she and her peers were disciplined more harshly than their white

classmates. Her story reveals not only the racialized reach of the penal welfare system but also a lifelong experience of being seen as less deserving of care and more easily subjected to punishment. Turning to gendered differentiation, we may recall how Maja-Louise's experience of incestuous abuse was understood and handled within the residential institution. Much like what occurred a century ago on Sprogø—where women who had been sexually abused were nonetheless institutionalized as “erotically abnormal” and confined for years (Jensen et al., 2025), it was Maja-Louise's sexuality that was problematized while her experience of sexual abuse – in her experience – was not attended to. Rather than allowing her to gain access to knowledge about her body and sexuality by attending sexual education classes, staff believed it was better to shield her from such topics, fearing it would exacerbate her already “problematic” sexuality. This reflects a persistent anxiety around female sexuality, and a harmful misplacement of responsibility upon sexual abuse. The general pathological and psychological approach towards the harm experienced by girls and women, are also present in the hybrid stories. In the next chapter, it will become even clearer how.

The impulse to *regulate the population through bordered penalty* becomes sharply visible in the heightened criminalization faced by Uzma-Aicha; and even more starkly in the conditional deportation sentence currently hanging over her. Although born and raised in Denmark, she is subjected to a different set of consequences than those faced by women like Sarah-Johanne, Anna-Maria, or Maja-Louise, whose families have no immediate (‘non-Western’) migration background. For them, punishment may take the form of imprisonment or other coerced conditions, but never expulsion. Uzma-Aicha's possibilities to live and remain in Denmark is rendered precarious, underscoring how the criminal justice system not only addresses individual acts but also functions as a mechanism for defining the boundaries of belonging. Uzma-Aicha's story illustrates the bifocal nature of the carceral system: individuals who have lived their entire lives in Denmark are treated differently if they lack citizenship. For her, this takes the form of the constant threat of losing residency and being deported to a country she barely knows. This institutionalized bifurcation both marginalizes and undermines the legal and social standing of deportable non-citizens, for whom the impulse is to prioritize exclusion and punishment over inclusion and rehabilitation.

## Concluding reflections

This chapter has outlined a conceptual understanding of the penal welfare system, demonstrating how policy-making, intervention, and harm-prevention practices are continuously enacted and reshaped by those within the system. This perspective emphasizes that the institutional landscape is not static but is constantly reconfigured through processes of contestation, negotiation, and adaptation. These negotiations shape how society defines social harm and human need, and, crucially, how the state positions itself in responding to them. What becomes visible, actionable, or overlooked in public interventions is determined by these contested definitions, which in turn frame what are perceived as appropriate solutions and responses. Accordingly, this study approaches ‘penal welfare’ not as a fixed structure but

as a terrain of ongoing negotiation. From this vantage point, scholarly contributions—including this one—carry the potential, whether modest or significant, to influence these negotiations and participate in the system’s continual transformation. Over time, such shifts may even warrant renaming the system itself, as new impulses and orientations emerge to become its defining forces.

From this analytical foundation, the chapter traced four key impulses that shape the present workings of the penal welfare system. While not without contestation, these impulses represent prevailing orientations that shape how institutions respond to and manage social life. Each is captured through a verb—1) *fragmenting* social issues, 2) *individualizing* culpability and *enforcing* productivity, 3) *differentiating* reactions towards different social categories, and 4) *regulating* the population through bordered penalty—to emphasize the directional force and action they incite. Although these impulses emerge from a literature-based analysis of what animates penal welfare institutions, they are inseparable from, and reflective of, the broader political architecture of the Danish state. It is through these impulses that the penal welfare state and system coheres and becomes legible as such, warranting its naming as precisely *penal welfare*. Identifying these impulses reveals the structuring forces that run through the hybrid stories of incarcerated women’s encounters and entanglements with the penal welfare system. As the anonymous student who listened to the incarcerated women’s creative texts notes, the women present themselves as complex subjects, with multiple identities and dimensions to their being. Yet this complexity is often flattened by the dominant workings of the penal welfare system, which tends to fragment social problems, individualize responsibility, and—particularly in the case of women—pathologize mental struggle rather than recognizing it as rooted in a structural and relational context.

### Questions for the judge in my trial:

1. Do I really deserve to get 8 months for something I wasn't part of?
2. Why were you late that day?
3. Did I receive this sentence because you were frustrated by:
  - a. Your delay?
  - b. Your secretary being absent?
  - c. The computer system not starting?
4. Didn't you feel like going to work that day and took it out on me?
5. Did you actually listen to what I said?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Partially
6. Did you sentence me simply to take out your frustrations because you were having a bad day? So that you wouldn't be the only one having a rough one?
7. To you, was I just another person in line to be stamped and given a one-way ticket to prison?
8. Did you decide, in just a few seconds, whether "she did it or not"?
9. Are we actual people to you, or merely case numbers?
10. Why did you only take 3 minutes to decide something that destroyed my life?
11. Did you consider that I too have a life and a family, who you've punished along with me?
  - a. Do you have a family?
12. Have you ever thought that what you did to me was unjust?
13. Don't you have a guilty conscience? Can you live with it?

- Laura

## 6. Depicting the penal welfare system

The incarcerated women I spoke with were accustomed to being asked numerous personal questions by penal welfare workers assessing them and their situation to move forward with their cases. From these and many other experiences, they often carried many questions about the professionals overseeing their lives and the penal welfare system as a whole. Questions that seldom were asked and answered. Preceding this chapter is a staging of one such set of questions, posed by Laura to the judge in her trial. Through these questions, Laura not only seeks clarity but expresses a longing for recognition and affirmation of the relationship structured between them. She questions if the judge understands the magnitude of his verdict. To him it might be a brief moment in a long work life, but for her and the ones in the receiving end, his verdict is a decision with profound consequences. Her pointed question, “Are we, to you, actual people, or merely case numbers?” resonates deeply with many of the women I met, reflecting a broader sense of disillusionment with the system and a longing to be relationally affirmed.

While the hybrid stories painted the incarcerated women’s life trajectories entangled with the penal welfare system in broad brushstrokes, and the previous chapter framed its continuous formation conceptually and presented its current animating impulses, this chapter focuses on the recurring patterns in their institutional encounters. These patterns warrant closer attention, as they reveal how institutional dynamics are enacted and experienced. Drawing from interviews with and empirical notes on the interactions with both incarcerated women and prison staff, this chapter brings their perspectives into dialogue. It traces recurring dynamics through three thematic sections: 1) The constraints of bureaucratic procedures, 2) The (im)possibilities of supportive relationships, and 3) The failure to address social harm. A central analytical focus is how incarcerated women and prison staff make sense of the penal welfare system’s ability—or inability—to respond meaningfully to varying situations and lived experiences of social harm. Yet, we will not go deep into each individual’s story, but rather maintain a collective narrative focus, with the hybrid stories serving as a guiding contextual reference to the incarcerated women’s lives. In this sense, this chapter aligns with a classic zemiological focus on how institutions actively produce, passively tolerate, or attempt to

mitigate or transform social harm (Canning & Tombs, 2021a; Pemberton, 2015). Each theme is explored by detailing the repeated scenes and reflections in the empirical material and is summed up by displaying the key arguments. From these descriptions, the figure of *The Engaged Professional* is introduced: someone who has played a crucial role in the women's lives by acting with personal commitment, empathy, and flexibility. Taken together, these accounts offer a grounded view of the penal welfare system from the social position of the then-incarcerated women. This perspective brings us closer to understanding how the current harm prevention paradigm in Denmark operates, and where it falls short.

## The constraints of bureaucratic procedures

Both incarcerated women and prison staff describe a system where bureaucratic procedures overshadow support that is often conditional. Continuity, stability, and safety were words commonly used by prison staff when highlighting the core qualities of external support structures they believe would match the women's needs, and they noticed how administrative frameworks often inhibit the possibilities to enact these qualities. On their end, they expressed frustration with the narrow room for professional autonomy and relational presence. Staff member Anni, for instance, described the strain of working in a structure that "loves to put them [the incarcerated women] in boxes" and requires her to "just be able to fit them into these boxes." From the other side, the women often spoke of feeling reduced and depersonalized. Lea explained how administrative rigidity translates into scripted, impersonal interactions:

(...) It's like the municipality has become very... autotuned. "*We have the same sentence we have to say, we have to...*" You can almost hear it when you come in! And then you don't get beyond the four questions. So, it's just either-or: "*What's your category?*"

When staff are "autotuned" with a multitude of 'have to's,' as Lea describes, the potential for genuine, responsive relationships diminishes. This section of the chapter begins by examining the women's experiences of the emotional and practical toll of seeking support within such a system. I explore how the institutional priorities of ensuring employment and sobriety often become barriers for the women. As a result, what they identify as their needs from the penal welfare system frequently diverges from what is actually offered. Finally, I turn to how procedural dependencies across bureaucratic systems can create ruptures in incarcerated women's lives. This section concludes by considering how the penal welfare system, in its rigidity, enacts what Berlant (2014) might term a withholding of compassion: making support conditional on compliance, even when such compliance feels unachievable to the women themselves.

### *It takes resources to ask for resources— and to sustain the support*

Seeking support from the penal welfare system was often experienced as burdensome for the women. For many, the process of asking for help felt overwhelming—at times even out of

reach—because it demanded resources and administrative competences in moments where resources were low. Trine expressed this burden vividly when recounting her attempt to apply for a mentor during a period of acute stress:

Trine: (...) If I went to the municipality and asked for a mentor, as I did, it was: "Why do you need that?" "Well, okay, then I would like to proceed under that disability paragraph something 101, or whatever it is, paragraph 100 because I am so ill"... Then they let me, while so ill, send in all sorts of papers and scan and so on. They know perfectly well that I can't do that. (...) They stress you even more with all those papers and scanning and documents and... I should have a contact person from the municipality...

Merethe: ... who takes care of it?

Trine: ... who could help me. Yes! And I asked for that, but I wasn't unwell enough for that.

For Trine, having to complete, scan, and submit multiple documents while already struggling felt unmanageable and actively distressing. Although she was able to name a relevant legal framework aligning her request with system's proceedings, this did not ease the process. Ironically, her attempt to apply for one form of support (a mentor) created a need for another form of support (a contact person) to support her with complying with the demands of the application process. Yet because she was not assessed as "unwell enough," she did not qualify for such assistance. Her remark that professionals "know perfectly well" she could not manage the process hints at a deeper critique. Trine believes the penal welfare workers knew she was unable to meet the requirements yet still asked her to do so because the proceedings demanded it. In that way, she experienced the professionals as showing greater loyalty to bureaucratic procedures than to a more responsive practice that would adapt those to an individual's situation.

Sanne, a staff member, described a pattern in which those perceived as "easier" to help are more likely to receive support, while those with more complex struggles often fall through the cracks. She observed how resources tend to go to those who are already relatively well-positioned: "It's those in here [Jyderup Prison] who are already resourceful who, um... get it all (...)." She attributed this dynamic to two interrelated factors. First, women who she considers more "resourceful" often have the capacity to act proactively; keeping track of rehabilitation programs and signing up for activities. Second, and perhaps more critically, Sanne noted that some staff are hesitant to include "the troublesome ones, those who are mentally vulnerable" in activities because supporting them requires more time, energy, and emotional labor. While this is understandable on a human level, and indeed studies have documented how working in prisons and with social work is taxing on staff (Andersen, 2018; Van Aerschot et al., 2022), it creates a troubling pattern: those who need the most support become deprioritized because meeting their needs is more demanding. Louise, another staff member, observed that this dynamic continues beyond the prison context, pointing to the publicly funded organization High:Five (n.n.) as an example—an initiative collaborates with companies to facilitate employment opportunities for people with prison sentences. According to Louise, the organization tends to prioritize formerly incarcerated individuals who are already relatively capable in the job market: "The problem is, they [High:Five] don't take those who have problems. They take those who already are able." This suggests that access to support at times is shaped more by perceived manageability than need.

Asking for help has not just been administratively demanding but emotionally depleting for Emma, another incarcerated woman. During a period marked by her father's death, substance use, and a sense of disorientation, she experienced how every attempt to contact the municipality required her to begin anew, repeating her story from the beginning each time:

Emma: Every time I had to go, I had to go to an assessment interview, and then to another interview, and then we talked about the same thing; what I wanted...

Merethe: Is it new people every time?

Emma: Completely! It was never the same person. I mean, it was always new, new, new! So again, telling my story one more time, and one more time. It was just exhausting.

Emma experiences engaging with the municipality as being caught in a loop; constantly having to reintroduce herself, re-narrate her life, re-justify her needs. Being passed between caseworkers produced a sense of neglect, as she was repeatedly asked to disclose personal details of her situation, while a lack of reaction of the system's side. Among the recurring requirements placed on her was participation in job training programs, designed to prepare her for future employment. For her this felt detached from her current reality and struggles. When I asked her what she thought the intention behind the job training was, she paused before responding:

Well, of course, I can understand the job training—that you need to learn to get up early, show up on time, how it is in a workplace and stuff. But... if you already have difficulty getting up, then it's mega hard to suddenly have that drive, the motivation for it. The only reason you do it is actually to get social benefits! And that's just not motivation enough!

Emma did not reject the value of job training in theory but described a disconnect between its requirements and her reality. Getting up in the morning was already hard enough for her. Showing up became something she forced herself to do, as a way to avoid losing her benefits more than genuinely feeling motivated for the job training. Emma's account speak of how Danish active welfare policy since the 1990s has hinged on expressions of motivation and willingness to work, even from those uncertain of their ability (Carstens, 2002). Over time, the pressure took a toll. She began feeling physically unwell before leaving home: nausea, vomiting, fever-like symptoms. Eventually, she could no longer maintain participation. The response from the system was swift:

And then they, then they let go of you again. Uh, then it's just like: *“Well, you don't want to. Well, then we'll just take the social benefit from you.”* Uh, and then it's like: *“Well, maybe the workplace wasn't right for me”* And I mean, listen to what the young person, or what, I mean, each employee, I mean, each citizen says! Listen to them! Get more remedies in. Really, do something.

Her frustration highlights a recurring issue the women faced with the penal welfare system: how quickly they are deemed non-compliant and subsequently excluded from support. When Emma could not keep up with the system's demands, her social benefits were cut, leaving her to find alternative ways to sustain herself. She maintained that things could have been different if the penal welfare system had listened to what she had difficulties with and adapted its approach to help her succeed. Having already endured the bureaucratic exhaustion of telling her story repeatedly to different caseworkers, she opted out of the system entirely and turned to selling drugs. For her, the effort required to seek public support outweighs the perceived

benefit of receiving it. Drug dealing, Emma explained, offered a sense of stability and control. Unlike the constant administrative hurdles of the municipality, drug dealing required no assessment interviews, no shifting caseworkers, no paperwork; mostly just direct dealings with customers. It also offered Emma something else: a sense of competence. As she put it, “I was very focused on quality, and customer service, and was always there for people.” Staff member Anni recognized such retreat from the penal welfare system as a pattern. Some women, she noted, turned to illegal activities after being worn out:

(...) some have given up on that because it can be a bit complicated and tricky to get... support from the municipality; if you don't show up for what you're supposed to and such, right? So, you're without any form of livelihood. And then I can, then I can understand that the only way forward is to commit new crimes, right... if you can't get money from anywhere.

The matter of ‘needing to show up’ is mentioned by Anni as a reason why social services is experienced as out of reach for many of the women. Other studies have similarly highlighted this discrepancy between individuals’ lived realities and the system’s expectations, a tension linked to the broader policy shift toward demanding individuals to become “active clients” (Mik-Meyer, 2018; Nørup, 2014). When individuals fail to meet these procedural expectations, they risk losing access to essential resources—such as financial support, relational care, or training opportunities—through which illicit means may come to appear as a viable way to sustain a livelihood. The expectation to enact a specific “workers identity”, show up repeatedly and punctually, demands a level of planning, persistence, and emotional stability that perhaps should not be assumed for all. Given that many of these women have suffered autonomy-undermining injustices (Anderson & Honneth, 2005), the very capacities often assumed to be prerequisites for support may, in fact, be those that need to be nurtured.

### *Job and sobriety first*

The women’s experiences repeatedly reflected the penal welfare system’s push to enforce productivity. Tina, for instance, described feeling this pressure intensely while coping with a deep depression following the stillbirth of her child. The National Association for Infant Death [Landsforeningen Spædbarnsdød] helped her navigate the municipal system to secure nine months of maternity leave to begin to process her loss. As those months came to an end, she approached her local citizen service with cautious openness: “So, shouldn’t we try to begin getting me out of bed again?” Instead of a conversation or gradual plan, she was told to report to the Job Centre the following Monday. Tina did not experience any space for dialogue: “They were completely cold,” she recalled. “And it was... inhuman.” For Tina, the system’s response added further harm to an already fragile moment. To Sofia, the penal welfare system’s impulse to enforce productivity left her feeling stuck in a cycle where “nothing has moved forward.” Living with chronic pain, she repeatedly underwent work ability assessments that yielded no conclusion. As she put it, “when I haven’t been able to work as much as they wanted me to, then I’ve just been left to stay home.” Camilla described being caught in a cycle of constantly changing caseworkers, many of whom never reviewed her files, leaving her situation at a

standstill. Yet each new caseworker would urge her to find employment, as she recalled them saying over the phone: “I’m your new caseworker. You re-e-ally need to get going with something now.” As such, while the activation policies are intended to decrease peoples’ dependency on welfare benefits, some of the women experienced a sense of being stuck in dependency within the system, as earlier research has also highlighted (Andersen, 2020).

According to Trine, the penal welfare system’s insistence on employment overlooked her needs and capacities. She recalled a municipal meeting in which she expected to discuss available support, only to find the workers focused almost exclusively on her return-to-work timeline. The experience elicited a strong physical reaction for her:

Trine: They talked a lot about WHEN I WOULD START WORKING, where I just... I went out and threw up, I actually threw up at the first resource, uh...

Merethe continues: Because you had such a physical...?

Trine interrupts: I felt so bad that I went out and threw up, and I cried. (...) I went out to throw up because I felt so bad about them just talking about me just working, and maybe having an inhouse support [bostøtte] for my children. That wasn't what it was about. My children function and thrive and are doing well... There's one for each team, right [Merethe: mhm]. They just sit there, like 11, uh, in the panel, looking at you. It's terrible.

Trine described an acute bodily reaction, highlighting just how overwhelming she found the system’s insistence on employment. She felt the meeting was not genuinely about exploring what she needed to be well and functional; rather, the focus remained firmly on her returning to work. Being scrutinized and “talked about” by a large panel of professionals intensified her sense of being pacified rather than genuinely heard in decisions about her future. The future they envisioned focused primarily on employment, which for her felt disconnected from her present experience of stress. While the workers suggested in-home support to assist with caring for her children, Trine felt this overlooked the core issue. Even as she tried to articulate her concerns, she found no space for meaningful discussion. Trine described that the caseworker afterwards “had written in my papers that I wasn't participating, and that I left several times during the meeting.” This erasure of the context behind her leaving suggests that the professionals overlooked how bureaucratic procedures themselves contribute to distress, and thus framed her absence solely as individual non-participation.

Lea faced similar pressure to engage in employment programs before she felt ready. In discussions with caseworkers about a job training program, she resisted, insisting that her unresolved personal issues needed to take priority: “Then I tried to say: ‘I can’t just do it! I have things inside me that I need to work through... So you can’t just send me over there!’” For her, focusing on her work capacity felt premature; it overlooked the more urgent need to process inner pain. Anna, who came from a relatively resourceful background, was able to secure a longer-term sick leave, freeing her from immediate occupational demands. She had clearly told her caseworker: “Listen, I really don't feel ready to work at all!” An early loss of a close friend in a traffic accident had reverberated through her social circle, contributing to substance use and engagement in illegal activities. She had also endured a series of violent romantic relationships with men, which left her depleted. What made a difference, she explained, was being granted “calmness and time.” It was during this pause that she “became stronger,” as she described it: “Because, little by little, I found myself again.” Keeping the

hybrid stories in mind, and considering the profound social harm many incarcerated women have experienced, it is understandable that they often felt healing—not work—needed to take precedence for a time. When the women emphasize the need to focus on mental well-being as a pathway to building capacity, they challenge the policy tendency to treat work as the ultimate goal and solution to social problems (Abrahamson, 2009; Andersen & Larsen, 2024; Kvist, Pedersen, & Köhler, 2008; Mujinovic, 2024). They also indicate that the demand to work has, at times, worsened their condition, potentially placing them even further from employment.

Beyond centering productivity, several women described how sobriety was sometimes treated as a precondition for receiving support. Sissel questioned the logic of expecting people to abstain from drugs before being offered assistance. She explained that this expectation contradicts her lived experience of what it actually takes to stop using substances:

(...) what I've learned most from my addiction is... You can't just remove the addiction; you also need to replace it with something else [Merethe: mm], something else you can do or be passionate about. Because boredom and restlessness are some of the worst things for an addict, right [Merethe: mm]. Um... Whereas they [penal welfare workers] *expect* you to be clean, and then you should be clean for a while, and *then* an offer is presented, right?

Sissel described that, for her, it would be more meaningful to start by replacing substance use with engagement in something she could be passionate about. She explained that this reflected a fundamental need to: “have something to live for, something to be a part of, and something that gives meaning to your life, right?” Many of the women described using substances as a form of self-medication to manage overwhelming mental and emotional states, which affirms prior studies with similar groups (Jensen & Hansen, 2024; Mathiassen, 2015a; Skov et al., 2022). For Sissel, what she needed was not sobriety as a first step, but connection, purpose, and belonging, which could support her in no longer desiring substances. Starting from the premise that people need something meaningful to live for, Sissel’s approach to substance treatment would prioritize engagement, purpose, and belonging over immediate abstinence. The logic being that when life feels meaningful, when there is community, there is less desire for escapism and emotional stimuli. Yet Sissel, along with several other women, experienced that the penal welfare system often requires sobriety before providing support for other improvements in their lives.

More specifically, several women encountered a barrier when being drug-free was made a requirement before accessing psychiatric assessments—and thereby, potentially, legal medication or other forms of support aimed at improving their mental well-being. While this rule is not formally stated in policy, and some regions, such as Central Denmark Region [Region Midtjylland] (n.n.), explicitly advertise services for individuals with concurrent substance use and mental health challenges, the organization Better Psychiatry [Bedre psykiatri] (2020b) has noted that this is often the message people actually receive. A survey among 400 relatives of individuals living with both mental health challenges and substance use revealed that half had witnessed their family members being turned away from psychiatric services (Better Psychiatry [Bedre psykiatri], 2020a). While requiring sobriety may enable professionals to make more accurate diagnoses—avoiding confusion between symptoms of substance use and underlying conditions—it also creates a barrier. The demand for sobriety posed a difficult paradox: the women were asked to relinquish the very tool they had relied on

to cope with mental challenges—effectively worsening their mental state for a time—before they could access support. For some, this procedural demand felt deeply intrusive, as self-medication had long been part of their inner life. As Emma put it:

(...) It's that thing about: "Well, you're using, so we can't, uh, give you an evaluation. I mean, we can't assess you". Uh, and that thing about suddenly having to say: "I'll stop, okay: Now I'll stop. Now I'll stop smoking, now I'll stop taking drugs." It was kind of like: "It's a part of me; you shouldn't take that from me" kind of, "Go away!"

Emma experienced her drug use as something deeply intimate. This shaped her response to the psychiatric system's demand for sobriety before any assessment could take place. She described how her "popcorn thoughts," as she called them, became easier to manage when she smoked a joint, allowing her to concentrate and feel more settled. Emma, like others, felt trapped: she wanted help to cope with her mental state—support that might eventually enable her to stop using substances—but such help was only made available once she had already quit.

### *What is needed and what is offered*

Dorthe, an incarcerated woman, described a dissonance between what the penal welfare system *offer* and what people actually *need*. We spoke one afternoon in the computer room where she was searching for social services, scanning through the digital portals with ease. Trained and formerly employed as a social worker, Dorthe now found herself on the other side; a person applying for support. She frames this shift as having been through a "breakdown" which she attributes to her longstanding pattern in romantic relationships:

I have this attraction for psychopath-men, wanting to help them and stuff... And I just did not have the capacity to know and set my own boundaries. They could fuck me up and fuck me from behind and I would ask for more! Then at one point, I just broke down, and I did not know how to get up. This is when you discover that the system does not work.<sup>56</sup>

Dorthe offered her story in broad strokes with a mix of candor and restraint. When I asked what she meant by "the system doesn't work," she responded: "The thing is that they don't listen. If you are a drug user, if you need some help, they will offer you all kinds of stuff, but not what you need." As a drug user, Dorthe did not experience being truly listened to or given access to the kind of support she sought. She was offered various measures, but not what she believed she needed. Dorthe's transition to being a recipient of social services exposed a different reality. This is when she came to the verdict that "the system does not work".

The distinction between what is *needed* and what is *offered* emerged not only in conversations with incarcerated women but also among prison staff. Several staff members expressed concern about the gap between what they were expected to deliver and what they believed the women actually needed. Alex<sup>57</sup>, a teacher at the prison school, described this tension in relation to The Prisons of Denmark's insistence on standardized testing. They spoke of a push

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<sup>56</sup> Based on my notes, the quotes do not have verbatim accuracy.

<sup>57</sup> As the profession is central to the account, a gender-neutral name and pronoun is chosen to ensure greater anonymity.

to implement formal screenings and assessments as soon as the women enters the school. For Alex, this approach risked reinforcing the insecurities many women already carried from previous learning experiences. “It would set them up for failure,”<sup>58</sup> Alex explained and so they refused:

They [consultants in The Prisons of Denmark] want me to screen and use tests all the time. They don't understand what's happening here! I simply refuse! They can come and meet the women here if they want. But they never do.

Alex believed the consultants in the Prisons of Denmark were too detached from the daily realities of the women, perhaps unaware that the focus on standardized tests clashed with actual needs. According to Alex, the pressure to administer tests is driven by political demands for measurable results that present well in reports to satisfy politicians. While this study cannot definitively confirm this, Alex’s view corresponds with previous research showing that neoliberal reforms in penal welfare management have led to more testing to provide evidence for effectiveness and cost-saving initiatives (Kelstrup et al., 2025; Ringø et al., 2018). Alex believed that education in Jyderup Prison should not be limited to improving measurable skills in core subjects; it should enable women to trust their own capacity to learn. Their goal was to help the women build confidence, nurture self-trust, and see themselves as individuals capable of growth and learning. Introducing tests too early, in their view, risk repeating an experience of inadequacy, rather than opening new possibilities. Caught between institutional expectations and what they believed the women truly needed, Alex chose to resist the administrative demand to conduct tests and screenings upon intake, seeking to create a more supportive beginning. Alex’s sense of what constituted a productive beginning to learning was echoed by staff members Sanne and Louise, who both observed that the women approached participation with greater caution than the men who had previously been incarcerated there. They noticed that the women often battled deep anxiety and a fragile sense of self-worth, which made conversations about future goals feel out of reach. In their view, this called for a slower approach, one more attuned to safety and trust. As Louise emphasized, supporting the women in building their self-esteem was essential “...to reach a point where they could make a choice” about their future. When reflecting on Chapter 4, Nathalie Mortensen, a member of the community advisory board, elaborated that the aim, as she saw it, was to strengthen the women’s capacity to cope, navigate, and act within a world of multiple and sometimes conflicting expectations—so they no longer wish to withdraw or escape from it. Read through a social harm perspective (Pemberton, 2015; Yar, 2012), the staff’s concern can be understood as an effort to ensure that the women have the social resources needed to reinforce their autonomy and make meaningful life decisions.

Janna, a staff member, critiqued the lack of flexible support structures within the penal welfare system. In her view, its bureaucratic rigidity leaves little room for meaningful adaptation:

I mean, we have quite rigid options, uh, rigid possibilities, like... ‘there’s this and that you can do.’ And if you fall a bit outside of that, or you don’t quite fit into that, uh, into those frameworks [Merethe: mhm], then there actually aren’t that many options.

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<sup>58</sup> Based on my notes, the quotes do not have verbatim accuracy.

Janna highlights how the system's very design is too narrow, too brittle, to accommodate the complexity and variation of people's lives. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a system governed by administrative rigidity often ends up offering something other than what is actually needed. Similarly, staff member Ulla spoke about the discrepancy between what is *needed* and what is *offered* through a larger critique of the structure of social pedagogical support. Her reflections pointed to a deep misalignment between the penal welfare system's expectations and the lived realities of the people it is supposed to support. Rather than offering the kind of steady, adaptive help that change often requires, Ulla believed the current model placed unrealistic demands on individuals who were already struggling. As she said:

If you are to be assessed for section 85 support,<sup>59</sup> you must be able to self-motivate and participate [Merethe: mhm]. So, if you're told by your section 85 support [e.g., contact person] that they're coming at 2 PM, then you damn well better be ready at 2 PM! [Merethe: mhm] Mhm. If you miss several appointments... then you're "not receptive", so you can't maintain your support, right? [Merethe: mhm] No! But if the only thing you can manage is when the dealer calls and says, "Yeah, I'll be at the corner in 5 minutes, so if you don't come, I won't be there today". Yeah.

Ulla's frustration echoes a recurring theme: support structures that expect compliance and initiative without first ensuring that people actually have the capacities to meet those demands. In this logic, missed appointments are read not as a signal that another kind of support might be needed, but as evidence of not being motivated and receptive. This becomes grounds for support withdrawal rather than deeper engagement. Ulla stressed how the simplicity of street-based transactions contrasts with the structured, scheduled demands of state-based assistance. She argued that the penal welfare system too often fails to recognize individual differences and actual capacities, thereby undermining its ability to support change. This resonates with Mik-Meyer's (2018) argument that "the municipality's resourceful "citizen figure" differs significantly" from many of the people encountering the system, particularly in their ability to navigate the short- and long-term consequences of their actions (p. 210, my translation). Ulla's observation highlights an inadequacy in the system's approach: if support is premised on the idea that a person requires relational assistance, how can it simultaneously depend on that individual already possessing the capacities the support is intended to cultivate? It creates an exclusionary mechanism as it upholds a procedure in which only the already relatively stable are eligible for help, while those with more complex struggles fall through the cracks. To Ulla such a system is highly inadequate to support people towards change:

You can't treat people that way if you want them to have a better life! [Merethe: mhm] (...) Well, then it doesn't help to have a contact person who calls you twice a week; that's not how it works (...) There needs to be much more intensive support [Merethe: yes], right...

According to Ulla, if the penal welfare system truly intends to help people build a "better life," it must acknowledge that many individuals need far more than just basic or occasional assistance. Truly supportive systems must start from where people are—not from where institutions want them to be. Some people need intensive, consistent support that adapts to

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<sup>59</sup> This reference pertains to the now-repealed Social Service Act, no. 10284 of 11/12/2017. In the current version of the Social Service Act, the corresponding provisions would be § 99 or § 86, subsection 2.

their specific situations and challenges. Without this shift, support risks being inadequate, inaccessible and ineffective for people in perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

*Disconnects in procedures create ruptures in people's lives*

In addition to the challenges of navigating bureaucratic procedures and sustaining support, another layer of barriers emerges from administrative disconnects, especially the links between MitID<sup>60</sup>, bank accounts, and access to the penal welfare services. Sanne, a prison staff member, explained that incarceration often forces people to move out of their homes and deregister their former addresses in public digital systems. However, since a prison cannot be listed as a residential address, individuals are left without a valid address—an essential requirement for applying for MitID, Denmark's digital identification system. Several incarcerated individuals do not have MitID prior to imprisonment, leaving them effectively locked out of the social services system, which increasingly requires digital login. To obtain MitID, a person must appear in person at a Citizen Service Centre; an obvious contradiction for those who are incarcerated. As staff member Louise added, the process is further complicated by documentation requirement as people need “all kinds of photo ID and passports and such, which they don't have; and it must also be a valid passport, and they don't have that at all”. Louise shared a Kafkaesque interaction between an incarcerated woman she knew who on prison leave went to Citizen service attempting to acquire MitID:

They say, 'You can't just show up here; you need to book an appointment online at Citizen Service.' 'Well, em... I've tried that, but I need MitID to do that.' 'Yes, you do, so goodbye again.' (...) That's how the outside society works, so it's completely cuckoo, right?

To obtain a MitID, one must first book an appointment online, but logging in to book the appointment requires already having a MitID. Louise finds this catch-22 “completely cuckoo”. Alongside the challenges of securing MitID, the absence of a registered address presents another obstacle which ripples into another system: banking. As several staff members and women pointed out, without a permanent address, it becomes nearly impossible to open or keep a bank account. And without a bank account, one cannot receive public benefits or wages, all of which are processed digitally. Sanne, a staff member, described that the women are “kicked out on their asses and elbows”<sup>61</sup> when trying to deal with banks. Her words reflect a frustration towards banks actively hindering basic civic infrastructure. For women already navigating instability and possibly homelessness, this exclusion to secure income of course makes stabilizing one's life even harder. Importantly, this exclusion isn't only unjust, it is unlawful. In 2022, the Danish Financial Supervisory Authority reaffirmed that all citizens have the right to a basic bank account (Danish Financial Supervisory Authority [Finanstilsynet], 2022). However, despite this clear directive, many women in Jyderup still encountered rejections from banks. Emma, for instance, found herself trapped in bureaucratic deadlock:

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<sup>60</sup> Denmark's electronic identification system for citizens used to log-in and engage with public digital systems, banks etc.

<sup>61</sup> Literal translation of a Danish idiom.

I don't have a bank account... I can't get a bank account because I don't have an address. (...) And I can't get an address while I'm in here. (...) the prison can't give me a care-of (C/O) address here, and I definitely don't have anyone on the outside who could provide me with a C/O address. (...) You're completely excluded from society the moment you end up in here.

Emma's story brings into view the rigid infrastructure of Denmark's increasingly digital penal welfare systems (Schou & Pors, 2019). These systems presume a digital and formalized type of citizenship; one that includes an ID, an address, and access to financial institutions. For several incarcerated women, such assumptions do not hold. When the penal welfare state fails to ensure these basic building blocks of participation, individuals become structurally shut out, as prior research also have shown (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Schou & Pors, 2019; Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022).

Even when the women manage to secure an address and a bank account, they often encounter long delays in processing applications for social benefits, which also create serious ruptures in already fragile lives. Line spoke about the hurdles she faced after being released from pre-trial detention:

I went to the municipality and said, "I've just been released from Vestre Prison, and I need to apply for social benefits." They told me, "Well, we need this, and this, and this." I submitted everything. Then they came back with, "Ahh, that's not enough, we need more."

It took Line three months and six visits to citizen service before her benefits were approved. Like Trine describes, there were numerous documents to locate, fill out, and submit in order for the penal welfare system to assess her case. During this waiting period—without any income—Line experienced a form of uncertainty and strain that is far from exceptional. In fact, waiting has been identified as a central condition within Nordic penal welfare systems and, in the context of neoliberal policies, has been conceptualized as a form of bureaucratic violence and an indirect means of reducing rights (Norstedt et al., 2022). Fortunately for Line, her family was able to support her through the gap; but as she pointed out, many are not in that position. For them, such a waiting period could mean being left without money and without a legal means to meet even basic needs. When I asked what she thought might happen to someone without similar support, she replied bluntly: "Well then, it's just a shame. Then there's nothing to be done." She added that this is often the point when people give up and turn to illegal activities, "simply because they can't be bothered to fight with the municipality!", as Anni earlier also argued.

Without financial stability, even the most carefully prepared plans for life after prison can quickly unravel. Sanne, a staff member, shared a story of Maria<sup>62</sup>, one of the women she had worked closely with, whose path was abruptly disrupted when her bank closed her account. Maria had been accepted into an education program set to begin immediately after her release. Together, she and Sanne had spent months preparing for this transition; coordinating logistics and building hope. Everything seemed in place until the bank, without warning, shut down her account. "That's when everything fell apart for her. It was incredibly stressful, and I did my best to resolve the issue. But the banks just don't care! They really don't!" Sanne stated. Suddenly, Maria was facing release without a way to receive social benefits; her only expected

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<sup>62</sup> Based on my notes, so not verbatim dictation.

income. When the education began, she never attended. Sanne received a message from the school confirming Maria's absence. Sanne feared Maria would soon return to prison. All the "good work," as she phrased it, had unraveled in a matter of days. To Sanne, the problem was the impact of instability created by such ruptures. "These women have been through so much and cannot handle stress in that way," she explained. In this case, not "showing up" for an educational program is not a failure of motivation or will, but also the outcome of institutions failing to show up for them. A single missing element, like not having a registered address, can block access to digital ID, which then bars a person from applying for welfare or opening a bank account. These cascading effects can unravel hopeful plans and create deep ruptures in people's lives. As existing research point to, the penal welfare state currently does not assume sufficient responsibility for ensuring digital access (Papazu et al., 2024; Schou & Pors, 2019). Instead, this burden falls upon individual staff members who go beyond their roles, and the affected individuals themselves, who are already navigating complex situations (ibid.)

### *Displaying the main outline in perspective*

While the state budget is a limited resource, making prioritization inevitable in all policy matters, testimonies from prison staff and incarcerated women relate to how insufficient support may foster long-term dependency. As Ulla suggests, providing "much more intensive" public assistance when needed—and aligning it more closely with individuals' circumstances and capacities—could significantly improve prospects for meaningful change. This links to a previous study on the socioeconomic aspects of so-called 'socially vulnerable citizens' and their use of the welfare system—a group that often includes these women—which finds there is "probably significant potential for creating more coherence and integrity in the efforts, which could also reduce the extensive use of interventions and the related costs" (Benjaminsen et al., 2018: 19, my translation). At this point, the experiences of incarcerated women and prison staff navigating the penal welfare system reveal how rigid administrative frameworks often stall or inhibit, rather than enable, the development of effective and responsive support structures. According to prison staff, relational support must be grounded in continuity, stability, and safety. However, these crucial foundations are frequently inhibited by bureaucratic procedures, delimited support possibilities, and sudden withdrawal of services. The system's failure to provide the necessary digital access (despite requiring its use) compounds these difficulties and leaves many individuals caught in a paradox of needing access but lacking the means. For some women, the constant negotiation with and waiting within the penal welfare system becomes so exhausting that they choose to let go of public benefits entirely. In their view, sustaining a livelihood through informal or illegal means becomes more manageable than meeting the system's relentless demands. The penal welfare systems impulse to fragment social issues into isolated cases, processing and assessing them based on perceived compliance and legibility, contributes to the women experiencing the workers as "autotuned" and the structures as inattentive to their situations and needs.

A recurring pattern is the system's imposition of demands that frequently exceed the capacities of those seeking assistance; both in terms of bureaucratic complexity and the conditionality and precarity of support. Failure to perform the role of “active client” (Marston et al., 2005)—such as missing appointments or a bureaucratic step—is often met with withdrawal of support rather than further engagement and co-creation. When viewed through Yar’s (2012) framing of social harm as arising from unmet human needs, these experiences within the penal welfare system become clearer. Central to the women’s perception is the system’s impulse to enforce productivity, which often overshadows attending to their stated needs. As educational scholar Martha Padovan-Özdemir (2022) reminds us, “[t]he welfare project is therefore not only a question of social justice” but also about “managing and stabilizing the relationship between capitalism’s employers and employees” (p. 89). Although the Nordic states have been recognized for mitigating more of the harm produced by capitalism than many other state structure (Pemberton, 2015), they remain deeply entangled in this global system, which continues to shape national policies (Shammas, 2024). Within this context, the sidelining of the women’s expressed needs becomes not incidental but symptomatic of a broader production of social harm.

Berlant’s (2014) concept of *withholding compassion* provides a compelling lens to understand the lived realities within such a system. Rather than viewing compassion simply as an emotion, she conceptualizes it as a social structure—a relational mode through which those with resources may choose whether or not to alleviate suffering. Berlant asks us to consider, “What if compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality?” (ibid: 10). This perspective helps us see public support systems as spaces where care and abandonment coexist, with resources distributed selectively. Trine’s feeling that penal welfare workers knowingly imposed demands beyond her capacity underscores Berlant’s point that “the relation of compassion to sadism... cannot be overlooked” (Ibid.: 9). Similarly, prison staff observe that the women are sometimes held more culpable than what they consider fair or helpful for fostering real change. This tension is further reflected in the system’s impulse to fragment social problems, particularly evident in how substance use is treated—as an issue that must be resolved before mental health services or broader welfare support can be accessed. For the women, this rigid sequencing feels like a cruel withholding of care. Many use drugs to cope with emotional states they have not yet learned to manage in other ways. Being required to relinquish this coping strategy without access to alternative support leaves them in a vulnerable state. From this section, it becomes evident that both incarcerated women and prison staff expose fractures in what Berlant (2014) describes as a “bargain” in managing inequality. They express frustration with the system’s failure to adequately meet the women’s needs or engage meaningfully with their capacities. By making the mitigation of structural inequality contingent—regardless if that is on compassion, deservingness or expression of motivation—the penal welfare system opens the door to withholding support when that is needed and thus to perpetuate coldness; a lack of responding to inequalities. An alternative would be to treat action against structural inequality not as a matter of compassion for individuals, but as an issue of equity and justice.

## The (im)possibilities of supportive relationships

This section explores the (im)possibilities of building supportive relationships between penal welfare workers and the group of women I met while incarcerated. Both the women and prison staff repeatedly emphasized that relationships are central to enabling and supporting change. This shared conviction resonates with a broad body of research in Denmark and beyond—including restorative and transformative justice traditions—which positions relationships and communities as indispensable to fostering both individual and collective transformation (Bladt & Christensen, 2021; Howe et al., 2018; Jülich et al., 2009; Mørck et al., 2023). From this conviction also grew a shared frustration that, within the penal welfare system, such relationships are often too fragile, inconsistent, or tightly constrained by institutional procedures to foster meaningful support. This is problematic as Hannah, a staff member, describes the relationship as the very basis of her work with the incarcerated women:

I mean, there's not much we can do other than use ourselves and the, uh, what's it called... the relationship we've built with them. That's really our, our... yeah, hehe, our tool. (...) Of course, we also use methods and, uh, theories and all that, but overall, we have to rely on ourselves (...)

Her pauses perhaps reflect a struggle to articulate something deeply felt yet difficult to define: that the core of their professional capacity lies in the relational presence they bring. What Hannah calls “using ourselves” points to a form of personal investment, where the staff member becomes the medium through which support is made possible. Echoing this view, Ulla, another staff member, also framed relationships as foundational to any transformative work:

[W]hen assigning support to someone—consider, well, is this actually a relationship, I mean, that can it carry the weight? Right? [Merethe: mhm] Because it's the relationship that often has to be the foundation [Merethe: mhm] of the process to ensure stability, continuity... because then everything else follows naturally.

For Ulla, relationships must be structurally strong enough to “carry the weight” of the work. If they can offer stability and continuity, she believes transformation may follow. From the women's perspective, however, such relationships were rare; many felt that professionals were indifferent to their well-being. Staff, in turn, pointed to high caseloads, time constraints, and limited opportunities for sustained one-to-one contact as barriers to being present in the ways they felt were necessary. These constraints are well-documented in research on contemporary penal welfare work (Damsa, 2023b; Jørgensen, 2022; Mikkelsen et al., 2024; Trydegård, 2012), and this study will thus turn to other aspects of relationships. The analysis begins with the women's accounts of frequent staff turnover and minimal contact with those tasked with supporting them. It then considers the high medicalization of women's mental health, in the context of insufficient supportive relationships, communities, and conditions. Across the interviews, many women described longing for professionals who not only listened but were affected by what they heard. When supportive relationships with penal welfare workers did occur, they tended to center on these same qualities. Bringing these reflections together, the section introduces *The Engaged Professional*—a figure through which the women recognized the possibility of care that could make a real difference in their lives.

### *Experiencing penal welfare workers as indifferent vs. giving a shit*

Many of the women I spoke with voiced experiences of feeling like the penal welfare workers were indifferent to them as people. They expressed a deep need for encounters with professionals that felt personal; interactions where they could sense that someone truly cared. They were asking for presence; for professionals who did not just follow procedures but showed up in ways that felt human. Hawa put this ache into words with clarity:

I mean, maybe one out of three in the whole municipality actually tries to help. *One*, you know? All the others don't give a shit about us! They just want their paycheck. And you could feel it; with all the caseworkers, all the social workers, all the managers, the whole system.

Her words cut through with a mix of anger, resignation, and accumulated disappointment. Hawa had the sentiment that most penal welfare workers and the system actually “don't give a shit” about her, but merely processed her case as their job mandated them to do. For her and others, this sense of indifference was often sharpened by the ease with which they were passed from one professional to the next. In such exchanges, they felt reduced to cases in a system; cases that could be picked up or dropped at will. A recent study of young Danish adults with complex psychosocial problems similarly found that a lack of recognition from professionals contributes to their experience of marginalization (Andersen et al., 2020). Sofia described how frequent staff changes left her caught in a bureaucratic loop, where her inability to work was continually reassessed, but never meaningfully addressed. With each new caseworker, she had to begin again:

Then one disappears, then a new one comes, then you have to try something new, then another new one comes, then you have to try something else new.

Rather than feeling accompanied, Sofia experienced the process as fragmented and directionless. Formal procedures continued, but the support never settled into something stable or responsive. Lea echoed this sense of being repeatedly dropped and picked up again. She commented on what it felt like to be reassigned without being included in the reasons why:

(...) and then suddenly, after half a year, a new person contacts me and says, "I'm your new caseworker." And it's as if the other one has given up; "We'll just pass this case on here. You try!"

What Lea pointed to was both the disruption of relational continuity, but also the absence of recognition that a shift had even occurred; no goodbye, no explanation for why someone who had been assigned a role in her life was gone. She was now being “tried” by the next caseworker and had to just accept this lack of control. Nynne recalled a similar pattern from her teenage years spent in Children and Youth Homes. She had been passed on between eleven psychologists, without forming a stable relationship with someone who genuinely believed in her capacity for thriving and change. The last one contacted the staff at the institution she lived in with a message, which Nynne recalls as: “I probably shouldn't come back, because she didn't want to be the one who ruined my future with psychologists”. The therapist frames the decision as an act of care; as if discontinuing sessions will somehow protect Nynne's future

ability to engage with therapy. Yet, Nynne was once again left without a stable professional relationship. What was presented as a protective act nonetheless became another relational disconnection mimicking abandonment.

Lea offered multiple descriptions of how this dynamic affected her. She described how the revolving door of professionals came with a demand placed on her: that she would once again open up, retell her past, and justify her need for help:

Then we start over, then you have to go in for an interview. Then I have to sit and explain to a new person who doesn't even bother to look into my papers. Everything is in my papers; about my childhood, about my entire upbringing and all the problems one has had, etc., etc. But no one ever reads them!

Lea experienced this repetition and retelling as exhausting as well as meaningless. Her past was already written down, documented, made legible to the system. And yet, each time, the new professional appeared uninterested, uninformed, or unwilling to engage with what was already there. The burden of informing was on her, and she did not experience that her words had weight and were reacted on. Over time, this took a toll on her and formed her very being:

Your story becomes shorter and shorter and colder and colder. As you yourself become. You probably don't get the understanding you should get. Because you think that it doesn't really matter. You're a number!

The shortening of her narrative mirrored a form of emotional self-preservation and fatigue. Lea describes herself as becoming “colder”, a phrase that suggests a kind of guarded withdrawal, a protective strategy shaped by accumulated disappointment. A strategy in response to a system where she does not feel recognized as fully human, but more like a number. Lea seems to have moved into the emotional stance I have called *protective pessimism*, inverting Berlant's (2011) concept cruel optimism. She has left the stubborn hope that the next caseworker, or the next procedure, might finally offer real support and now has a wary posture that guards against further disillusionment and experiences of distrust. It protected her from the ups and downs which optimism brings, when then the hopes never manifest. Lea's experience with an assigned mentor further revealed the disconnect between formal structures of support and their actual enactment. Though formally assigned for two years, they never had “a single personal meeting”, while the mentor told her that “(...) she was reporting back to the municipality as if we had met in person.” The performance of support, without its presence, added to Lea's growing sense of mistrust. All these experiences left her feeling done. Some years before being incarcerated, Lea eventually made a decision to “opt out.” She called the municipality and asked them to stop her welfare benefits. The (lack of) reaction left her with a mixture of disbelief and bitter clarity:

Lea: (...) I just called them and said, “I want to withdraw from the municipality, so just stop my welfare benefits.” [Takes a deep breath.] Not even one person—not even my caseworker—I don't even know her name, I don't know what number she was... number 35? But... not a single person called afterward to check, to question it. “Are you actually doing okay, Lea?” or “Are you just, after all these years... thinking see ya'?” [Snaps her fingers.] No one have asked, if you got it under control. You are just out; “Ah, nice, then we got rid of her!”

Merethe: This is what you believe they perceive it as?

Lea: Yes, yes, that's how it is. One less payout!

Lea's words speak to how utterly invisible she felt when no one reacted as she withdrew from the municipality; cutting off her only registered income. Such a decision, she felt, should have raised concern. She struggled to understand how no one within the penal welfare system seemed to wonder how she would manage. For Lea, the absence of response became a painful confirmation: that she as a person did not matter to the professionals, but the workload and financial burden did. Research has documented how social workers are often monitored based on their success in moving people off benefits. While this practice is increasingly challenged, it provides important context for understanding Lea's sentiment (Larsen & Caswell, 2022: 72). These experiences draw up a pattern where this group of women is repeatedly shuffled between professionals whom they do not experience are genuinely invested in them. Thinking back to the hybrid stories, many women described growing up without caregivers who could prioritize their well-being or fully grasp the consequences of their actions. The incarcerated women longed for professionals who could meet them with responsiveness and relational depth, who would not simply follow protocol, but show up with care, curiosity, and consistency. What they wanted to experience was a kind of presence and a willingness to be with them. This is not easily reconciled with the fragmenting impulse of the penal welfare system, where lived social problems are assigned to distinct professionals and units. While this arrangement may offer better conditions for specialization, it diminishes professionals' ability to engage with the women holistically.

While the women often experience professionals as emotionally distant, several prison staff spoke about being affected by their suffering and by being in relationship with them. This emotional engagement, despite its challenges, is well-documented among penal welfare workers working with vulnerable clients (Andersen, 2018; Lindekilde et al., 2025; Moldenhawer, 2018). Hans described how ongoing exposure to suicide and self-harm "takes a toll on staff." Another prison staff shared a telling example: a team from The Danish Prisons visited the jail section but left after just one hour. "They wrote afterward that they felt traumatized by the experience, getting so much frustration thrown at them, hearing the women's stories like that," he recalled.<sup>63</sup> The team's reaction might be seen as a missed opportunity to reflect on the daily emotional labor carried by the prison staff—and, importantly, on the deep pain expressed by the women. Nonetheless, these accounts highlight how penal welfare workers are indeed emotionally affected by the women's stories. It is therefore important to consider why this emotional impact is so rarely felt by the women themselves. Perhaps the staff's emotional responses are not shared openly but instead lead to withdrawal and disengagement. As Sanne noted earlier, there is a tendency among staff to exclude the "most troublesome" individuals because they are more demanding, perhaps also emotionally taxing for the workers. But what if penal welfare workers were better supported in allowing themselves to be moved by these encounters and in letting their affective responses shape how they engage in relationships? Could such emotional openness become a way to deepen, rather than avoid, connection? Might it offer the women a genuine sense that staff actually "give a shit" about them?

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<sup>63</sup> From my notes, thus not verbatim dictation.

## *You can have pills?*

Among staff, the levels of medication prescribed to the incarcerated women was a topic of ongoing discussion. An inspection report from April 2023 revealed that 98% of the women received some form of medical treatment (Patientsikkerhed, 2023: 10). One employee from the health department had undertaken a comparison between medication intake in the former male closed unit and the current women's closed unit at Jyderup. The result was striking: the women were receiving *four times* as many pills as the men. This was not a matter of cost, but sheer quantity. Louise, a staff member, captured the situation dryly: "Well, we joke a bit that we get the medicine around here in wheelbarrows, you know (...) it's completely wild, what they get in terms of medicine (...)." Several staff members pointed out that the women's participation in education or job training was often hindered by limited access to consistent relational and therapeutic support. They argued that many women arrived with unresolved trauma, low self-esteem, and fragile emotional regulation. Without first or also addressing these foundations of well-being, staff believed that efforts to build skills or prepare for employment occurred on a shaky foundation—and would be insufficient to support lasting transformation. Staff members related to the high level of medicalization in a contextual manner. Janna, for one, pointed to the conditions inside the prison as factors that worsened mental health and increased the women's reliance on medication:

(...) there is no doubt that if the opportunities inside the prison for employment and activity, exercise, diet, etc... It would clearly reflect in how sick they are, how much medication they need, and also how much need they have for psychologists and psychiatrists [Merethe: mhm] Mh... It works together! And they get worse from the conditions that are here than they needed to be.

For Janna, improving prison conditions would create better opportunities for mental thriving, offering more than just the limited approach of symptom management through medication. Ulla offers a complementary perspective on the high rates of medication. Like other staff member, she expressed that medication is not just imposed by 'the prison' but something that women themselves request. Ulla believes that some women actively seek medication, hoping it will provide a "quick fix" for their distress, similarly to how some have been using illegal drugs. As such, the lacking supportive conditions in prison may increase the appeal of such quick escapes from a difficult reality.

The incarcerated women at times spoke of the medicine they took, yet did not describe themselves as being significantly more medicated while incarcerated.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps we can understand this variation through considering *change* versus *continuity*. For staff members who transitioned from working in a men's prison to a women's facility, the increase in medication levels was striking and unmistakable. However, for the women themselves, this level of medication felt more like a continuation; a familiar pattern where illegal and legal substances had long been a part of their lives. What the women emphasized was not the medication itself, but the persistent absence or insufficient stable, meaningful relational

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<sup>64</sup> I did not ask about medication in every interview. However, staff frequently brought up the issue themselves.

support to help them overcome mental health struggles; within and outside the prison. Many described a recurring lack of therapy or social-pedagogical offers, which prior research also have found (Ahlmark et al., 2021; Danish Appeals Board, 2020; Henriksen, 2017; Mathiassen, 2015a). Criticism of the prison's health unit was common; some women reported being allowed psychiatric consultations that resulted only in medical prescriptions, with no further follow-up or therapeutic engagement. Pills were offered, but the deeper, relational forms of support were noticeably absent. This absence of sustained support left many feeling isolated, which adds nuances to staff member Ulla's perspective: if medication is the primary form of 'help' available, it becomes more likely that both staff and women come to see pills as the main—and sometimes only—solution worth pursuing. In other words, when deeper relational and therapeutic support is scarce, reliance on medication may be less a true choice and more a response shaped by the limited options the system provides.

A few of the incarcerated women shared that they had, at times, resisted the amount or type of medication they were ordained. Nynne, for example, described her deep frustration with the psychiatric system at a time when she chose not to take the full dose of her prescribed medication. At that time, she shared that her ex-partner had taken their daughter away which left her devastated. She describes grappling with “a lot of psychological issues”, but ultimately being rejected for treatment:

Nynne: I just ended up completely down and hit rock bottom. And psyche'... then I was involved with psychiatry, uh—which wanted me to take way too much medication. When I didn't want to take it, I got a 'nice' message in e-Boks<sup>65</sup> from the chief psychiatrist, saying that my life was too chaotic for them to help me... Yeah.

Merethe: Was that stated in a letter?

Nynne: Yes, it's in my e-Boks.

Merethe: So, there was no other offer for you there?

Nynne: No, then it just became that I should... send a text message to my caseworker at the municipality once every three months, just to say that I was alive. Uh...

The experience suggests that individuals who have “hit rock bottom” and live what is labeled a “chaotic” life seek help from the public system but are denied because of that very chaos. This raises an important and troubling question—who then is the psychiatric system designed for? This reinforces a previous argument in this chapter, where both staff and incarcerated women note that those with relatively more resources are better positioned to receive assistance. The decision was sent to Nynne digitally, without personal engagement or possibility for dialogue. Rather than the relational engagement she had hoped for, she was left to navigate her struggles on her own. Nynne's only remaining connection to the public system was sending a text message to her caseworker every three months to confirm she was still alive. While this is unlikely to have been the official phrasing, it captures the sentiment it evoked in her. She considered herself to be tasked with communicating her *aliveness* to the caseworker, but her *actual life* was not engaged with. When I asked her what kind of support she had hoped to receive, she said:

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<sup>65</sup> E-Boks is a digital mailbox where citizens and businesses receive official documents from public authorities. It is privately owned, but part of the public digital infrastructure in Denmark.

Give me some tools to handle all my... diagnoses and psychological issues that had flared up significantly. I was already in psychiatry when I was pregnant. Uh... Where they then said that I should have been in DBT treatment <sup>66</sup>, but... (...) I expected to get some tools to handle everything. [Merethe: mhm]. I couldn't get that. I found my own ways, and then... It's just been that the municipality didn't want to touch me, I mean...

She felt pushed to the margins; beyond the penal welfare state's sphere of responsibility and liability. Nynne sensed that penal welfare workers "did not want to touch" her case, treating it as one unworthy of public support or engagement. For her, a central reason for this withdrawal of support—or withholding of compassion (Berlant, 2014)—was her refusal to take the prescribed medication. Since she resisted the pills, no alternative was offered. This awakens the haunting pattern within the penal welfare system: the impulse to medicalize and pathologize women's distress, rather than engage with curiosity about what might truly be needed. Offering pills instead of more substantial support underscores a key gap between what is *needed* and what is *offered*, which inflicts profound consequences. By medicalizing incarcerated women's suffering, the focus shifts to individual pathology, often masking the prior social harms and structural factors that gave rise to their distress, which remain unresolved (Kilty, 2012).

### *The Engaged Professional: When relational support fosters change*

After numerous encounters with the penal welfare system, what remained most meaningful to the women were not programs, tools, or standardized interventions, but people to whom they experienced that they mattered. Amid these often difficult encounters, they frequently recalled one or two professionals who had left a lasting, positive impact and were remembered with sincere gratitude. In their accounts, such professionals appeared as exceptions rather than the norm. It is possible that the sheer weight of negative experiences blurred, or even erased, moments of genuine care along the way. Still, when reflecting back, it was these few individuals whom the women experienced as truly supportive. When reflecting on what set these professionals apart from the many others they encountered, the women consistently emphasized the qualities these workers embodied. Across their recollections, the descriptions converged around the same core elements. They spoke of someone who:

1. is personally invested in them,
2. is accessible and responsive,
3. steps outside the office to meet them in their lives, and
4. supports them in processing difficult experiences.

These are not easily measurable traits—and perhaps that is precisely the point, as they cannot be fully captured through bureaucratic procedures but are instead experienced in the flow of relationships. Jensen and Hansen (2024) similarly emphasize the importance of "the professional who dares to involve themselves" (Ibid.: 55), finding that such engagement is consistently linked to more positive experiences. In their study on crime prevention among citizens with mental illness, participants particularly appreciated professionals who stayed

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<sup>66</sup> Dialectical Behavior Therapy [Dialektisk Adfærdsterapi (DAT)].

present and attentive, even when they tried to retreat or disengage. Turning toward these shared qualities, I will sketch the figure of the Engaged Professional: a practitioner who provides relational connection, fostering recognition, possibility, and change.

We begin with a defining trait of the Engaged Professional; their personal investment in the lives of those they support. This investment was often described by the women as a sense that the relationship extended beyond procedural duties; of wanting to be present rather than just fulfilling an obligation. Anna, for instance, recounted an experience with a worker who maintained close, ongoing contact and took the time to truly listen to her needs. She described how she experienced that sharing her good news “meant a lot” to the professional, and how their occasional hugs made her experience the worker as “just... human, really!” Within this relationship, Anna felt deeply affirmed and recognized as a person—rather than reduced to a case number. Louisa’s memories of one Children and Youth Home echoed this sense of genuine care. Among the several homes she had lived in, it was the warmth and openness of the staff that distinguished this place as one where she felt truly embraced:

There were some kind pedagogues, and they really took us in—like we were their own children. I mean, they hugged us, they listened to us, they weren’t afraid that we might throw a pen at them or something. And, and, and they didn’t resort to physical force as a standard practice.

Louisa shared that she experienced staff as relating to her and the other children “as if they were their own.” At first glance, this may seem like an unrealistic—or even overwhelming—expectation to place on professionals. Yet it is worth pausing to consider what Louisa actually associated with this description. For her, it was not about limitless emotional labor, but about experiencing care in tangible, everyday ways. This care was expressed through acts of affection such as hugs, through the absence of unnecessary restraint, and through staff who did not respond to distress with fear or withdrawal. Being listened to and seen without judgment was enough for Louisa to feel that the staff genuinely cared. Camilla articulated a similar experience as the feeling that supporting her was “more than just a job” for the professional involved. She shared about a contact person, whom she sensed truly *wanted to* help her succeed—an experience that had a profound impact on her:

It helped me a lot, so much, also because I could feel that she also wanted to – like she did a lot for me, and she would often come by... If I couldn’t get up to go to school, she showed up and drove me there. I mean, yeah, she was really great.

The contact person’s commitment was a form of relational engagement, as Camilla sensed that the contact person really wanted to show up for her. Camilla’s lack of managing to get up and get to school was not met with punishment or withdrawal of support, but with a kind of persistence that was caring rather than coercive. In contrast to other experiences, the contact person was attentive to Camilla’s abilities and struggles and thus decided to drive her to school.

Another important aspect to Camilla was she often spoke with her contact person on the phone and knew she “could always call her if something was up, always.” This illustrates the second quality of the Engaged Professional; being accessible and responsive. Accessibility here involves not only availability but also a willingness to adapt the support structure to fit the rhythms and realities of women’s lives. For Camilla, this responsiveness was evident when her

contact person showed up at her door to drive her to school during a period when she was struggling to get there on her own. Emma likewise emphasized the importance of accessibility when reflecting on a mentor with whom she had a particularly positive experience:

Like, really, she was really, truly dedicated to her work. I could call her whenever I wanted, and if there was a problem, she would help me.

Knowing she could call her mentor when she needed support was a major source of reassurance for Emma. This sense of accessibility extends beyond the possibility of making a phone call; it was the assurance that someone on the other end genuinely cared and would respond. Having support that was available and willingly offered provided a steady point of stability, contrasting earlier experiences of unpredictability and abandonment. Similar to Louisa's description of professionals relating to her "as if they were their own," the idea of "always being able to call whenever" is less about literal 24/7 access and more about the felt sense of an open, responsive, and sincere relationship. For Fatma, a responsive accessibility meant that the professionals were proactive with guidance and support. During a period of homelessness, her experiences with many shelter staff had been characterized by fragmented, inconsistent assistance and little follow-up. Yet one shelter stood out for taking a different approach—one that fostered more intentional, consistent, and relational engagement between staff and users:

What they did differently was, eh... because they supported me more (...) At the [specific] shelter, I had a good contact person, and, what's it called, and the staff were good, and guided me in what I should write, where I should... They advised me really well on where I should go, and where I should... what rights I had, etc. And then I got the apartment!"

At this shelter, the staff did not wait for Fatma to ask for support; they made themselves both available and approachable. This kind of sustained, relational accessibility directly shaped her ability to navigate the system and move toward residential stability.

The third quality of the Engaged Professional is the willingness to step beyond the confines of an office and meet people in the context of their everyday lives. This kind of relational and physical presence was consistently highlighted in the women's reflections. Emma, for example, described how her mentor did not limit support to one-on-one meetings, but stepped in when family tensions became overwhelming:

If something came up with my parents, she could help talk to them, if it was hard for me to address it myself. There were just so many good things about her (...)

For Emma, this support was meaningful because it was active and situated; her mentor engaged directly in the spaces where her life was unfolding, helping her navigate challenges and build better relationships with her parents. Similarly, Tina spoke with warmth about a staff member in a smaller municipality who made a deliberate effort to connect with the people he supported. He left his office, checked in, and spent time with the "tough kids" and those who were struggling, demonstrating a presence that was relevant and attainable. As Tina shared:

He really looks out for the youth. He actually spends time on them, gets to know them, and can talk to the tough kids—he's like, "They need to be doing something, right?" (...) Yeah, he was the one who made sure they... you know, "There are factories out there, get going,

right?” [Merethe: Yeah, yeah]. But also, he would go out and talk, if someone was arhhhg [read: struggling]... He really put his heart into it!

Tina recalled how he made the effort to check in, visiting and talking to people when something was wrong. He supported Tina in securing an internship and later a job that she enjoyed. While he actively helped them find jobs that suited their interests and capacities, occupation was not his sole focus. What set him apart, she explained, was the way he navigated his professional role—with care, commitment, and heart. For her, this approach made a real difference as she sensed “we weren’t just a number or a statistic.”

The fourth quality of the Engaged Professional is their dedication to supporting women in working through difficult experiences. This was less about enacting specific methods and more about the presence of someone who could help them make sense of their past while opening up possibilities for the future. Lissi, for example, described her therapist as “a truly skilled woman” who helped her reorient herself on a deeply personal level:

The fourth quality of the Engaged Professional is the capacity and commitment to support women in processing difficult experiences. This quality was not defined by knowledge of specific methods or techniques (though that may also have played a role), but by the presence of someone who could help them make sense of their past while opening up possibilities for the future. Lissi, for example, described her therapist as “a truly skilled woman” who guided her toward a deeper personal reorientation:

Well, she has helped me turn all my vulnerabilities around and... rebuild me. Of course, there are things that have dragged me down, but she has been a great help in building me back up. She really has. So, I’ve been seeing her for two years... uhmm... twice a month, yeah.

Lissi’s words center on the cumulative impact of regular, relational attention over time; two years of biweekly sessions. In that duration, Lissi began to feel herself change, not because she had been “fixed,” but because someone had been there to walk with her through her vulnerabilities, and to support her in holding the pieces differently. Such stories remind us that change is neither linear nor quick, and highlight the importance of professional roles and conditions that enable support for such journeys. For Sissel, an essential aspect of being supported in processing difficult situations was having professionals who took the initiative to address tensions or ruptures happening in the relationship between them—particularly when she had crossed a line. She often struggled with knowing how to act in those moments and deeply appreciated when her contact person showed her the way:

Instead of me having to go and talk about it—because I just couldn’t, you know? I couldn’t, like, talk about the situation... she never held a grudge. If something happened, she would just say, ‘That? Don’t do that,’ and then it was like, case closed, right? [Me: mh] So yeah, she was really good at her job.

Sissel acknowledged her own difficulties in initiating conversations when she had made mistakes. She was therefore grateful for how the penal welfare worker proactively addressed incidents—setting clear boundaries while not holding her past actions against her. This approach allowed her to engage with correction rather than being weighed down by a lingering sense of personal failure. Such a relationship provided a model in which accountability could coexist with care, remaining consistent even in moments of difficulty. Her experience aligns

with the concept of “anger with love” described by de Jong and Denkers (2020). They found that so-called ‘high-risk youth’ responded positively not least in behavioral change when professionals combined clear expectations with genuine relational engagement. Sissel’s story shows how this firm-but-caring approach can support growth, highlighting the relational depth that characterizes the Engaged Professional.

For Aisha, it was important to engage with professionals who could help her process present difficulties while preparing for future challenges. She found it difficult to speak with her family about prison, as they had no direct experience and often responded with sorrow rather than understanding. As she explained:

My mom doesn’t get it at all—she just feels sorry for me, like, her heart is just completely broken over all of this, you know? (...) That’s why talking to a mentor makes a difference.

In contrast to her family, her mentor understood the prison as an institution and could offer a perspective grounded in experience. This relational engagement made her feel less alone and more grounded when thinking about life after release. It also provided realistic, non-judgmental guidance: “It’s about getting that kind of feedback,” she said. Such feedback gently recalibrated expectations without dismissing hope, helping her balance the urgency of change with the need to land safely first.

In essence, the Engaged Professional as a figure represents the kind of publicly assigned relational support that has actually been experienced as meaningful and empowering by women who are currently incarcerated.

### *Displaying the main outline in perspective*

Both incarcerated women and prison staff emphasized the central role of relationships in supporting individual change. The women’s experiences of professional indifference were closely linked to how they were often passed from one professional to another, with little attention to the relational disruption this entailed or to the time required to rebuild trust. In this respect, their accounts resonate with studies of the penal welfare system showing how its everyday practices recast people as “cases” and “clients” (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2004). This pattern reflects the system’s broader impulse to fragment social issues—an impulse mirrored in how the women experienced being perceived and related to: not as whole people, but as case files scattered across institutions and administrative units. Such experiences have left many women with deep-seated anger, despair, distrust, and hurt; profoundly shaping their relationship to the penal welfare state. The penal welfare system’s impulse to differentiate its responses to girls and women through pathologization and psychological framing was starkly visible in the pervasive use of medicalization at Jyderup Prison. Women were prescribed four times as many pills as the men formerly incarcerated in the same facility. Yet what the women emphasized was not the medication itself, but the persistent lack of stable, meaningful relational support to help them navigate mental health struggles—both inside and outside the prison. While both medication and relational or therapeutic interventions address individual experiences of distress, medication tends to prioritize containment and symptom relief,

whereas sustained relational support offers the possibility of deeper processing and transformation of the underlying experiences that may drive distress. When the women spoke of instances in which the system functioned as a form of harm mitigation, these moments were rooted in relational qualities and embodied by particular professionals. This resonates with the argument made by social work scholars Ward et al. (2018), who contend that “[a]t its best, what social work can offer to people in need of help is a supportive and understanding relationship which will enable them to resolve their difficulties and to feel enhanced rather than undermined in the process” (p. 7, my emphasis). By unfolding the four recurring qualities in the women’s experiences, this section has outlined the figure of the Engaged Professional: someone who is personally invested and genuinely responsive, and whose presence testified to the women that their lives and experiences mattered—specifically and sincerely.

Taken seriously, the research participants’ emphasis on the centrality of relationships in supporting individual change suggests that relationality could be constructed as a focal point within an alternative paradigm of harm prevention. At the same time, placing relationality at the center invites reflection on how this focus might be translated into practice. Approached through a paranoid reading (Sedgwick, 1997), which draws attention to faults and gaps, one might become preoccupied with how focusing mainly on individual relationships can decenter and obscure the broader structural conditions that produce harm. It is possible to envision a public system that places relationships at its center, but such a system may still operate primarily to mitigate harm rather than to transform structural conditions. This concern echoes Lea’s (2008) critique of social service bureaucracy’s belief in the “magic of intervention” (p. 16), namely the conviction that social problems can be solved through ongoing institutional expansion and reform. The faith in merely expanded social services and individualized interventions may ultimately prove illusory. Alone, neither a heightened focus on individual support nor the creation of additional services is likely to produce the structural change necessary to address harm meaningfully. Approached through a reparative reading (Sedgwick, 1997) we are prompted not merely to critique the limitations of relationality as a focus, but also to honor the emergence of this insight and to engage with its possible implications. The question then becomes how such relational approaches might be expanded—not as a substitute for structural analysis, but as a bridge toward it. Transformative justice, with its emphasis on centering relationships in responses to harm and on linking interpersonal accountability to broader structural transformation, offers vital guidance (Eriksson, 2009; Generation Five, 2007; Hoddy & Gready, 2020). Within this justice paradigm, the potential of supportive relationships within public structures is both affirmed and expanded, as it invites us to imagine how relational practices might be restructured—and how these changes could ripple outward, reshaping the institutional and societal logics that shape them.

## The failure to address social harm

Following Pemberton's (2015) insights that a society's configuration shapes both the production and mitigation of social harm (p. 10), this final thematic section explores the ways in which the participants experienced the penal welfare system as often failing to address harm. A recurring pattern in the women's pre-incarceration case files illustrates this gap. As staff member Sanne observed, "There isn't really much support we can point to." When I asked her why she thought that was the case, she reflected, "I just think a lot of them have been left to fend for themselves. Left adrift on their own." Her words underscore that, despite the support structures the penal welfare system offers in theory, many of the women currently incarcerated have ultimately often navigated their struggles alone. Building on this observation, Janna, another staff member, questioned whether the current system even is equipped to respond adequately to the complexity of the women's experiences:

I also just think some of them are simply in such bad shape. it's a real question whether we're even handling it. (...) Whether the services available through the municipality, the services our society offers to create possibilities and frameworks for including a few more people—whether they're good enough.

Janna's words raise a fundamental doubt about the capacity of existing institutions and initiatives within the penal welfare system to meet the needs of women currently incarcerated, and whether they can meaningfully foster pathways to inclusion in society. Framed by this doubt, the section begins with an exploration of retributive responses within Jyderup, moves to the broader absence of structural engagement in the penal welfare system, and concludes by examining encounters where incarcerated women perceived certain workers as exacerbating harm.

### *Retributive reactions in Jyderup Prison*

The experience of incarceration itself imposed a recovery burden; leaving deep and lasting marks on many of the women. Anna emphasized how the isolating nature of prison made her feel "broken from being alone." After a previous jail experience, she struggled to reintegrate because she "was really scared to be around others." She remembered her first bus ride after release, leaving her "drenched in sweat," shaking, and utterly out of her comfort zone. "One becomes somewhat damaged from this prison and jail," Anna reflected, highlighting the need to "rehabilitate" her brain afterward—an observation that challenges the widely held idea of the Nordic prison as rehabilitative (Smith, 2009; Storgaard, 2020; Tang, 2023; Ugelvik, 2016). Building on Anna's account of the mental strain caused by prolonged isolation during incarceration, it is particularly striking that, *within prison*, severe mental health struggles are at times met with enforced isolation and carceral measures. When staff assess that a person may be at risk of self-harm, they can be placed in an observation or security cell; a measure involving isolation, continuous surveillance, and, if deemed necessary, physical restraint, as outlined in § 66(2) of the Execution of Sentences Act [Straffuldbydelseslovgivningen].

Sissel's account of time spent in the observation cell shed light on how such placement feels more punitive than protective. Like many women in Jyderup Prison, she struggled with her mental health and had prior contact with psychiatric services. During her sentence, she experienced a resurgence of stress and anxiety. Although she was able to speak with the in-house psychiatrist, the conversation led to no immediate support, as she was told she would have to "start completely over with a psychiatric assessment." With no clear timeline for this process, her mental state deteriorated. In a vulnerable moment, Sissel reached out to the guards, explaining how she was feeling. As she recalls, they responded with empathy, assuring her that "no one should feel like that" and promised to confer and return with a plan. She was initially relieved, but when they came back, it was to inform her that she would be moved to an observation cell. Sissel had heard unsettling things about this cell from others and thus resisted:

I told them, 'Honestly, when I feel this bad, it's actually better for me to just stay in my cell, in familiar surroundings, rather than being moved to one of those... cells up there, because it's not a good place to be. I already can't sleep, and there's no way I'll sleep up there.'

Her protests were overruled. Five guards arrived at her cell to escort her; by force if necessary. Prior to arriving in the observation cell, she was ordered to undress and change into standard-issue clothing. When she refused, the guards stated that noncompliance would result in them removing her clothes themselves:

I shouted a bit while doing it [undressing], about what I thought of the whole situation and... I said I didn't think it was fair, and how could they treat people like that, and that they should be helping, not making things worse, and... I said I wished... I said I'd been subjected to abuse my whole life, and that they should try being me and see what it was like...

In that moment, Sissel was desperately trying to get the guards to relate to her differently. She was crying for empathy; trying to make them understand what it felt like to be her: someone carrying a history of repeated abuse, now placed in a cell to be watched, rather than e.g. being talked with. Similar to the efforts within Laura's questionnaire to the judge, Sissel wanted the guards to grasp how their actions and decisions affected her. She did not experience the carceral response as helpful, but rather "making things worse". When Sissel lightly hit herself on the head in frustration, it triggered a further punitive response. She was ordered to be restrained with belts. Despite her refusal, the guards lifted and dragged her. She "started fighting back," as she described, but they eventually strapped her down to a mattress. One strap was so tight she feared it would break her arm, yet no one adjusted it. Days after her time in the observation cell, Sissel asked one of the guards why they in stead had not stayed with her in her cell to try to understand what was happening. The guard replied that they simply did not have the staff for that, adding, as Sissel recalled, "We only have two buttons to press; and that's the observation room or the fixation belt." This stark statement speak of an institutional logic (Thornton et al., 2015) where carceral responses are the considered primary tools for addressing mental health crises. To Sissel, this reasoning was not only inadequate but deeply irrational. It had taken *five* staff members to forcibly move her and *one* to sit and monitor her for hours; resources that, in her view, could have been deployed far more effectively. Reflecting on the incident, Sissel shared that if she had truly been suicidal that day,

the violence of the response—the forced transfer, the stripping, the fixation—might have been “the straw that broke the camel’s back”. Her experience is not unique. Several women described reaching out during moments of mental crisis, to be met with coercive interventions justified as protective measures rather than with relational support. This aligns with research identifying a tension between a ‘societal security logic’ and a ‘social care logic’ as competing logics within Nordic institutions addressing violent extremism (Christensen et al., 2024; Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2023). While prisons are not specifically designed to address extremism, the societal security logic remains relevant: it relies on centralized decision-making and employs mechanisms of incapacitation in response to rule-breaking behavior (Sivenbring & Malmros, 2021). Under this logic, the women’s distress is interpreted as risk; risk triggers procedures; and procedures take the form of isolation, restraint, and constant surveillance. In practice, this blurs the line between protection and punishment, making it difficult to discern where care ends and coercion begins. This becomes even more evident when considering that solitary confinement is used not only in response to mental health crises but also as a routine disciplinary measure within the prison. Camilla’s repeated placements in isolation for infractions like spitting or smoking had a profound impact on her, reflecting Anna’s earlier observation about the need to “rehabilitate” her mind after incarceration. “The first many times, I did nothing but cry and... tried to get out of there in every way I could,” she said. But something shifted over time. With a resigned giggle, Camilla added, “You just find peace in it... no one’s coming anyway.” When asked if this ‘peace’ was actually an emotional shutdown, she quietly nodded, “Yeah. It’s not healthy, that’s for sure.” Camilla’s response reflects more than adaptation; it reveals the damage inflicted by the prison itself. The experiences of Anna, Sissel, and Camilla challenge the idea that Nordic prisons function effectively as sites of rehabilitation beyond punishment (Smith & Ugelvik, 2017a; Ugelvik, 2016). Its rehabilitative potential is undermined as the institution itself inflicts additional harms—wounds they must contend with and heal from long after release.

Another retributive mechanism is that any punishable act automatically triggers legal prosecution. Staff are required to report and submit all incidents of illegality for prosecution, meaning that being placed in either a residential institution or a prison heightens one’s risk of criminalization (Bengtsson et al., 2025). This requirement effectively removes the possibility for those involved to decide how a harmful incident should be addressed. As a result, conflicts that might otherwise have been handled differently are instead funneled directly into the penal system. Louisa’s experience of being stabbed while in prison—by someone she had actually become friends with during her sentence—illustrates the consequences of this lack of agency. At the time, the woman who stabbed her was in a psychotic state and unable to control her actions. Louisa wanted a response, but not the formal, punitive process that was automatically triggered. She hoped her friend could access mental health support to prevent similar incidents, while she herself longed for therapy to process both the violence and the emotional breach of being hurt by someone she cared about. She also expected her contact officer to check in with her, but no one did. Instead, the only institutional response was a formal demand for a statement, initiating a legal process that extended her friend’s sentence—despite Louisa’s wish not to press charges. By defaulting to prosecution, the institution erased the possibility of a response centered on relational repair and a supportive accountability process for her

friend, as envisioned in restorative and transformative justice approaches (Pelsinger, 2025). Louisa's call for mental health support, both for herself and for the woman who harmed her, was overridden by retributive reaction oriented around guilt, evidence, and punishment (Walen, 2014; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016).

Staff members, too, expressed frustration at how ill-equipped the prison system is to respond to women struggling with complex mental health challenges. Hans, for instance, critiqued that people with complex psychological and social needs are funneled into a system that is fundamentally unprepared to support them.

(...) there's no doubt that there's a handful here—if not more—primarily in the closed section, who should never have been in prison! I mean... they should have been in the closed [psychiatric] ward, or at least somewhere with much, much more resources to address their diagnoses.

His remarks call attention to the mismatch between institutional design and the realities of those it is tasked with handling. It is a question of whether the penal system can or should be the container for such profound social and psychological suffering. Janna, another staff member, criticized how the opening of Jyderup Prison resulted in women who had previously been incarcerated at Herstedvester—a facility with more specialized mental health resources—being transferred to a prison lacking such supports. She believed Herstedvester was better at recognizing that “many of them had been victims of abuse themselves and were really struggling”. Consequently, Janna contended that the histories of abuse among incarcerated women are currently insufficiently addressed at Jyderup, despite the facility being designed—according to the Danish Government (2017) and management of the Prisons of Denmark (2017)—to provide more tailored activities and rehabilitation offers for women.

Some staff linked the institutional shortcomings to a political shift that has permeated the Prisons of Denmark, moving the focus from *dynamic* security toward an emphasis on *static* security. Anni, for instance described dynamic security as a “lost” concept, overshadowed by a dominant emphasis on “order and security.” *Static* security involves physical and procedural measures such as locks, barriers, and surveillance, focusing primarily on maintaining order and minimizing risk (Kilmer et al., 2023; Minke & Smith, 2017). In contrast, *dynamic* security centers on relational presence and preventative care; building trust, truly knowing individuals, and noticing early signs of distress before situations escalate (ibid.). Anni found this change affected her work negatively:

I find it challenging because order and security take precedence over everything else. (...) When I started, dynamic security was more talked about; that one worked with relationships. I think that concept has been lost.

Supporting Anni's observation, research shows that dynamic security has become marginalized in practice, with increasing administrative demands and fewer staff available to carry out relational work (Minke & Smith, 2017). The rehabilitative purposes attributed to (Nordic) prisons co-exist uneasily with retributive goals aimed at punishing people more harshly (Smith, 2009, 2023), as also visible in the newest agreement on the Budget of The Prisons of Denmark 2026–2030 (Danish Government, 2025a). Importantly, this shift reflects the influence of policies driven by penal excess, which have been found to provoke resistance

among prison staff members (Damsa, 2023b; Smith, 2022). Hannah, who works in rehabilitative efforts, reflected on the challenges of supporting incarcerated women while navigating the dominating logic of static security. She described her role as “acting as a kind of buffer between the prison system and the treatment world”. This notion of a buffer—a soft human intermediary—point to a fault line between regimes and logics. According to Hannah, treatment work demands presence, attunement, and emotional availability, whereas the prison system tends to function through generalization and control:

(...) you have to see people, you can't just see them as being inmates or as numbers... there are just some of the prison guards who do that. I think, we need to see them as being humans and approach them as regular, ehh, like meet them at eye level. (...) we get this sense that this approach is not exactly welcomed; at least not by everyone in the prison regime.

Hannah's words highlight a central tension: supporting change requires engaging the whole person and seeing beyond the label of “inmate,” a perspective that clashes with the prison regime's priorities. As Janna, another staff member, put it bluntly: “[static] security is what will always come first. Because this is a prison, not a treatment facility.” Consequently, relational care and conditions for treatment are frequently pushed to the background. The dominance of hierarchical, security-driven logic became starkly evident during Trine's incarceration. After prolonged captivity in a basement by an abusive partner, Trine suffers from PTSD. Despite her psychiatrist's explicit advice against confinement—warning that it would exacerbate her condition—she is locked in her cell like all other incarcerated people during nights and illness. When Trine confided to the guards that confinement triggered severe flashbacks and panic, they explained that while psychiatrists could prescribe medication, they cannot prescribe unlocked doors. This illustrates that rather than equal forces clashing, the prison's static security logic dominates, with relational and rehabilitative approaches treated as guests; welcome, but never in charge.

### *Missing the roots of social harm*

For staff member Ulla, the question of prevention was not about what happens inside prison, but what *could* happen before. She spoke with frustration about the lack of “timely care” and inadequacy of support for the incarcerated women within the penal welfare system. As previous research has noted, “timely care” is often hindered and complicated by the linear logic of bureaucratic systems (Andersen & Bengtsson, 2019). For Ulla, addressing prevention meant confronting these institutional gaps—ensuring that individuals receive the resources and support needed to avoid the path to incarceration in the first place. As she put it: “I absolutely believe that the real hope, *the big hope*, doesn't lie in the prison service; it's out there, on the outside”. For Ulla, the conditions preceding—access to care, stability, and safety—were also decisive in shaping what could be achieved if incarcerated. As she said: “if people were doing just... a little bit better when they came in... then we could do more things with them”. Seen this way, the “real hope” she referred to was less about interventions within prison walls and more about a society where people are faring better before incarceration. In these

reflections, Ulla gestures toward what critical theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004) famously articulate as the object of abolition; “[n]ot so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons(…)” (p. 114). Anna, an incarcerated woman, expressed a similar doubt about the prison’s capacity to generatively alter life trajectories: “Maybe I don’t really understand the concept of it... You know, you’re thrown in and out of prison and all that. It leaves its mark when there’s no one [there for you]”, she reflected. She described incarceration as another rupture in a life already marked by instability and abandonment. I consider Anna’s uncertainty about “the concept of prison” less an expression of doubt than a critique: if prison does not interrupt cycles of harm, what purpose does it serve? This sentiment was echoed by Janna, a staff member, who noted, “It is difficult to imagine that by coming here [Jyderup Prison], one can come out the other end and be lifted from where they came from in the first place.” Her words serve as a caution against overly hopeful narratives of personal transformation within an institution that is inherently limited in its capacity to support such change. Supporting this critique, a literature review from the Ministry of Justice Research office itself concludes that “the severity of the sanction has a zero effect. However, some studies indicate that harsher penalties, such as serving a prison sentence, increase the risk of recidivism compared to less severe penalties” (Fuglsang, Okholm, & Ribe, 2020: 4, my translation). These arguments underpin a core conviction of this study: genuine harm prevention requires rethinking and reshaping the institutions themselves. Such fundamental changes could open possibilities for futures in which these women would not be incarcerated at all.

By now, this study has illustrated the coercive authority ascribed to penal welfare workers (Marston et al., 2005) and the ease with which incarcerated women are interpreted as non-compliant, often resulting in the withdrawal of support as a disciplinary measure. Many of the women I spoke with reflected further on how their so-called “acting out” behaviors were rarely met with curiosity or care. Instead, such behaviors were frequently disciplined, dismissed, or punished. Emma recounted such an example: she had hoped to receive attention and guidance, but instead was expelled. She had recently been transferred to a boarding school [efterskole] for students with dyslexia, which enabled her to finally experience a way of learning that made sense to her. As she recalled:

And then also to be affirmed that, you know, you can actually do something. Where in school you were told, ‘you’ll never amount to anything because you can’t sit still, you can’t concentrate, you’re cheeky’ (...) it was just like — [takes a deep breath signaling relief] ‘That’s why I’ve had a hard time. That’s why I haven’t been able to concentrate,’ you know?

The moment of recognition was powerful: her difficulties had a name, a reason. Her learning style was not wrong; just unmet. Yet this small opening into new possibility was quickly closed again. Just nine days into her new school, she was expelled for bringing and smoking weed. Emma had admitted the offense openly and pleaded to stay, telling the headmaster: “I’ll sit and kiss your feet if I can just stay at this school.” Her plea was a deep expression of wanting to stay in a place where she had felt seen and capable. Still, she was not given another chance, and her actions were punished by being expelled. When I asked what she believed could have helped instead, she answered without hesitation:

To have been given one more chance. (...) And then maybe some extra focus on me. Maybe some kind of addiction... help from someone. (...) Like people who cut themselves—it's a cry for help. (...) And then it's good to get that, just that little push, someone to dig a bit deeper: 'What is it that makes you do this? Why do you behave like this? Why do you say these things? [Merethe: yeah] What are you thinking when you do those things?'

Emma understood her addiction as an expression of deeper pain. What she truly needed was steady, compassionate curiosity. The questions she wished adults had asked echo adrienne maree brown's (2017) idea that an accountability process starts with asking 'why' (p. 148). Asking why does not excuse behavior but helps us understand how it comes to be; and from there, imagine ways to address it (ibid.). For Emma, this meant adults who would stay close, listen, and seek to understand the context behind her actions, rather than simply reacting. Camilla shared a similar experience, recalling how she often was disciplined but did not experience that anyone tried to understand why she struggled in school. Reflecting on those years, she wished staff had been more attuned to her well-being:

That they had looked more into how things were, you know—how the family was doing and why... because there was always—I mean, I really caused a lot of trouble in the lower grades.

Camilla linked her disruptive behavior in the lower grades to how poorly things were going at home. Like Emma, she longed for the adults around her to see her acting out not merely as problem to be corrected, but as a signal to look deeper. Instead, she recalled repeatedly being sent to the principal's office and a series of other disciplinary responses. The focus remained on her disruption, not on the circumstances shaping her actions. Camilla and Emma's stories offers a vital counterpoint to recent legal shifts such as the Executive Order on the Promotion of Good Order in Primary and Lower Secondary Schools [Bekendtgørelse om fremme af god orden i folkeskolen], which encourages teachers to impose more individualized sanctions on schoolchildren (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2024a, 2024c). Such measures treat behavior as isolated and punishable, rather than as a potential expression of distress or unmet needs that public infrastructures could engage with more meaningfully. Camilla's and Emma's stories remind us that addressing so-called "acting out" behavior requires something other than discipline and order. It calls for inquiry, relational attentiveness, and a willingness to ask why.

Many other women also encountered that institutions than schools focused on their behavior but neglected the reasons behind it. Fatma, for instance, experienced that she needed to defend herself as a matter of surviving while living in some of the homeless shelters. "It was life or death," she explained, capturing the intensity of her environment. Fatma shared that her first prison sentence followed an incident in which she physically defended herself in one of the shelters she stayed in—an act of resisting violence rather than initiating it. Instead of being recognized as self-protection within an unsafe environment, her actions were reframed as criminal conduct. In this way, the system punished survival strategies while leaving the violent conditions that necessitated them unaddressed in how they handled her behaviour. Reflecting on her time in Children and Youth homes, Louisa described how her behavior was frequently met with coercive interventions rather than care or understanding. With clear frustration, she recalled: "Some of the restraints I experienced... they were worse than in here

[Jyderup], you know? (...) How the fuck is that even possible?” Her reaction points to a troubling continuity that some of the women had experienced, where coercive control have been part of their early institutional experiences and now extends into imprisonment. A similar pattern was described by Louise, a staff member, who spoke of an incarcerated woman raised in residential care, noting how her early “acting out” became the primary focus of institutional response. In both accounts, behavior became the problem to manage, while the conditions and histories producing that behavior remained largely uninterrogated.

These stories reflect retributive justice culture’s broader pattern of abstracting behavior from its social and emotional context and meeting individual behavior with punishment rather than inquiry and process (Caruso, 2021; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016). What is notably absent in such responses is sustained curiosity and relational engagement—a willingness to ask why. It is precisely this absence that staff member Louise later reflected on when speaking about women incarcerated for sudden, violent outbursts, such as “knocking down bus drivers, or the train conductor, or the 7/11 employee.” Initially, these incidents had surprised her, but as she got to know the women, the context began to emerge:

If you talk to them, it’s like—it’s pure, repressed rage that suddenly breaks out, right?  
Umm... because they’ve never really been... met... [Merethe: mhm] or understood, it all just kind of... burns out at some point, right? The balloon bursts.

Louise believed that these outbursts resulted from accumulated experiences of not being seen or heard. Over time, the rage built up until the women could no longer contain it. At this breaking point, the outbursts emerged, with repressed anger manifesting as violence. While research complicates simplistic causal narratives about who enacts violence (Christensen, 2024; Christoffersen et al., 2011; Henriksen & Miller, 2012), a study with incarcerated men and women found that many were caught in cycles of emotional suppression and explosive release, sometimes manifesting as violence toward themselves or others (Laws, 2019). The women themselves described a dynamic of accumulating rage in relation to their encounters with the penal welfare system. Camilla, for example, spoke about how the constant turnover of caseworkers and their failure to meaningfully engage with her life story left her feeling “agitated and you come across as this, uh... aggressive type, almost!” Similarly, a recent study on Danish Job Centers found that expressions of anger often arise from experiences of injustice and serve as resistance to bureaucratic proceedings (Monrad, 2024). Staff member Louise, observed, that such emotional intensity tends to push professionals away rather than draw them in:

And when you then... get angry and full of rage, well, then no one wants to deal with you. The Job Centre’s don’t want you, and the municipalities don’t want you either. And then there’s the mentor—you have to be really persistent if you want to be a mentor for someone like that... uh, they [the mentors] just don’t want to or they don’t stick with it.

While relating to anger can be exhausting for professionals, it’s important to situate the women’s anger within the context of repeated experiences of being unmet. As Louise explained, a damaging cycle often unfolds: the more a person’s anger erupts, the more professionals withdraw; this withdrawal, in turn, deepens the original wound of not being seen or acknowledged. Louise’s observation thus points to how the penal welfare system deflects responsibility, failing to engage with the emotional harm it both encounters and reproduces.

Hans, another staff member, offered a complementary perspective. He noted that women who initially appear “streetwise” or “strongly controlling” often reveal something quite different when met with sustained attention: “Once you get to know them, they’re not strongly controlling after all. They’re just people who need someone to listen to them (...) so they don’t have to take on this role.” Hans’ readiness to stay engaged, even in the face of aggression, created space for these defensive behaviors to soften and, over time, change. This points to how anger or controlling behavior are not fixed traits, but dynamic responses shaped by environments. Louise and Hans, in different ways, gesture toward the same lived truth: behavior must be met with inquiry rather than dismissal. When people are genuinely listened to, something softens. When they are not, something hardens—until it may eventually burst.

### *When what is supposed to be supporting, inflicts harm*

Although harm is interwoven throughout the women’s encounters with the penal welfare system in this chapter, this section zooms in on moments where they were misled, excluded, or subjected to transgressive forms of treatment. In these accounts, the system meant to support them instead became a source of harm. Julia’s shared one such experience. When she was 18, her caseworker arranged an educational assessment and subsequently informed her that she did not qualify for the preparatory education program. Instead, she was placed in a work program packing Christmas boxes. When she accessed her case files a year later, she learned that her assessment scores had actually qualified her both for the program and for completing primary school. Confronted with this discrepancy, she was left wondering why she had been misled in the first place:

Julia: They were probably nervous that I couldn't handle being in school and wouldn't be stable enough because I didn't always show up for the meetings I had with the caseworkers. But that was because I felt it was very much the same thing all the time. I wasn't doing anything that would develop me.

Merethe: What should have happened for you to feel that you were developing?

Julia: That I had been allowed to go to school, or that I had been allowed to get out a bit more. I mean, I went to the Job Centre with old people twice a week and packed Christmas boxes; that was all I had to do. So, you automatically feel dumbed down.

Julia believed the penal welfare workers had lied because they saw her as too unstable to cope with a school setting. She acknowledged that her attendance at meetings with caseworkers had been inconsistent, and that this was likely interpreted as grounds to deny her access to education. Yet she understood her absences not as instability, but as a response to repetitive and unstimulating meetings that offered little support for her ambitions or sense of progress. Julia’s account thus adds an important layer to institutional readings of women as “not showing up,” foregrounding the need for activities to feel meaningful in order to sustain engagement. She longed for support in her educational development, yet was instead funneled into factory-like labor, packing boxes. This left her feeling “dumbed down”—and, given the professionals’ deception, she quite literally had been. In prison, she was now back in school,

preparing to finally take her exam; a step toward the future that had once been withheld from her.

Hawa had also experienced unreliable support within the penal welfare system. What stayed with her was the experience of being repeatedly let down by professionals; both prevalent in her past and fears for her family's future. She spoke with particular concern about her younger brothers, who, like her, had caseworkers that routinely failed to follow through:

My little brother's caseworker calls him and says, 'Yeah, we're going to the movies next week,' and then it just doesn't happen! And it's not good because the kids get dumb from it, and I'm afraid my brothers will end up like I did.

Hawa described how commitments between young people and professionals create anticipation—but when those professionals prove unreliable, that hopeful anticipation collapses again and again. Her phrase—“the kids get dumb from it”—evokes a kind of quiet, cumulative harm, the erosion of trust that accompanies promises left unkept. She worried that such repeated disappointments facing her brothers would not only hurt in the moment, but also shape their sense of self and place in the world. This resonates with a London-based study of young people in care, which found a profound longing to be cared for and intense frustration when professionals failed to maintain consistent contact (Gaskell, 2010). In both Hawa's account and the study's findings, unreliability—caseworkers forgetting, cancelling, or disappearing—is experienced as more than an administrative lapse, but a relational rupture. Perhaps also a measure of their own worth, a silent calculation of whether they are important enough to be shown up for.

A few women recounted interactions with penal welfare workers that involving transgressive conduct and even physical and sexual assault. For Tina, the violation happened in a therapist's office. Referred to therapy after giving birth to a stillborn child, she hoped for support in processing the loss. Instead, the therapist fixated on her history as a sex worker. “He became more interested in my pelvic region than in my personal life,” Tina said. She recalled how the therapist repeatedly asked probing questions about her past and sat uncomfortably close, saying, “He was disgusting!” Feeling disturbed and unsettled, Tina stopped attending therapy. When she told her caseworkers, they responded with surprise and a hint of skepticism, noting that others had spoken well of the therapist. No alternative was offered, and the matter was not pursued further. Tina was left without the support she had initially sought, now carrying the experience of both sexual transgression and dismissal.

Hanne shared an experience with a particularly disturbing abuse of power by a penal welfare worker. She recounted an encounter with a police officer who, under the guise of offering protection, expected sexual favors in return. Hanne had been in a turbulent relationship with a man who frequently demeaned and abused her. After her partner burned her with cigarettes, she called the police. One officer later phoned her and said, “Isn't it nicer if it's just me coming over?”, and then showed up alone. As she described what had happened to her, the officer asked her to sit on his lap because she was “so sad.” Then, he asked her to perform oral sex. She complied, while crying.:

It was kind of like: what?! What the hell is going on here? You know... I was confused, I was sad, and I was burned, it hurt (...) I'm sitting there crying while sucking dick, right! I mean, it was not so great. I just have to say, it wasn't so...

Hanne initially reported the incident to the police, however, as she felt bad for the officer, she withdrew the case. “He could lose everything”, as she said. The officer later returned to her home, bringing 200 DKK and some food; a gesture she called “a gift” for not pursuing the case. This incident, alongside other painful experiences with penal welfare professionals, prompted Hanne to ask me: “So, can you understand why I find it a bit difficult to trust someone who's supposed to like manage my life?” Hanne's words cut to the core of a structural problem: her story lays bare how the very institutions tasked with care can, when integrity falters, become new sites of harm. She highlighted another particularly disheartening experience when the municipality began sending her official letters in Kalaallisut (Greenlandic) and referred her to a hepatitis vaccination program. Though Hanne's mother is Kalaaleq (Greenlandic), her father is Danish, and she was born and raised in Denmark. Danish is her first language, and she has spent her entire adult life in the country. What may have been intended as a gesture of linguistic inclusion—if we are being generous—was experienced by Hanne as a racialized sorting; an administrative decision that ignored her lived reality.

I assume that when I go to the municipal office, I must be Danish because I've lived here my whole life except for three months. (...) Then you go in there, and you're only judged by your skin color. Honestly!

What stung, Hanne explained, was not merely the language mismatch, but the underlying assumption it carried: that her skin color overshadowed everything else she had lived and worked for. She experienced the penal welfare system's tendency to differentiate according to social categories as erasing her full reality. This struck her deeply, particularly because much of her life had been devoted to striving for belonging. As she put it; “I've really done everything for the Danes (...) and really tried to adapt in every way I can. And still, you're never considered Danish.” The municipality's letters felt like a withholding of recognition to Hanne; a persistent denial of national belonging. Despite her sustained efforts to meet what she perceived as the criteria for Danishness, she remained misrecognized.

### *Displaying the main outline in perspective*

This thematic section turned to the use of the retributive reactions within prison, seen across a range of circumstances: when women were harmed by others, when they were punished for their own actions, or when they endured emotional and psychological suffering. Across these varied situations, a shared thread runs through the women's accounts; retribution compounded suffering. The women did not experience these responses offering possibility for transformation; instead, they brought further harm through the absence of social acknowledgment. Staff members likewise pointed to the need for infrastructure change in the wider society and did not view the prison as capable of resolving deep social issues. As staff member Ulla put it, “the big hope” lies not inside the prison, but beyond it.

The women shared incidents where they experienced the penal welfare system as harmful, rather than successful in addressing the social harm they experienced. For some, this relates to being excluded from national belonging; for others, it stemmed from a pattern of unreliability and broken promises. Still others described experiences of sexually transgressive behavior by those in positions of authority. Within the varied institutional terrain of the penal welfare system—in particular schools and residential care—the women spoke of how their behavior was rarely met with understanding. As children, they did not experience professionals as curious about, or willing to explore, the conditions shaping their actions. Instead, their ‘acting out’ was framed as deviance to be contained through control or discipline. Such responses reduce complex social and emotional expressions to matters of order, thereby foreclosing opportunities for deeper engagement. This would entail greater relational attentiveness, interpretive inquiry, and a readiness to ask why; an approach largely absent from their experiences. Recalling an earlier point in this chapter—that failure to comply with conditional welfare often leads to the withdrawal of support—it becomes clear that these early encounters were also expressions of a broader punitive-security logic, as prior research has also demonstrated (Bjerre & Brinkgaard, 2025; Brønsted, 2019; Christensen et al., 2024). As such, retributive justice culture is embedded within the framework of harm prevention dispersed across various institutions, shaping the ways they interpret need and respond to distress.

Raising the reflective horizon brings a more fundamental critique of the penal welfare system’s capacity to address social harm into view. While it encompasses initiatives aimed at creating structures for social equity (such as free education and healthcare), much of its function is oriented toward mitigating the effects of inequality and harm, rather than transforming the structures that are part of generating them. As social work scholars Stine Thygesen and Lone Bæk Brønsted (2023) argue such interventions may provide (important) relief for individuals, yet they leave the underlying drivers of harm largely intact. This recognition brings us back to reflections of how relational forms of support can be meaningfully linked to structural transformation. The system’s individualizing impulse plays a particularly stabilizing role: it shapes not only how harm is interpreted, but also how responsibility is assigned and interventions are designed. This aligns with sociologist Georg Simmel’s (1965) observation that “[t]he goal of assistance is precisely to mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that the social structure may continue to be based on this differentiation” (p. 122). In other words, if the aim were truly to eliminate phenomena such as poverty, it would require dismantling the very social structures that produce it; not merely offering support to those suffering from its effects. Returning to Pemberton’s (2015) argument that a society’s configuration shapes how much social harm is both produced and mitigated (p. 10), the individualizing orientation of relief in Denmark can be understood as part of the ongoing reproduction of social harm.

## Concluding reflections

One of the guiding questions in this study is: What can these women's experiences teach us about the workings of the Danish penal welfare system? This inquiry opens an epistemological space—not only asking what knowledge emerges from these encounters, but also how we come to understand and value it. The depiction of the penal welfare system presented here comes from a particular vantage point: socially marginalized women, those with “too little wealth and power,” as Braithwaite (1979: 187) perhaps would describe them. Rather than aiming for broad generalizability, this analysis depicts how the system operates specifically for this group—a crucial focus, given that prison staff believed those with relatively more resources tend to benefit more under the current system. Had the analysis centered on a different social group, other dynamics and recurring patterns would likely have emerged. Yet, as this study has shown, bureaucratic procedures consistently take precedence over contextual and co-creative forms of support, suggesting that the dynamics described here reflect broader, systemic tendencies. By placing the experiences of incarcerated women alongside the perspectives of prison staff within the same analysis, this study presents their views as complementary and, to some extent, aligned in understanding what public support is needed for the group of women who ended up incarcerated. It attends to the repeated and significant experiences that incarcerated women have shared about the penal welfare system, alongside insights from the staff who navigate its structures daily. What comes into view is a rigid system, poorly attuned to the women's social realities—hard to access, difficult to maintain meaningful contact with, and prone to excluding or discarding those it is meant to support. While the system is enacted by people, it often fails to affirm the relationality the women seek; instead, its bureaucratic structures frequently hinder the development of supportive scaffolding and meaningful relationships. The women have not only been shaped by prior experiences of social harm within intimate and familial contexts (as vividly illustrated in the hybrid stories) but have also encountered new forms of relational abandonment through their interactions with the penal welfare system. In many cases, the system has failed to prevent or redress the very social harm the incarcerated women had hoped it might alleviate. This finding aligns with existing research on similar groups, which similarly points to the system's inadequacy in addressing the women's complex situations (Ahlmarm et al., 2021; Henriksen, 2021a; Mathiassen, 2015a). Nonetheless, the women often identified one or a few professionals who made a positive impact on their lives. By focusing on the qualities embodied by these individuals, this chapter introduced the figure of the Engaged Professional offering insights of practical relevance for social work practitioners working with similar populations.

Placing the experiences of incarcerated women at the center does more than expose their marginalization; it provides a vital vantage point from which to interrogate the structural conditions underpinning the penal welfare system. Through this lens, both the possibilities and the impossibilities of the system come into clearer view. The women are subject to retributive punishment for acts deemed punishable—acts that may themselves be expressions of social harm—while simultaneously having endured multiple social harms that the system has failed to address adequately. Recognizing this, the study underscores the imperative of

building conditions that foster genuine prevention and human flourishing. Central to this effort is attending to the social harms that have already occurred—a need the women themselves articulated, as the next chapter explores. This approach resonates with Lissi’s description of aftercare: tending to wounds with sustained attention, care, and commitment. Building on these insights, we are prompted to ask: how might institutions be reimagined and structured to foster sustained engagement that supports individuals not as exceptions, but as the norm? Pursuing this path offers the potential to create life-affirming institutions that not only prevent harm but actively nurture thriving.

## **If I were a prison officer**

If I were a prison officer, I would always try to listen, so no one felt cheated.

If I were a prison officer, I would be more understanding and not nearly as intrusive.

If I were a prison officer, I would never call inmates by number. I would learn their names.

If I were a prison officer, I would see the person and not the crime.

If I were a prison officer, I would do my best to help each individual.

If I were a prison officer, I would speak *with* the inmates, not *at* them.

If I were a prison officer, I would look them in the eyes when I spoke to them.

If I were a prison officer, I would never support my colleagues if I thought they were being unfair.

If I were a prison officer, I would meet people with an open mind.

If I were a prison officer, I would never lock people up.

This is why I could never become a prison officer.

Because my heart wouldn't allow it.

- Layla

## 7. Longing for other public structures and responses

In recounting their pasts, the women often highlighted situations where they experienced public support as absent, misaligned, or insufficient. These moments became hearths for imagining the ‘what else’; the speculative ground for envisioning other possibilities. At times, the women not only reimagined how professions and public systems might be practiced differently, but also questioned the very legitimacy or necessity of certain functions and roles. Layla’s text, which opens this chapter, is a powerful example of just that. It begins with her imagining how she would take on the role of a prison officer, drawing on her own experiences of incarceration and the kinds of treatment she longed for. Yet, despite the tweaks and differences she adds to its enactment, Layla’s finds herself unable to inhabit the role due to its demands. The final line, “my heart wouldn’t allow it,” stands as a refusal towards locking people up; of the role, and of the system that necessitates it.

While the figure of *The Engaged Professional* epitomizes qualities of specific penal welfare workers by whom the women felt seen and supported, the longings explored in this chapter both build on and exceed what has been experienced and what currently exists. These longings are not limited to the personal qualities of individual professionals; they also point toward structural reconfigurations that hold the potential for imagining the penal welfare system—and the state itself—otherwise. When the women speculated about ‘the otherwise’ of public support structures, their visions were often closely entangled with personal dreams of transformation. These two threads—the institutional and the personal—run in parallel throughout the chapter. Public institutions already seek to facilitate particular forms of individual change (such as becoming substance-free, gaining employment, or achieving mental stability), and the women’s own longings for change thus offer an important counterpoint. Centering their visions of support and transformation, we gain insight into how they hoped public systems would respond to social harm. The then-incarcerated women expressed longings for forms of public support in which 1) they are genuinely listened to, 2) seen beyond labels of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’, 3) the social harm that already has occurred is addressed, and 4) they can learn, expand, and embrace in(ter)dependence. By unfolding and exploring the qualities of these longings one after the other, this chapter traces how the women

reimagine public support in ways that better attend to their needs and to the social harm they have both encountered and enacted. These longings along with Layla’s refusal to inhabit the role of a prison officer, evokes a reflective space. It asks us to consider: What would it truly require of the penal welfare state to meet these longings—not in gesture, but in lasting form and function?

## Longing to be genuinely listened to

Among the incarcerated women I engaged with, one longing stood out as the most vivid and consistently expressed: the desire to be genuinely listened to. With the notable exception of the Engaged Professional, the women had predominantly experienced not being listened to in their interactions with the penal welfare system. The longing to be listened to, and the frequent experience of not being heard, aligns with existing research on criminalized and marginalized people’s interactions with the Danish penal welfare system (Andersen et al., 2020; Bryderup, 2010: 174, Duke et al., 2023; Jensen & Hansen, 2024). Attempting to get a more nuanced understanding of what being listened to meant to the incarcerated women, and how the professionals which they had positive experiences with had listened, I often asked the women to put listening into words and provide examples. Across their stories, three interwoven qualities of the specific type of listening they wished for emerged: 1) Curiosity and non-directiveness, 2) Acceptance of their experiences as lived truth, and 3) Allowing what is shared to influence what happens next. The first quality—experiencing curiosity and non-directiveness—is powerfully illustrated in Camilla’s reflection. Speaking about why she appreciated the approach of a particular un-uniformed prison staff member, she shared:

She gave me the space to... talk about what I needed to talk about, umm, and she didn’t push me or tried to pull anything out of me, at all! She was just very... like, she just listened a lot and then gave a lot of feedback... yeah... which I could take with me and think about.

Camilla highlights how important it was that the staff member stayed with what she wanted to share, rather than steering the conversation toward a preset agenda. The staff member held space for Camilla’s own priorities to emerge, and this created the conditions for her to speak about what she felt ready to name. This approach differed from experiences of being ‘pushed or pulled’ in conversations. She appreciated that the feedback she received was not directive or prescriptive but offered gently—as something to reflect on and possibly integrate into her life. This respect for her (relational) autonomy, and the presence of a supportive and non-intrusive curiosity, made the interaction feel meaningful. It allowed Camilla to engage at her own pace, without feeling forced or judged. Julia similarly described how a caseworker’s willingness to truly listen gave her the opportunity to better understand herself. Rather than being shut down or dismissed—told things like “that’s just in your head”, as she phrased it—Julia experienced the caseworker stayed with what she shared and explored it alongside her. This kind of engagement affirmed her as someone whose inner world was not only real but worth attending to, co-creating a space where self-reflection and relational trust could grow.

Lissi recalled a session with a psychologist where she experienced the opposite of being listened to with curiosity and non-directiveness. From the outset, she sensed that the psychologist was not open to letting her guide the conversation toward what felt important to her. Having read Lissi's case files beforehand, the psychologist insisted on focusing on her relationship with her father. For Lissi, this predetermined agenda—shaped by the psychologist's interpretation of her files—felt like a breach of relational trust. She described it as “a bit like a violation,” adding that she felt “run over by her.” What Lissi longed for instead was a different kind of engagement: “Get to know me before you, umm, start asking about the most vulnerable parts of my life.” What she longed for was twofold: to be treated as an active participant in conversations about her own life, and to enter into a relationship where trust could develop slowly, so that painful memories would only be revisited once enough trust was in place. Curiosity and openness thus emerge as essential preconditions for engaging with painful experiences and social harm. Both Lissi and Camilla drew on metaphors of violence—being pushed, pulled, run over, violated—to describe interactions with professionals in which their agency was denied. These metaphors speak to the embodied sense of discomfort and coercion that arises when a conversation is led by someone else's assumptions and agenda. They offer a stark visual of the emotional cost of experiencing being treated as an object of intervention, rather than a subject in relationships. Some women noted feeling genuinely listened to during the interviews, using these moments to illustrate what attentive listening feels like. As Louisa described:

Louisa: Just like you're sitting here and listening to me now, and I think that's really nice. And finally, I get the chance to talk with someone who just sits and listens, I think that's really nice.

Merethe: I'm glad to hear that.

Louisa: I haven't experienced that in a long time, so...

What Louisa appreciated most was that I merely “sat and listened.” To me, this reflects the importance of being received without direction, and of being witnessed and accompanied as her stories were shared and felt. When I later concluded an interview with Camilla and we reflected together on her experience, she recalled a previous conversation with a substance abuse consultant, describing it as “pulling for information,” something she had found deeply unpleasant. She contrasted this with our conversation, which felt “very natural and easy.” Because she did not feel pressured to disclose, she was not on guard and could focus on sharing what and how she wanted, making the interaction feel less intrusive and more genuine. Beyond any personal qualities I brought to listening, my role as a researcher positioned me in ways that, in some respects, allowed for better conditions for attentive listening. Not being part of the penal welfare system enabled me to listen without needing to extract information for case assessments. Lea appeared attuned to how the institutional constraints faced by penal welfare workers, dictated by service mandates and budgetary decisions, impede their ability to listen fully and attentively. During our interview, she suggested:

They should set up a unit within the municipalities with professionals who aren't sitting on the money, aren't concerned with occupation... People who focus on you as a person, who actually have time to say, 'Hey, where are you at mentally?'

Lea's suggestion reflects a longing for open-ended listening: one that is not constrained by financial or occupational agendas. She expressed a wish for being listened to by professionals who genuinely have the interest in "you as a person" and the time to venture into the possible answers to the question of; "where are you at mentally?", exploring the complexities of emotional well-being.

Some of Emma's encounters with penal welfare workers shed light on the second quality of listening: accepting people's experiences as lived truth. She had been placed in an internship at a restaurant organized by the municipality. At first, she was excited about the workplace, but things quickly changed as she said: "My sous-chef touches the girls and touches me and stuff like that." When she reported this to the head chef, he did not intervene to address the sous-chef's behavior but instead threatened to fire her. Hoping for help, she turned to her caseworker, who disbelieved her and, as she recalled, suggested that she "must have exaggerated, ehm, because it just couldn't be true that a nice place like that could have such problems." To Emma, this response was devastating: "a real betrayal by the municipality". Despite facilitating the internship, "the municipality" failed to assume responsibility by not acknowledging and acting on her experience of harm. Her words were not treated as reliable, and the abusive behavior she described was effectively dismissed. Hawa also expressed frustration at not being believed or trusted when sharing her experiences of living at home with caseworkers at the municipality. For Hawa, it mattered less who was listening and what professional role they occupied; the crucial aspect was to be genuinely listened to and trusted by someone within the penal welfare system. She shared that, if she could redesign the system, a central change would be the creation of a space where people are truly heard and where their truths are accepted and trusted without skepticism or dismissal.

Hawa: Just someone who is willing to listen! [Merethe: Yeah.] Like, it didn't even matter who it was. Just someone willing to listen to what we were saying. None of them [at the municipality] believed what I told them. Even though it was like it was, they'd say: 'this sounds too exaggerated.' 'I mean, I'm standing here telling you what it is.' (...)

Merethe: So, when you told them how things were at home...?

Hawa speaks over: ... They didn't care at all.

Merethe: So they thought you were lying, or what?

Hawa: Well, they said to me like "we don't believe that" and stuff like that.

Hawa's experience of not being believed by penal welfare workers, left her feeling invalidated. She recounted moments where the professionals explicitly told her they did not believe her, compounding the emotional harm. Her statement: "They didn't care at all", speaks of her profound pain when experiencing not being recognized as a person whose experiences are worthy of attentive response and support. Similarly, Sofia expressed frustration at not being heard. She experienced that her own assessment of her bodily state was dismissed in favor of a doctor's evaluation. Sofia believed that no one could understand what it meant to live in her body better than herself. Yet within the penal welfare system, it was the doctor's test-based assessment that carried more weight. When asked what she would have liked to be changed, it centered around being listened to:

That they would have listened more to what I'm saying! It's my body, I'm the one who knows best. Sure, there may be specialists, and uh... some skilled doctors and all that, but for a regular municipal doctor to sit there and say, 'well, you're not sick enough', and then they listen more to him than they actually listen to me. Because they're not hearing what I'm saying!

Like Hawa, Sofia felt that what she shared was not fully recognized as a lived truth and did not influence the outcome of her case as she had hoped. This relates to a third quality of listening: allowing what is shared to shape what happens next. The women longed for their words to have the power to inform decisions in their case assessments. Both Hawa and Sofia experienced that their stories were not treated as reliable information to guide further action. Line added another dimension to this longing by emphasizing the importance of continuity in listening when it came to acting on what had already been shared. This longing stemmed from the exhaustion of repeatedly having to explain herself to new professionals at the municipality, often feeling stuck in loops. What she wanted instead was to stay in contact with one person who could say, “We talked about this last time, how is that going?” As she saw it, being genuinely listened to meant having someone who stayed, remembered what she had shared, and followed up with her. Hanne expressed a similar frustration: if penal welfare workers did not act on what she shared during meetings, she would prefer not to have the meetings at all.

Why have all those meetings? Why not just send someone to where they've already planned to go? Instead of pretending like we have any influence when actually we don't have that.

Hanne's frustration highlights how the decisions of penal welfare workers—in this case regarding occupational initiatives—left her feeling that her involvement was merely performative. She described the process as “pretending,” experiencing that her input had no real influence on the outcomes or direction of her case. I sensed her frustration as she spoke and asked whether the experience felt provoking. She confirmed, stating that it felt like “a waste of her time.” If her voice was not genuinely considered in the process, she would rather forgo meetings where her participation had no real influence. Louisa offered another thoughtful reflection on what it would mean to genuinely listen to the people one is tasked with supporting. Imagining herself in the role of a professional, she emphasized the importance of suspending one's own assumptions in order to make space for the perspectives and knowledge of the individual:

If I were, like, a pedagogue, or something similar, then I would listen more to the citizen than, than, than I would listen to my own ideas, and... and what I myself think the citizen needs. [Merethe: mhm] I would listen to what the citizen themselves believes they need.

This quote highlights a form of listening that goes beyond merely hearing words to allowing those words to shape how the support structure is organized according to what the citizen “believes they need”—in other words, to allow for genuine influence. Louisa gestures toward a relational ethic of attentiveness, one in which professionals temporarily suspend the system's and their own frameworks, making space for the individual's ideas, needs, and language to take center stage and guide what happens next. She deepens this reflection by linking the absence of attuned listening to the potential escalation of violence, both toward others and toward herself:

Listen to me, and listen to my ideas, and listen to my... body language, listen to everything I have, before—for example, let's just say I've been out fight... stabbing someone out in town yesterday, right?—Then listen to me before I lash out and become dangerous to others or to myself.

Louisa suggests that certain acts of violence can be prevented when people are truly listened to and their disclosures are acted upon. This imagined scenario calls for understanding violence as relational—often emerging from experiences of neglect or dismissal that lead to emotional build-up. Her words resonate with reflections shared by staff member Louise in the previous chapter, who described the women's violent acts as expressions of “repressed rage that suddenly breaks out” because “they've never really been... met... or understood.” Louisa's account provides a lived articulation of this dynamic.

As I reflected on the kind of listening the incarcerated women longed for, I kept returning to a quote by the late Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2007). His words on what constitute “true dialogue” may help us attune to what is required to create the conditions for listening within public institutions:

In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. (...) If we think we monopolize the truth and we still organize a dialogue, it is not authentic. (...) We have to allow what is good, beautiful and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us. (Ibid.: xv–xvi)

Hanh gestures toward a relational ethic of openness—one in which dialogue is not merely about presenting one's perspective but about remaining available for change. The possibility of change, then, becomes the very condition that makes dialogue meaningful. Camilla, for example, highlighted the value of receiving feedback from a professional she could engage with without pressure—a gesture of respect that honored her agency and allowed her room to reflect and grow. The figure of the Engaged Professional similarly embodies this ethic, listening responsively with a willingness to be affected and to act accordingly.

Importantly, the kind of listening the women long for requires more than increasing the professionals' listening's skills and willingness to change; it demands a system capable of responding with structural flexibility. The women's experiences suggest that their knowledge—of their lives, needs, and longings—rarely holds that kind of transformative power currently. Their insights are invited, yet they are seldom granted the capacity to reshape the rules, routines, or objectives of the penal welfare system. Professionals may wish to listen and respond, but they are constrained by institutional structures that resist being reshaped through dialogue. Despite numerous user involvement meetings and consultations, the underlying logic of how harm is understood and prevented largely remains intact. This aligns with the argument of social work scholars Mette Bladt and Rasmus Christensen (2021), who stress that simply including people's voices in social pedagogical projects is insufficient to evoke transformation. Echoing Hanne's experience of meetings as performative, Bladt and Christensen (2021) contend that the current bureaucratic structuring of the penal welfare system prevents participatory elements from becoming genuine participation. In such contexts, listening risks being reduced to procedural compliance rather than serving as a pathway for institutional learning and transformation, allowing the system to adapt and improve its harm-preventive practices. Bladt and Christensen (2021) therefore propose restructuring organizations and services to enable “transformative participation” (my

translation), in which people's insights can meaningfully shape the very penal welfare structures that govern their lives. This resonates with Eriksson's (2009) finding that community processes can provide "links from micro- to macro-levels of social relations [that] can be an exercise in deliberative democracy" (p. 317). As such, the women's longing to be genuinely listened to can be understood not merely as a request for improved professional listening, but as a call for a redistribution of epistemic and political power—one that recognizes their knowledge as legitimate and actionable in shaping decisions and practices in public systems.

### Longing to be seen beyond labels of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'

While the longing to *be listened to* concerns being received, accompanied, and granted agency, the longing to *be seen* pertains to the way one is perceived, positioned, and related to. Several women spoke, directly or indirectly, about resisting being reduced to static labels. They expressed discomfort with being viewed solely as 'criminals' or 'bad people,' and just as strongly, they rejected the opposite framing: being seen only as 'victims' or 'people to pity.' Both poles felt limiting. Anna described the aftermath of her sentence as a moment in which she felt she had to "accept that you suddenly are 'a criminal,'" a characterization she experienced as so "grotesque" that she had to repeat it to herself over and over to let it sink in. When I asked whether a sentence necessarily makes one a "criminal," she explained that she felt forced to assume that identity "because this is how the world will see me." Thus, Anna's experience illustrates how her sense of self, like that of other women, is formed in relation to the public pedagogy of prisons. As Meiners (2010) contends, the very existence of prisons as institutions circulates the message that those who break the law are "criminals"—inherently bad people who deserve confinement. The women longed to be seen in ways that afforded greater dignity and nuance. This desire extended beyond professionals within the penal welfare system to include friends, family members, and even how they came to view themselves. The desire to be seen differently thus traversed multiple relational spaces. Sissel offered a particularly rich reflection on what it had meant to her to be recognized in a fuller, more humane sense. She described a pivotal period in her late teens, when a family member stepped into her life and assumed a more consistent and caring role. The way he perceived and related to her, made a tangible difference. Curious about this difference, I asked what set his way of relating apart from the professionals she had met in schools and Children and Youth Homes. She explained:

I think, for example at the Children and Youth Home, they only looked at what you did, they didn't look at the reasons behind it. My [family member], he knew that my dad was dead, he knew how things were with my mom, he knew I was just struggling, right... and I just don't think they were very good at analyzing me or spending time trying to understand it. They just saw the things I did and thought I was a brat, right? [Merethe: mm] (...)

There was more need for one-on-one contact and stuff like that [Merethe: mm], especially when you've just lost your dad and don't have your mom in your life. You need an adult to show you that you can trust them. Just because you do something wrong, they won't just throw you away—that you're okay even if you do something wrong. It's something you do,

not who you are [Merethe: mm].

So... I think he was better at seeing through that, right [Merethe: mm], at separating actions from the person. I mean, he often told me, "You may have done stupid things, but you're a good girl," and that "we have to move on from it. We can't keep dwelling on it or we'll never move forward".

Sissel's reflection offers a poignant account of what she had needed during a period of intense distress as a teenager. This distress was shaped by the loss of her father—whom she had previously shared with me had been murdered—and the absence of her mother, who struggled to care for her. She longed for a relational ethic in which her actions were understood as meaningful signals—expressions of distress rather than fixed indicators of character, such as being labeled "a brat." For Sissel, being truly seen required professionals to spend time with her one-on-one, demonstrating a genuine interest in understanding the reasons behind her behavior rather than merely reacting to it. She wanted to be recognized as a young person in need of steady presence and affirmation, someone deserving of care even when she made mistakes. The key difference, in her view, was that her family member succeeded in differentiating between action and person—something she had not experienced at the Children and Youth Home. While acknowledging that she sometimes did "stupid things," he reminded her of her being "good" and emphasized a shared desire to "move forward" together. In doing so, he enabled her to remain connected with him and offered a way of relating to her actions that did not collapse them into identity. Sissel's memory of being called "a good girl" stands as a counter-narrative to the verdicts that could be made from a retributive framework. It mattered greatly to her that someone recognized her capacity for goodness and refused to let her acting-out behavior define her personhood.

Camilla shared experiences from Children and Youth Homes that resonated closely with Sissel's reflections. In her youth, she had repeatedly run away from the homes where she was placed. She described this behavior as intentional; a "test," as she called it: "Do they still like me if I'm a brat?" Her running away was a question posed to the penal welfare workers—she was seeking proof that care and contact would not be withdrawn the moment she crossed a line. Her running away was, in effect, a question posed to the penal welfare workers—an attempt to see whether care and contact would persist even when she crossed a line. Like Sissel, she was seeking relational security and hoping that professionals could recognize the roots and context of her behavior. Sissel and Camilla's reflections highlight a shared longing to be seen as complex individuals rather than reduced to isolated behaviors. Their stories illuminate the emotional toll of navigating a penal welfare system dominated by retributive and rehabilitative logics. Both approaches, whether punitive or treatment-focused, tend to individualize harm, framing it as a deficit within the person that requires either punishment or treatment, rather than tending to harm's relational and structural nesting (Sung & Gideon, 2010; Walen, 2014). When harm is framed primarily as a personal deficit, it hinders the ability to recognize complex personhood and contextual behavior. The women's experiences echo those of youth who have committed illegal acts, as documented in a previous study by Bryderup (2010) which found that they reject "a punitive pedagogy that emphasizes behavior regulation and consequences, where they feel humiliated and deprived of opportunities to be together with others" (p. 174). There is thus a clear alignment between the women's experiences and Bryderup's findings, highlighting how punitive approaches can obscure

relational needs and diminish opportunities for meaningful connection. The distinction between punitive and relational approaches is mirrored in Sissel's experiences with her family member versus the penal welfare workers at the Children and Youth Homes where she lived. When the family member told her, "We have to move on from it," the use of "we" was crucial. It framed the process of change as collective rather than isolating—signaling, in effect, that they were in it together. There was no emotional withdrawal, no punitive distancing. Instead, there was accompaniment, one of the key principles central to transformative justice frameworks, which frames sustained relational commitment as a condition for supporting an accountability process (Barrie, 2020; Pelsinger, 2025). To be seen, then, is not merely to be noticed by professionals; it is to be held in a generous gaze that seeks to understand behavior at its roots and possibly change behavior *together* rather than inflicting consequences on distance.

Many of women also actively rejected being seen as someone to pity. In my conversations with them, a recurring theme was a pride in having navigated life 'on their own'. By asserting their own competence and resilience, they challenged the perception of them being weak and fragile. Recalling how Thorkild Fogde, former head of The Prisons of Denmark, describes incarcerated women as "a particularly vulnerable and exposed group" (The Prisons of Denmark, 2019), and considering the broader political, professional, and academic focus on their marginalization as presented in chapter 5—including this study—it places their rejection of pity in context. To consider incarcerated women primarily through vulnerability as a catch-all category, risks obscuring the complex and varied processes that contribute to their situation (Waite & Darley, 2025). It may not only undermine their agency and diffuses possibilities for structural critique, but can also be used to justify extended carceral control under the guise of paternalistic care (ibid.). Camilla shared about an interaction in which she experienced being 'pitied' and reflected on the sentiment it evoked in her. She had been on the phone with an ex-partner to inform him that her exit permit from prison had been withdrawn, during which he expressed pity for her situation. Recalling the conversation, her words carried a mix of frustration and resolve:

You really don't need to feel sorry for me at all because it's not about pity for me; it's annoying, but it's not something to feel sorry about [Merethe: yeah] yeah... (...)  
I think I just feel that no one should feel sorry for me because there's nothing I can't handle on my own, kind of. I know there are lots of things that one can't handle alone, but for me, I think that... I've always managed on my own.

While this example does not involve a penal welfare worker, Camilla's reaction to pity illustrates the discomfort of misrecognition many women felt. Being pitied for losing her exit permit felt like not being truly seen, as Camilla sensed no acknowledgment of the full scope of her life experiences. After all she had been through, she wanted to be recognized as capable of navigating "annoying" setbacks like a withdrawn permit. She did not want to be seen as someone in need of saving, but rather as someone who had repeatedly proven her capacity to carry herself through adversity. Thinking back to Berlant's (2014) conceptualization of compassion as a social structure, Camilla refuses to be positioned beneath others. She destabilizes the hierarchy in which pity places her by rejecting it and insisting on the capacities and resources she already holds. To be seen as capable—having lived through various forms of social harm, as she had shared—was central to how she wanted to be perceived and related to

by others. Even as Camilla recognized that “there are lots of things one can’t handle alone,” her emphasis on having “managed on her own” reflected how she understood her life story, if not her present condition. She wanted others—her ex-partner as well as penal welfare workers—to see her through the lens of what she had endured and to respond to her from that recognition.

Many of the women spoke with similarly clarity about the discomfort of being pitied. It did not feel like care, but condescension. Yet another layer ran beneath the discomfort; one less about how others see them, but about who they believed they needed to be in order to change their life situation. Camilla captured this tension when she spoke of her brother, contrasting their responses to hardship:

I’ve never been the type to just lean back and say, ‘Oh, poor me.’ My big brother is like, ‘I can’t do that,’ (...) if you want to just sit with a bong, then that’s fine, but then you just have to stop whining about the fact that nothing else is happening, you know... but if you want something anything else, then you have to get up and do something about it.

For her, resisting pity was not only about pushing back against others’ perceptions but also about drawing a firm line between surrender and struggle. Her brother’s passivity signified a collapse she refused to permit for herself. Refusing to feel sorry for herself became a strategy for staying afloat; one that also meant rejecting others’ attempts to pity her. Like Camilla, Lea contrasted herself with her brother, whom she viewed as having succumbed to a victim position:

Either you become the weak victim, or you get up and fight your case. (...) I don’t just give in! But I think it’s also because I’ve always had to take care of my little brother.

Lea’s words express a survival logic deeply rooted in lived responsibility. Her self-conception as a fighter was shaped by hardship and the enduring task of caretaking. She had built her life around a commitment to fight; not only for herself but also for her brother. Lea’s framing invites a binary reading of strength, where there’s little space for in-between states of exhaustion, uncertainty, or emotional need. Some of the women seemed haunted by a fear about what would happen if they ever stopped pushing. When I asked Camilla directly if she feared ending up in a situation similar to her brother, she did not answer straightforwardly. Instead, she repeated, almost like a mantra: “It’s not going to happen... It will not. I will, I know it won’t happen...” In that repetition, I heard a plea to herself; a way of keeping the fear for that exact scenario at bay. I understand Lea’s rejection of victimhood and Camilla’s insistence on self-sufficiency as deeply shaped by their life experiences. Public support systems had in their experiences failed to provide the relational consistency they needed to be able to safely fall apart and be held. Their refusal of pity, then, can also be understood as not merely a rejection of being looked down upon, but also a quiet appeal for systems steady enough to let the survival mode soften.

Part of the women’s struggle to escape rigid dichotomies was a desire to be seen in ways that acknowledged their potential for transformation—a recognition of their capacity to become someone different, to grow beyond past identities. What many of the women sought was not to erase the past, but to believe the past would not dictate their future. They wanted to be seen as capable of change, and for the professionals to help them sustain that hope. Sissel voiced

deep frustration when she described being pinned to her past by penal welfare workers. In conversations about her situation, they had repeatedly invoked the widely used Danish concept of *social arv*—intergenerational transmission—the notion that a child’s social position and opportunities are shaped by their parents’ circumstances. “It’s that whole idea of intergenerational transmission,” Sissel said. “They almost just hammer it down over your head.” Her words were visceral, conveying how the use of the notion felt violent, as if the system itself declared: Your past determines your future. What Sissel longed for was to be supported in exploring who she wanted to become, with the certainty that help would be there along the way. Dominika described an even more urgent desire to become someone new. Raised in a family where illegal activity was a dominant reproductive strategy, she had carried those patterns into adulthood. Her determination to change was tied to a commitment to rebuild a life with and for her children. This, she emphasized, required a clean break. Her former self, she told me, felt like someone who no longer existed:

So everything that was, who I was, that person is gone. (...) that’s also why I say, when I call the municipality, I don’t know where to start because this, this is new to me, so I don’t know where to go, which, uh... Before I knew where to go, what buttons to press, where to turn, and all that, but now it’s just blank, I... it’s like I’m newborn, you could say.

The statement “that person is gone” carried multiple layers of meaning for her. It was both a separation from her past self and a declaration of becoming—a clear signal of her desire to live differently. In describing the process of leaving behind a former self, Dominika evoked a sense of rupture and renewal that brought to mind the concept of *dead name*<sup>67</sup> from queer communities. While the contexts are distinct, the parallels are striking: both reflect a yearning to be seen anew. For Dominika, and for others I spoke with, this was not simply a metaphorical gesture—it expressed a deep desire to sever ties with a past self that no longer felt authentic, a self that, in their eyes, was no longer alive. Dominika was asking to be recognized in the unfolding present. Yet to be a “newborn,” as she described herself, is not only hopeful but also frightening, as it entails heightened dependence. The familiarity of old patterns, however destructive, had provided a kind of orientation for Dominika. Now, she did not even know where to begin when calling the municipality. What she experienced was a blankness—a disorienting sense of not knowing how to move in this new identity. The tools that once helped her navigate life no longer fit. Dominika longed for scaffolding to support such a transformation and was in the process of trying to get a mentor assigned. Her experience can be framed in relation to anthropologist Tina Wilchen Christensen’s (2019) study of former right-wing extremists, which describes an “in-between world,” a liminal state in which people have left one social world but have not yet developed the “sensitivities required of them to act in a different ‘world’” (p. 4). Building on Butler (2020: 147) this highlights that fostering open-ended futures is not about prescribing a particular life path, but about creating conditions that allow to gain the sensibilities and tools needed for change to unfold. From this perspective, Dominika’s desire for transformation reflects a call for public support structures capable of making a transition into a new ‘world’ and a new identity both viable and sustainable. This requires fostering institutional practices grounded in the understanding that people are always

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<sup>67</sup> The term *dead name* is used by some queer individuals to describe a birth name that does not align with their gender identity, marking gendered expectations for a life they wish to end—or never truly felt was alive. For studies on dead naming, see Sinclair-Palm and Chokly (2023) and Pehl (2024).

in motion, and designing public support systems that do not aim to fix individuals in place, but rather accompany them through transitions. The women's longing to be seen beyond the binaries of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'—and the static identities these roles imply—reveals a desire for support systems able to hold ambiguity, contradiction, and transformation. Attending to this need involves disentangling identity from individual acts and addressing the structural and emotional roots of harm, through professional relationships capable of holding space for contradiction, growth, and the slow, ongoing work of becoming.

## Longing to address the social harm that already has occurred

The women emphasized that how public support structures engage with their pasts is of profound significance. They sought approaches that enabled them to reckon with the past without being permanently defined by it. They called for systems that could accompany them in addressing and processing the social harm they had endured, as part of fostering their capacity to move forward. As Lea already pointed to, the women wanted professionals to begin by asking simple, grounded questions like: “Where are you at mentally?” They resisted being rushed into training programs or occupation initiatives that ignored their current state of being. For them, transformation demanded this dual capacity: to confront what was and what remains, as a necessary step toward imagining and inhabiting different futures. In this sense, they longed for both the past and the present to be recognized as important temporal sites for addressing social harm. Julia spoke of wishing that, during her childhood, “people had reacted when things were happening,” and that the penal welfare workers would “dig a little deeper” into what was really going on in her family. She thus longed for public services that are responsive, curious, and willing to go beyond surface-level assessments of behavior—to engage with complexity and offering care in real time, as harm unfolds.

Trine's reflections add further depth to this call for curious responsiveness by illuminating how public systems might engage with people's pasts as active terrains shaping the present. Having encountered multiple therapeutic approaches, Trine distinguished between what she called “tool-oriented” support and what we might frame as “root-oriented” support;<sup>68</sup> an approach that seeks to understand and address the origins of pain and behavior. This distinction was important as Trine believed that for some people, tools are not enough. She described that many of the interventions she had encountered, both in child and adult psychiatry, had focused on behavioral regulation. “It's tools!” she said, imitating the kind of logic she had been offered: “Like, if you're put in the yellow zone today, it's like... ‘You shouldn't be in the red, because then you need to use this tool’”. These therapeutic frameworks, centered on behavioral zones and coping mechanisms, never reached the depth of support she needed. “That doesn't work for me,” Trine plainly said. In contrast, the kind of therapy that resonated with her was what she described as going in to “clean it up”:

Psychotherapists go in and work on: “Where does it come from?” [Merethe: mhm] They go in and... clean it up, like we went all the way back to when I was 4-5 years old... Because

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<sup>68</sup> Drawing on the language of transformative justice (Hoddy & Gready, 2020).

when you talk things through, that's what helps. (...) It's because I need to process my insane experiences...

Trine experienced being taught to cope with symptoms in the present as far too simplistic an approach. What she needed was support in tracing those symptoms back to their roots in her past. Her reflection highlights a crucial distinction between learning to manage one's feelings and understanding and processing where those feelings originate. For Trine, the latter was essential. In her view, a tool-based approach might be relevant and sufficient for people without what she described as "insane experiences" in their backpacks; those whose past is already 'sufficiently clean' and who can begin with the present. But for someone carrying a messy past, marked by accumulated social harm, support cannot start and end with techniques for symptom management. It must begin with engaging, unpacking, and processing those demanding experiences. As she explained:

(...) people like Jacob Ellemann<sup>69</sup>, who might have had a good life, he could benefit from a psychologist; "How can I handle... now when I get stressed [Merethe: mhm], which tool should I bring out?" [Merethe: mhm] You can't do that with me, because it's... processing, that's what I need.

Without processing past experiences of social harm, Trine found that the effects and symptoms persisted, no matter how many new tools were introduced in the present. For those carrying histories heavy with harm, support must begin at the roots. She thus called for public systems to engage attentively with the full weight of a person's history as part of determining what kind of support is needed in the present.

Several of the other women similarly pointed to the importance of support in engaging with their pasts and experiences of harm. Dominika, for instance, described how she experienced thinking about her own history as overwhelming to the point of feeling unmanageable: "If I think back on those things, what I've been through, then I go mad, I go stupid. (...) I just can't contain it, I can't handle it." Dominika's experience of 'going mad' when visiting her past points to the need for support that enables people to relate to and process past harm. What had not been afforded her at the time of our engagement. Emma's reflections point in a similar direction, illustrating how unresolved experiences from the past can continue to shape the present in ways that exceeded what she felt able to bear on her own. She spoke with disarming clarity about how she had used drugs as a strategy to manage feelings she did not know how to cope with:

I took drugs for many years because of grief, betrayal, anger, irritation, disappointment, and all that! (...) I shut down, took a bunch of drugs, and then it was just on hold. [Merethe: yes] Back then, I just thought: "Well, they're erased!" But when you came out of the high, well, then it just got worse again. [Merethe: yes] It was just like a temporary pause button (...) All those things, I never actually processed any of them. (...) It just turned into one big haze... in the end. And then when that wave of feelings hit afterward, you're like... "I can't handle this!"

For Emma, the weight of grief, betrayal, and anger felt unbearable to hold. Drugs became her

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<sup>69</sup> The former vice-prime minister of Denmark for The Liberal Party of Denmark [Venstre]. In February 2023 he went on a sick leave as he suffered from stress, and in October 2023 he quit politics.

way of pressing pause—temporarily muting reactions to experiences which she could not yet process. Yet the relief was fleeting. When the haze lifted, a “wave of feelings hit”, unchanged and unresolved. Over time, Emma came to recognize that her drug use had not resolved the difficult emotions; it only postponed what she ultimately needed to face and work through. At the time of the interview, she described practicing how to remain with difficult emotions rather than numbing or fleeing from them. Like Julia, she had finally received inpatient substance abuse treatment during incarceration. She now considered how “it’s really, really damaging to shut yourself off from your own emotions and dismiss your feelings (...)”. Following the psychoeducation she had received as part of the substance abuse program, Emma realized that she gained capacity to stay with painful emotions without being overwhelmed by them. A recent study of women associated with so-called drug- and/or crime-related environments who participated in a soma-based, trauma-informed rehabilitation program found that participants developed a greater ability to fully feel their emotions and gaining more control over impulsive reactions (Ahlmarm et al., 2021). Emma’s reflections thus mirror a broader pattern in which psychoeducation practices can gradually expand people’s capacity to remain with difficult emotions and past harm rather than escaping them, while enabling greater autonomy in how they respond in the present.

For many of the incarcerated women I engaged with, the inability to process earlier experiences of harm had not only affected their sense of self but had also shaped the choices that eventually led to punishable acts. Some articulated a clear connection between unacknowledged trauma and the behaviors for which they were later punished. Julia, for instance, stated: “The situation itself could have been avoided if I had received inpatient treatment.” By “the situation,” she referred to her escalating substance use, involvement in illegal activities, and ultimately her imprisonment. At the time, she described herself as “really depressed,” struggling to set boundaries, and in desperate need of sustained support. She had reached out to the municipality to request inpatient substance abuse treatment, but her request was denied. To Julia, this denial of access to support marked a critical turning point that shaped the events that followed. As the reader might recall, Lissi offered a similar reflection on the absence of timely support, illustrating how unaddressed trauma can have cascading effects, which was presented in the introduction of this dissertation. During the interview, Lissi described how not having processed her childhood experiences had contributed to a deep-seated belief that she was unlovable. This belief, in turn, led her to act in ways that compromised her own boundaries in an attempt to prove her worth, particularly in relation to boyfriends. One vivid memory she returned to was agreeing to store weapons in the apartment she shared with a former boyfriend, a home that also housed his 15-year-old child. Reflecting on that time, Lissi said:

And I think, had I processed it [her childhood] earlier, I would never have gone along with the things I’ve agreed to. It’s not like I’m blaming others for it because I’ve made the bad decisions myself... but there’s been a lot of external influences...

Like Julia, Lissi’s reflection focuses less on deflecting responsibility and more on tracing how her autonomy developed in relation to the injustices she had experienced (Anderson & Honneth, 2005). Her account highlights how unprocessed harm can influence decision-making, distorting both her sense of what is right and her capacity to stand by it. This pattern

is also reflected in the soma-based, trauma-informed rehabilitation program described by Ahlmark et al. (2021), where women reported that participation helped them better recognize and honor their own boundaries. Many had been involved in romantic relationships with men that initially appeared protective but later became controlling or violent (ibid.: 51). After completing the program, participants described a clearer awareness of their limits and a greater capacity to step away from harmful relationships and situations (ibid.: 90). Taken together with Julia and Lissi's experiences, these accounts highlight how unprocessed past trauma can shape choices, while responsive, trauma-informed support offers a pathway to reclaiming agency and cultivating healthier boundaries. The women also reflected on how public structures could have responded to social harms as they occurred. Some considered how their life trajectories might have been different if penal welfare workers had insisted on working more closely with their parents and caretakers when they were children. Julia, for instance, speculated that such interventions might have changed the way harm unfolded in real time. "Maybe they should've pushed a bit more," she said, referring to how she wished professionals had been persistent with her mother. "Maybe listened a bit more, like—to us kids." Her words express a longing for proactive and persistent care that might have altered the trajectory of harm as it unfolded in her family. For Emma, responding to harm meant addressing the full ecosystem of relationships that shaped an individual's experiences. Interventions, she emphasized, should occur in context, rather than focusing solely on isolated individual processing. As she said: "It has to include the family. It has to include relatives, school teachers, educational advisors—everyone. It needs to go all the way around." As such, Emma's emphasis on interventions that include family, educators, and community members underscores the critical need for systems that respond early and relationally, creating the conditions to prevent harm from escalating into more serious consequences.

Just as the women longed not only to be listened to but also to listen, they sought not only support in processing harm they had experienced but also sought to understand and work through harm they had caused. Nynne, for example, suggested that Denmark's justice system could benefit from more dialogical processes between those who had committed and those who had been affected by harm. She referred to practices in Norway, where, in serious crime cases, victims or their relatives sometimes participate in facilitated dialogues with those who caused the harm. "(...) it apparently helps a lot to keep people from going out and doing stuff like that again," Nynne said. Such dialogue offers something that punishment cannot: an opportunity to encounter the impact of one's actions directly. This form of engagement is central to processing past harm, allowing a meeting of subjectivities that avoids reducing individuals to 'victim' or 'offender' while still acknowledging the real effects of the harm. Sissel shared a memory that illustrated what such an encounter might feel like on a personal scale. She spoke about a situation with the family member mentioned earlier, which had shaped a moment of clarity for her:

I remember at one point I got really angry at him, and it was intense. We were supposed to go hiking in some mountains, walking about 20 kilometers a day, and I wasn't prepared for that at all—I'd just been lazy, you know, just lying around and smoking weed for two years [Merethe: yeah].

Ehm so, at one point, I'd had enough, and I started yelling at him.

And then he went for a walk, came back, and said, "Sissel, you really mustn't yell at me, I

feel bad in my whole body from stuff like that [Merethe: mm], it hurts in my body that you yell at me". And he's just so calm, almost on the edge of being conflict-avoidant, you know...

So, yeah, it worked out really well because I just gained respect for him, you know? He didn't say anything back or judge me for it or anything. So, it was like... Yeah.

Her family member did not retaliate, withdraw, or moralize when she yelled at him. Instead, he established a boundary while affirming their relationship. He made clear that she was capable of hurting him and that her yelling affected his being and body. Yet rather than asking her to suppress her anger, he invited her to direct it differently. His message was simple and clear: your actions matter to me, and I hope you choose otherwise. Something shifted for Sissel in that moment. Confronted with his vulnerability and their interdependence, she understood how her actions had impacted him. Philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2011/2007: 20) notes that when faced with other's vulnerability, we are confronted with a choice: to care, or to wound. Sissel chose care. What made the moment so powerful to her was the absence of punishment. Her family member's response affirmed their connection, grounding it in trust and mutual respect. He offered a different way of relating; one that acknowledged harm without turning away. By witnessing his care for both himself and for her, Sissel, in turn, developed a deeper respect for him.

While serving sentences for acts they had committed, the incarcerated women expressed a profound longing for public responses to the multiple forms of social harm they had endured. In articulating these experiences, they drew attention to needs and experiences long overlooked or dismissed by the very penal welfare system now tasked with their punishment. Drawing on Pemberton (2015) and Anderson and Honneth (2005), their reflections can be read as a call for social resources they had long been denied—resources essential not only for addressing past harms, but also for supporting their autonomy and enhancing their capacity to make meaningful choices. Yar (2012) argues that when public institutions fail to address harm, they risk becoming generators of social harm themselves. From an abolitionist perspective, this dynamic is especially significant: neglecting past and ongoing trauma does not simply reflect bureaucratic failure—it actively compounds injury and reproduces cycles of harm. By centering these women's experiences, we can notice the importance of public support structures capable of holding the complexity of both their past and present, structures that could act as attentive bystanders to unfolding harm while offering sustained support for its transformation.

### Longing to learn, expand, and embrace in(ter)dependence

Yet another longing appeared in the women's accounts of what gave them hope, brought them moments of happiness, and how they chose to engage in activities during incarceration. It was the longing to learn, to expand, and to embrace in(ter)dependence. Writing in(ter)dependence in this way reflects the women's often-explicit desire for *in*dependence—gaining agency over their lives, achieving economic autonomy, even becoming business owners—while also holding space for their implicit, underlying longing to connect and relate more deeply with others: the

desire for *interdependence*. Feminist educator bell hooks (2014/1994: 59) famously write about coming to theory because she was hurting, and in theory finding a location for healing. In Jyderup prison, I encountered women who approached learning in a similar spirit: seeking understanding of experiences that had caused them suffering. Like hooks, they were not searching for detached truths, but striving for knowledge that might guide their lives, foster understanding, and play a role in their personal change. The women turned to psychology, philosophy, trauma theory, astrology, and Buddhism. They read about mental health diagnoses and explored philosophical perspectives on suffering—from Kierkegaard to spiritual teachings. These pursuits reflected a deep longing to learn and to expand their capacities and their sense of self. For Julia, this location for healing was found in psychology. She had turned to it to make sense of her upbringing: her mother had schizophrenia, her largely absent father had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, and Julia herself struggled throughout primary school, often acting out. As a teenager, Julia had been removed from her home and placed in residential care. Yet despite this intervention, she could not recall any professional helping her make sense of her own behavior or that of her family. It was not until much later—beginning with a book she borrowed from a library—that she started piecing things together. Psychology offered her, in her words, “answers and calmness.” It provided a framework for understanding her mother’s schizophrenia as shaped by life experiences and generational patterns, while also illuminating her own outwardly reactive behavior: “how I could be so... destructive in my behavior,” she said, “also, how other people around me might be outwardly reactive.” With these new insights, Julia realized, “it dawns on me that I can still manage to change it.” Engaging with her own agency and understanding socio-psychological dynamics became a way to shift both her behavior and the direction of her life. Her experience reflects a frustration voiced by many women previously discussed: that public support systems prioritized behavior management while failing to understand or respond to the social and relational contexts shaping those behaviors.

For these women, the longing to learn and expand was bound up with envisioning future possibilities and intentionally shaping their continuous process of becoming. Some described, with laughter and pride, how they had embraced being “nerds”—a playful yet meaningful marker of reclaimed identity and joy. It was about giving oneself permission to care deeply, to engage wholeheartedly, and to explore with curiosity. Nynne, for example, identified as a “slight nerd” in philosophy, a label she claimed with warmth: “It just means they [nerds] have enthusiasm. They have something, to put energy into something (...) And better than drugs,” she said. Her mention of drugs revealed a crucial connection: when meaningful passion was missing, substances had once filled the emotional void. In contrast, her enthusiasm for learning represented a radically different way of experiencing life. Research supports this pattern: people sometimes use drugs to access emotions—like joy—that are otherwise absent in their daily lives. Other studies have similarly found that people sometimes turn to drugs to access emotions, such as joy, that are otherwise absent from their lives (Ahlmark et. al., 2021: 40). She described how reading these works provided not only intellectual stimulation but also emotional companionship, as she recognized her own “gloom” reflected in the existential struggles of others. Through these writings, she encountered people who, centuries earlier, had tried to make sense of feelings she herself was grappling with.

Philosophy became more than an activity into which she could put her energy into—it became a companion, helping her reflect on difficult questions about the kind of person she wanted to become. This was at the same time a daunting task, she at times felt overwhelmed by:

(...) sometimes you end up feeling paralyzed because you're unsure which direction to choose. (...) You don't really need to decide what you want to do with your life. But you do need to decide what you want to do with yourself!

Uh... Because if you want to see yourself as *a just person*, then you need to act justly. If you want to be a courageous person, then you need to act... courageously in situations. So... you kind of have to choose your path that way.

Nynne described a deliberate process of self-shaping, a commitment to live in ways aligned with her ideals and aspirations. For her, this meant consistently choosing actions that moved her toward the person she wanted to become. For Emma, becoming a nerd was not an intellectual pursuit like Nynne's philosophy, but a discovery of enthusiasm for everyday life and creative expression. This shift signaled a widening of her inner life—a newfound curiosity, energy, and engagement that had previously felt out of reach. Reflecting on her transformation, she said:

Emma: Yeah, I've become such a huge nerd! [Merethe laughs] I mean, all the stuff I used to resist back in the day. (...) I just sort of became one [a nerd] over time. Now, I enjoy things like that. I like creative stuff; I like astrology... you know, horoscopes and all that. I'll sit down and write and write and write. People think it's crazy, but I just think, "Nah, shhh, I'm busy right now." I love it!

Merethe: That's awesome.

Emma: Yeah! You get a new side to yourself.

For Emma, the transformation had unfolded gradually. She now felt genuinely enthusiastic and absorbed in horoscopes and creative projects, taking pleasure in these pursuits in a way that had previously been foreign to her. Being a "nerd" became a label she could use to name this shift—a recognition of a new, more engaged side of herself. This identity stood in sharp contrast to her earlier life with a former boyfriend, where, in her words, "all we did was bake hash cakes and sit on our asses." With a mix of humor and sorrow, she added that they "only knew each other through the drugs." The emergence of this new identity—creative, curious, and devoted—revealed capacities she had not previously recognized. She began to see that she could contribute meaningfully to others: the women in Jyderup prison appreciated the cakes she baked in the common kitchen and enjoyed the horoscopes she created for them, allowing her to experience both joy and connection in ways that extended beyond herself. The significance of this shift was visible in the way she lit up as she recounted these experiences. The experiences of Nynne and Emma invite us to consider the transformative potential of enthusiasm: how public institutions can either create spaces where curiosity and passion thrive or environments that suppress these essential forms of growth. Research shows that public efforts fostering communities of practice and collaboration can support empowerment and collective transformation (Mørck et al., 2023; Mørck et al., 2024). To realize this potential, public institutions must be designed to value and nurture emerging capacities, and relational infrastructures—transgressive pedagogies, community kitchens, creative spaces, peer learning environments—must provide opportunities for individuals to be intentionally witnessed and to actively contribute to each other's becoming.

Linked to these reflections, Nynne voiced clear frustration at how professionals overlooked her and others' potential. "I think, overall, that the public sector should focus more on identifying people's resources," she stated. She described how individuals caught in addiction often become locked into what she termed an "addicted mentality," a belief that "[w]ell, I can't do anything else with my life." This mindset, she argued, becomes self-reinforcing, particularly when public systems fail to provide viable alternatives. Nynne emphasized that she wanted public institutions to help people discover their capacities—a practical step toward imagining other possible futures. Her own experience illustrated the problem: after her second incarceration, a case worker offered her early retirement—a proposal she found both absurd and dismissive of her potential:

I'm sitting here precisely because I've had the resources to do whatever I've done in terms of crime [Merethe: mhm]. So, it should be about figuring out how to use my resources on the right side of the law instead...

Nynne was puzzled and frustrated that no one seemed genuinely curious about what she could do. She did not want to be cast aside on retirement, but to be supported in finding work that aligned with her capacities. Like many others I met, Nynne had developed skills in sales, logistics, branding, and customer service that very well could be useful in many legal jobs. Line articulated a similar hope: that when someone leaves incarceration and says, "I would really like to do this," the penal welfare system "should help you on your way toward that." She thus stressed the importance of being supported towards realizing a different life path. Louisa explained that it was through her work as a vendor for *Hus Forbi*, a street newspaper sold by people experiencing homelessness, that she began to see herself differently: "polite, thoughtful, friendly, caring, smiling, funny." Selling the newspaper gave her a sense of purpose and responsibility, as she reflected:

I know I can't just sit around getting totally high and try to sell newspapers, right? It's freedom with responsibility. (...) Yeah, to show myself and others that I can take responsibility for something, so I can get something in return, if you understand. (...) Like: "Here I am. I'm homeless. Is there anyone who can help me?"

That final sentence can be read as a statement of presence and a reaching out to others without shame. Louisa was taking action—showing up and taking concrete steps toward change. The position of a vendor also provided a practical context in which reducing her drug use became both possible and relevant: she wanted to be alert and engaged with customers, and the work instilled a sense of accountability to herself.

Some of the women envisioned futures in which they could use what they had learned through hardship to support others—especially children and young people navigating the kinds of situations they had once endured. A few dreamed of leading youth institutions, hoping to transform the very care systems they had felt harmed by. Others imagined becoming the kind of stable, kind, and attentive contact person they had needed themselves. Still others aspired to become business owners to shape work life on their own terms. Yet, like enthusiasm, dreams did not always come easily. Some women shared how, earlier in life, their circumstances had kept dreams from taking shape. Hawa spoke powerfully to this sense of absence:

None of us had money, none of us had a job, none of us had anything. (...) I only thought about smoking weed. Because there was nothing else to do, we had no money, and we didn't think that far ahead. Like, not at all. We never talked about the future. Never, ever.

For Hawa and her friends, the future was largely absent from their daily concerns. Their routine of smoking weed functioned less as a deliberate choice and more as a way to fill otherwise empty days—a default in the apparent absence of alternatives or visible possibilities. Pathways to different futures did not seem known or accessible. This mirrors observations from a study on girls who use violence, in which professionals noted that participants' visions for the future were often narrow and short-term (Kongstad, 2008: 46). Kind (2025) similarly reflects on how social positions—“like class, race, and gender”—shape what feels imaginable (p. 372). While she argues that we can work to release ourselves from these constraints, she emphasizes that imagination is not a solitary endeavor, but something that emerges through “working together with one another and also with props” (p. 383). These “others” include professionals, whose engagement can either expand or limit the range of conceivable futures. Although this chapter centers the women's longings, a reflection from staff member Jørgen illustrates how professionals may inadvertently become barriers to dreaming. Echoing Nynne's notion of an “addiction mentality,” Jørgen described how some women, in his view, had resigned themselves to lives without fulfillment:

I think they live in that world, with that addiction and that's the only thing. [...] but it's also very realistic to say, those dreams, they will never be fulfilled. They say that indirectly themselves, because... "I can't and I won't and it... where I am in my life now, it simply can't happen." [Merethe: mh] and they don't believe themselves that it can succeed for them. They may have some dreams, some of them, but it's probably just not realistic, right? So.

In Jørgen's account, the women's diminished expectations for their futures appeared as a realistic reading of their situation rather than as something that might be altered through different forms of support. His stance also carried a kind of *protective pessimism*; perhaps meant to shield the women (and himself) from disappointment and broken dreams. Yet, as Kind (2025) reminds us, we all participate in shaping the imaginative terrain. When professionals withhold belief in alternative futures, they may inadvertently contribute to their foreclosure. Some women described how, when supportive relationships finally emerged and their living conditions improved, dreams gradually re-entered the room. For Julia, a turning point came when she received care that acknowledged and addressed the root causes of her addiction:

I am getting the help I feel I was missing a year ago. Um, I'm not one to run and sell drugs anymore, and my dream of finally having an okay, more stable life, it... is coming more and more to life. The dream of my 9th grade is coming more to life.

While her dreams of completing ninth grade and finding stability may seem modest, in her circumstances they carry a quiet radicality. They reflect a renewed orientation toward life and the re-emergence of hope. If realized, these first steps may open the door for other dreams to take form over time. Julia's experience points to an important role for public support systems: creating conditions in which people can begin to imagine and pursue different futures. This raises a broader question about how institutions and professionals might contribute to reanimating the capacity to dream. Such work involves holding space not only for what people are currently able to express, but also for possibilities that have not yet fully taken shape. To

engage realistically with people's lives, therefore, is not to relinquish hope—as forms of protective pessimism may do—but to sustain it carefully while taking concrete steps that make new possibilities increasingly tangible.

The women's stories highlight that personal growth does not happen in isolation; it is formed through relationships and relations of interdependence. Their longing to expand—into new interests, into self-worth, and into different lives—was deeply entangled with the people around them. As Dominika described it, “becoming a new person” often involved reassessing the relationships that had shaped their lives. For some, this meant creating distance from certain connections while actively seeking out healthier ones. Several women described the loneliness that accompanied such decisions—either because family members had severed ties, or because they themselves had withdrawn from social circles where illegality had once functioned as a form of belonging. Fatma had experienced both dynamics. One of the aspects she valued most in the support she currently received from a substance abuse counselor was the help she received in reconnecting with her sister. She knew that rebuilding trust would take time. “I hadn't been sufficiently trustable as an addict,” she acknowledged. Yet the relationship mattered profoundly to her, and she hoped her sister would come to see that she was “pulling it together now.” Others described similar efforts to reshape their relational worlds. Hawa and Emma both spoke about cutting ties with former friends as part of their attempts to live differently. Emma reflected on the painful experience of “saying goodbye” to people you once “felt comfortable with” but who are “not good for you now (...) if you want something else.” Hawa had already begun making such changes before her incarceration. She now spent time with people whose lives were oriented differently—less around parties, drugs, or conflicts, and more around everyday social activities such as going to cafés, spas, or the cinema. These shifts signaled more than a change of company; they reflected transformations in values, relational belonging, and in the kinds of futures the women could begin to see as possible. Many of the women reflected critically on past romantic relationships, recognizing patterns of physical, sexual, or psychological violence. For Anna, the struggle to leave a man who had been violent toward her was profoundly difficult. It demanded that she reclaim a sense of self that had eroded over time: “I had no opinions left. I had no sense of anything. I couldn't even decide what kind of movie I liked,” she recalled. Her words illustrate how sustained harm can flatten a person's subjectivity and injure their autonomy. Change began to feel possible only after she received support for what she called her “addiction to bad men.” With that support, she slowly began reconnecting with herself and eventually “became stronger,” leaving the relationship. Similarly, Julia reflected on her own patterns of remaining in dysfunctional relationships, describing herself as a “security junky” [*tryghedsnarkoman*]. It was only as she began to know and like herself more that she grew comfortable with not having a partner at all. Their reflections point to how learning, growth, and the development of autonomy are deeply relational processes—often requiring supportive environments that make it possible to reconsider one's patterns and choices.

Seen from this perspective, the longing to learn, expand, and embrace in(ter)dependence offers a valuable lens for rethinking public support structures. Such an orientation asks institutions not merely to respond to immediate crises, but to nurture the conditions through

which people can reconnect with themselves and cultivate different ways of living. It resonates with the broader argument presented earlier: that creating a society with less social harm requires institutions that are oriented not only toward *prevention*, but also toward enabling practices that support people's ongoing processes of becoming.

## Concluding reflections

This chapter has connected the women's personal dreams of change with broader visions for structural transformation in public institutions, exploring how incarcerated women wished to be engaged by the penal welfare system in ways responsive to the complexities of their lives. Reflecting on both their past experiences and their current presence in Jyderup Prison, they articulated multiple desires for alternative approaches and orientations. Central to their vision was the desire to be listened to with genuine curiosity and respect, recognized as knowers of their own lives. They emphasized dialogue over direction, wanting conversations that were with them, not about them, and spaces where individual professionals, harm-preventive practices, and institutions can respond, adapt, and change as a result of dialogue with them. They also wished to be recognized as complex and evolving subjects, rather than reduced to static roles such as 'criminal', 'brat', 'victim', or 'pitiful subject'. They wanted public structures in which "acting out" behavior would be understood not as deliberate misbehavior but as signals of distress and unmet needs. Emphasizing that their actions often carried long histories shaped by violence, neglect, or abandonment, they expressed a longing for public support efforts that remains present through them enacting difficult behavior, rather than withdrawing from or excluding them. The women expressed a need for public support that addresses both the harm they had endured and the ways it had shaped their lives, without allowing it to define them. They envisioned public support systems capable of engaging with the weight of past experiences, facilitating deep reflection and understanding, rather than limiting intervention to immediate coping strategies. Lastly, they expressed a longing for public support structures that accompany them in their ongoing growth through meaningful activities and relationships that affirm and nurture their potential. They recognized that such support could help them discover new dimensions of themselves and envision alternative futures, including ones free from illegal activities. Their longings were grounded in a desire for relationally oriented support, enacted through interactions that cultivate their capacity for connection, autonomy, and in(ter)dependence.

These speculations of possible public harm preventive practices may, at first glance, appear merely reparative, as if reforms within the existing system and harm paradigm could be sufficient. I will, however, suggest that there is a gap between the incarcerated women's longings and what the penal welfare system is structured to provide, even when reforms are considered. Articulating more explicitly how their longings challenge prevailing public practices of harm-handling—and thereby exposing this gap—I will concludingly relate their visions to three core principles of transformative justice, as presented in chapter 3. Firstly, the women's desire to be genuinely listened to—and to be granted agency in decisions affecting

their lives—directly resonates with transformative justice’s commitment to *decentralized and collectivizing approaches to harm*. They expressed a shift away from top-down decision-making toward spaces where they could influence processes, speak from their own experiences, and have their insights taken seriously in shaping outcomes. They asked for systems designed to enable their agency, allowing them to play a meaningful role in how support is structured and delivered. This reflects the core of decentralizing responses to harm, where the experiences of those most impacted are recognized as co-constructors of solutions.

Secondly, their yearning for approaches that did not disappear or deny their complex humanity when they “acted out” aligns with transformative justice’s emphasis *on processes that support all parties involved*. The women emphasized the need for professionals to remain present during difficult moments, responding to pain, anger, or harmful behavior with curiosity and care. They sought accompaniment in processing past harms and in undertaking the labor of accountability, healing, and transformation. Crucially, they rejected being reduced to binary roles of victim or perpetrator, instead calling to be seen as whole human beings shaped by histories of harm, resilience, and layered needs, in evolving change.

Finally, their desires *implicate structural transformation*, including changes in distribution, institutions, and social norms. Some women described constraints on dreaming and imagining different futures—including moving away from illegal activities—within the limits of their current economic and social resources. Others articulated a desire to shift the justice paradigm itself, moving away from punitive practices and toward institutions capable of supporting engagement with those affected by their actions. Across these accounts, they emphasized the importance of systems that could respond flexibly to evolving needs and support them in exceeding the limits imposed by their present circumstances.

Recognizing the connections between the women’s longings and the core principles of transformative justice is crucial, as it allows us to rearticulate their speculations as a challenge to the prevailing harm-prevention paradigm in Denmark—a challenge to the dominant cultures of retributive and rehabilitative justice. Attending to their longings provides a perspective on social work and harm intervention grounded in the lived experiences of people within the penal welfare system. It offers guidance for reorienting relational structures, practices, and institutions within public systems, based on the insights and visions of those who have most acutely needed such changes themselves. Moving toward realizing their visions entails closing the gap between the current configuration of the penal welfare system and their longings. The next chapter continues this exploration by reflecting on the harm preventive paradigm this could manifest.

### **Questions for my mother (my childhood)**

Do you regret having me at 18?

If you could do things differently, what would you change?

Would you be able to handle hearing how I truly feel deep down?

If I opened up to you, would you need to be protected from my tough questions and critical approach? If so, why?

When did you feel things began to go wrong in my childhood?

Do you think you've been a responsible parent?

Do you feel you fulfilled your role as a mother to me?

Are you angry or disappointed with yourself for the way you handled me?

Do you feel guilt and shame after learning I was sexually abused?

Do you feel responsible for my lack of self-esteem?

Do you regret not pursuing work or education so you could better support me/us financially?

Do you feel any guilt about yourself after experiencing sexual abuse? Guilt toward yourself?

Do you feel that you gave up on me to the system?

- Emmelie

*/ Text 7*

## Questions for my father

1. Why were you never there for me?
2. Why did you choose drugs over me?
3. Why is my mom so angry with you?
4. Why didn't you ever find me?
5. Do I have any other siblings?
6. Does your family know I exist?
7. Do you know anything about me?
8. Do you know you're a grandfather?
9. Why did you leave this world?
10. Will I ever get to see you again?
11. Are you in a better place now?
12. Are you resting in peace?
13. Can you see me now? Are you with me where I am?
14. If you could start over, would you change anything?
15. Do you know I forgive you?
16. Do you know I love you?

– Layla

*/ Text 8*

## 8. A transformative harm prevention paradigm

While this study centers on the institutional structures shaping the lives of incarcerated women, it is important to recognize the role of family settings—shaped in turn by broader social inequalities—as sites of profound hurt and unresolved tensions. In the creative texts preceding this chapter, Emmelie and Layla pose heartfelt questions to a present mother and an absent father, voicing with striking clarity the relational ruptures that continue to haunt them. By continually revisiting these formative bonds to understand their own subject formation, the women inspire a vision of harm prevention built around nurturing relational accountability and attentive care. Across their lived experiences with the penal welfare system, and their imagined, more responsive pasts—the women affirm the need for public (and possibly state-based) support.

Whereas the preceding chapter explored four longings pointing toward alternative approaches in public structures and responses, this chapter speculates on harm prevention grounded in both the experiences and visions of the research participants and informed by the study's theoretical framework. In this exploration, I refer to and sketch this alternative as a *transformative harm prevention paradigm*. Yet the term itself carries a paradox as a transformative paradigm of prevention risks negating its own naming. To truly transform harm, prevention cannot be reduced to mere inhibition; it must go beyond obstructing certain futures to actively nurturing and enabling others. While prevention within a retributive and rehabilitative justice paradigm often seeks to manage or mitigate risk within existing structures, transformative justice calls for a deeper structural reimagining and re-doing (Evans, 2016; Kim, 2021). It entails a movement toward reordering and changing the conditions under and through which harm arises. In this sense, the aim is not primarily to reduce harm, but to foster life-affirming societal conditions in which harm becomes less likely in the first place. This shifts the emphasis from harm management and mitigation to structural creation and possibility. At its core, I attempt to imagine a public system in which the women's longings are likely to be met, where the figure of *the Engaged Professional* is not only possible to enact but actively nurtured, and where centering relationships does not lead to an individualization of prevention efforts.

In this alternative paradigm, I will imagine that prevention is not merely about anticipating illegal acts, but about responding meaningfully to the conditions comprising human thriving. Taken seriously that the level and type of social harm corresponds to the specific societal architecture, as Pemberton argues (2015: 10), I will envision a paradigm firmly committed to explore and create a societal architecture that will both produce the least amount of social harm—that is avoidable suffering—and that may enable human and planetary thriving. A contextual understanding of the becoming of harm lies at the core of this approach, and the transformative harm prevention paradigm therefore attends to the relational, structural, and historical conditions in which harm emerges and unfolds. I envision this paradigm as recognizing human autonomy as inherently relational, shaped and supported by surrounding settings such as family, institutions, and broader society (Mackenzie, 2013, 2019a). From this perspective, attending to societal structures is inseparable from the goal of creating conditions that enable people to cohabit generatively—providing sufficient social resources to exercise life choices while fostering accountability and care toward one another. Honoring the insight that experiences of harm can constitute autonomy-undermining injustices that impair our capacity to act responsibly and accountably (Anderson & Honneth, 2005), I speculate that a transformative harm prevention paradigm will address these experiences as a central component of its preventive endeavor. From these foundations, what I have previously conceptualized in this dissertation as the penal welfare system and penal welfare state will be transformed so profoundly that they call for other names.

Within the current legal system, an individual is framed as guilty or not guilty; fully responsible and punishable, or not at all. Here, the incarcerated women long to be seen beyond the labels of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ and called on institutions to support behavioral change in ways that capture the nuances of subjecthood and agency. I imagine that a transformative harm prevention paradigm will grasp what falls outside these legal categories by moving beyond retributive binaries, toward exploring implication and responsibility differently (Rothberg, 2019). Recalling Sissel’s experience of her family member sharing how he was affected by her yelling, there was a moment of transformation. In that encounter, their interdependence became clear: Sissel recognized that she mattered to him precisely because he voiced how her actions impacted him. Such moments illuminate the possibilities of a system attuned to relational accountability rather than confined to legal categories of guilt. Echoing Sissel’s experience, Nynne believed that encounters where one faces those affected by one’s actions can nurture learning, accountability, and growth. I speculate that a transformative harm prevention paradigm would be shaped to create and support these kinds of experiences: moments where accountability emerges through relationship, dialogue, and recognition.

Perhaps, local *accountability centers* would emerge as new institutions which serve as one of spaces where harm is dealt with. In these centers, I imagine that those who have been harmed, those who enacted harm, and other relevant partners would come together to explore the impact of the event. Facilitators trained in restorative and transformative practices could guide processes that focus on understanding, repair, and prevention. Decisions about “what happens next” would not be imposed from above but co-created with attention to the wishes, needs, capacities, and circumstances of everyone involved. Remembering how the women longed for

support in making sense of the social harm they had experienced and its ongoing effects, they described a desire for spaces of processing and learning which might open possibilities for relating differently to their past experiences. Julia, for instance, described how psychological insights enabled her to make sense of her mother's actions, which had deeply harmed her. This understanding allowed her to approach her past with more flexibility, reconsidering ideas of blame, responsibility, and compassion. Similarly, following being stabbed, Louisa expressed a longing not only for herself to be supported in processing the experience, but also for the one who had stabbed her to receive appropriate mental support, so such incidents might not be repeated. Heeding these experiences, I speculate a transformative harm prevention paradigm that centers consequences rather than punishment in the aftermath of harmful acts. The local accountability centers we imagine could provide not only spaces for dialogue and repair but also therapeutic and social-pedagogical support; perhaps in collaboration with other institutions capable of supporting people with significant mental challenges towards change.

Importantly, I also imagine that a transformative harm prevention paradigm acknowledges and embraces human fallibility and the limits of our capacities. Like the incarcerated women themselves, such a paradigm will not fully reject coercion. Some of the women asked why the state had allowed their parents to raise them despite being unable to provide care for them, or why earlier interventions had not occurred. Others reflected that, despite its inherent violence, incarceration had provided them access to detoxification and treatment they had been unable to reach otherwise. In this sense, coercion—though deeply fraught—can sometimes create conditions for change, particularly for people whose freedom is already constrained by addiction. This requires close attention to human psychology, relational dynamics, and the broader social conditions that shape our ability to act with intention and responsibility. Navigating this terrain is inevitably difficult. I imagine that a transformative paradigm will wrestle openly with these contradictions: how to design interventions that interrupt cycles of harm with minimal domination, and how to impose only the least necessary constraints to prevent others from harming. Inevitably, this also returns us to the inherently unresolved question at the heart of *zemiology*: what constitutes harm (Yar, 2012). The goal would not be to resolve the tension between care and coercion once and for all but instead hold it as a generative guide in the ongoing evolution of practices.

Heeding the late philosopher Iris Marion Young's (2013) critique of community as carrying a romanticized notion of sameness and harmony, I envision a transformative harm prevention paradigm that recognize the need for building capacities to navigate differences; in peoples' resources, abilities, beliefs, etc. Within such a paradigm, I imagine a central function of public institutions would be to actively nurture these relational and communal capacities. I consider that these capacities form the core foundation of a society that not only enables people to respond effectively to harm but also reduces the likelihood of harmful acts occurring in the first place. Cultivating individual and collective skills for engaging with difference—learning to navigate conflict, to listen, and to respond thoughtfully—becomes central to creating a society capable of preventing and addressing harm while fostering thriving. We might imagine a transformative harm prevention paradigm scaling and creating local variations of approaches like those in Albertslund Municipality (Albertslund Municipality, 2023; Felholt, 2024). Here

all elementary students are introduced to relational accountability through restorative justice practices and community processes, supported by training for all public-school teachers. Children are thus socialized into deeper forms of listening, learning to take responsibility for their actions, and participating in the wellbeing of their peers and communities. Extending this vision, a transformative paradigm would actively cultivate both individual and collective capacities to foster generative interdependence across society.

Over time, I imagine how such capacities could ripple outward, slowly but persistently reducing harm and supporting thriving communities, as early evidence in Albertslund also suggests (Jensen et al., 2023). These ripples will not take the form of grand transformations all at once; I imagine that they may emerge through small shifts in how people relate to one another, how conflicts are navigated, and how institutions reorient their practices. Such incremental movements are part of the transformative harm prevention paradigm's long-term ambitions. Cultivating resources in the present is not only a matter of responding to the urgencies of the "now," but also of laying down pathways toward desired futures. These efforts function both as immediate interventions and as seeds for systemic change over time. A core strength lies in its openness and its capacity to remain responsive as new conditions and needs emerge. As such, I speculate that this paradigm embodies the unfinished ethos (Mathiesen, 2015/1974): always in motion, shifting, learning, and evolving to meet an ever-changing landscape of challenges and potentials.

Followingly, the transformative harm prevention paradigm stretches far beyond what we currently recognize as 'justice institutions,' reshaping the broader landscape of schools, welfare, healthcare, and community life. As Emma captured in her call for alternative public support: "It needs to go all the way around." When reflecting on how the women described their schooling experiences—marked by punishment such as expulsion, visits to the principal's office, or other disciplinary measures—and how support within the penal welfare system was often withdrawn if they failed to comply with conditionalities, it becomes evident to me that such experiences would be fundamentally at odds with a transformative harm prevention paradigm. Instead, this paradigm would reconceptualize how institutions engage with those who cause harm or violate rules, prioritizing relational approaches over punishment. I imagine current practices of social and welfare work changing radically: less governed by rigid rules, procedures, and compliance demands, and more attuned to the textures of lived experience. Within such an approach, the incarcerated women's longing to be genuinely heard—and for their experiences to be recognized as subjective truths rather than filtered through or ignored by bureaucratic categories—could be taken seriously.

I imagine that the transformative harm prevention paradigm will extend beyond the former penal welfare system's focus on individualized, harm-mitigating interventions, recognizing that such approaches risk reproducing deeper structural inequalities (Thygesen & Brønsted, 2023; Toraif & Mueller, 2023), which would transform the orientation of social-pedagogical practices. While individualized support would remain important, professionals would work just as intentionally to nurture the ties between individuals and their broader communities, cultivating networks of accountability and care. In such a system, I imagine that the withdrawal of public involvement would no longer carry the connotation of abandonment or

neglect. Instead, it would unfold as a gradual transition: professionals stepping back only when existing social structures—family, friendships, community groups, or other relational networks—had been reinforced to a point where they could reliably sustain the person. Crucially, those receiving support would come to experience themselves not merely as beneficiaries of care, but as active contributors to collective well-being. Their contributions—like Emma baking cakes and doing horoscopes—would be recognized, valued, and reciprocated, creating a sense that their capacities are not only acknowledged but genuinely desired by others. In this way, I imagine how highlighting interdependence through reciprocal engagement, will become a form of prevention in itself. It transforms not only those who receive support but also those who provide it, fostering a shared sense of responsibility and belonging.

Building on the women's desire to influence social services, I speculate that the transformative harm prevention paradigm would also alter the very design and governance of public institutions. As the women emphasize, those affected by institutional practices must have meaningful influence over the design and delivery of services. This compels me to envision what it might look like for institutions and practices to emerge collaboratively, rather than being imposed hierarchically. I thus imagine that transitioning towards a transformative harm prevention paradigm will involve shifting (some) power away from centralized decision-making bodies, allowing local actors to operate as more than implementers of top-down directives. This involves cultivating local self-determinism within public institutions, empowering actors to shape how policies and practices are put into action. Perhaps life-affirming institutions and practices will emerge in the space between formalism and informalism—where the structure and predictability of formal systems intersect with the flexibility, responsiveness, and relational depth often found in informal practices. This in-between space, situated between centralized governance and grassroots action, invites us to rethink public responses to harm and need in ways that minimize bureaucratic distance while sustaining coherence and accountability. Revisiting the concept of the *commune* opens a lens for imagining governance as shaped by and for its members, while remaining connected to broader societal structures. In a reimagined commune, I speculate how listening could be a political practice; interwoven into the fabric of governance and co-creating of services. Professionals would encounter people not through pre-scripted assessment sheets, but by remaining attuned to the evolving, situated realities individuals bring with them. In this vision, the system is structured around dynamic feedback loops: local service providers would relay insights to higher governing bodies, which in turn would commit to integrating these observations into policy and decision-making. Simultaneously, participatory forums would recognize lived experiences as legitimate and influential sources of knowledge, actively informing the design and implementation of local governance. In effect, institutions on the ground would gain a greater role in co-creating both the rules that guide practice and the services that respond to people's lived needs.

I hold that life-affirming institutions are life-affirming precisely because they can respond to the complexity of people's lives, remain in ongoing dialogue with those they serve, and uphold care and accountability through relational practices. Such a restructuring would counter the

prevailing impulse in the penal welfare system to fragment social issues. We might envision institutions capable of embracing a greater complexity of people's experiences, requiring them to serve multiple purposes and functions simultaneously. In this speculation, professional roles would be profoundly transformed. I imagine that it will be less important to know and follow regulations, and be occupied with casework, and more important to enact fierce relational capacities—the kind of skills the Engaged Professional also give shape to. Central to this role would be the ability to listen attentively, navigate interpersonal tensions, foster trust, and support meaningful connections within individuals and communities. These relational competencies would also shape the culture of institutions themselves, encouraging environments where collaboration and knowledge-sharing across different services and professions become the norm. By embedding these skills into the core of professional practice, institutions could better respond to the interwoven social, relational, and structural dimensions of people's lives.

The transformative harm prevention paradigm, as I have envisioned, encourages moving away from static, procedural models of justice—relying on fixed categories and standardized interventions—toward a dynamic, ongoing process of collectively co-creating services. Through greater co-creation and collective self-determination within public systems, I imagine that our understanding of procedural fairness would begin to shift. Much like the comfort some feel entering a familiar fast-food chain in a foreign country, predictability can provide ease. Yet insisting on sameness obscures local differences, needs, and resources, raising the question: at what cost is uniformity served? Rather than equating fairness with sameness—standardized services and identical distribution—I imagine we would come to recognize the value of difference and develop a skepticism toward the glorification of uniformity. As governance becomes relational and locally grounded, predictability gives way to responsiveness. Fairness, in this frame, is not measured by identical treatment but by attentiveness to varying needs. This shift embraces complexity and pluralism as essential in care and justice. What emerges, then, is that the constant is not uniform outcomes but the values and orientation guiding public institutions.

These speculations sketch merely aspects of an alternative harm prevention paradigm. Formulated in idealized terms, akin to the transformative justice principles presented in chapter 2, they cannot capture the full complexity and unpredictability of lived experience. Rather, they offer an unfinished reorientation and an invitation to explore different possibilities and experiment with how society might handle and prevent harm in more life-affirming ways. Some of these alternatives are already being imagined and enacted, and by no means do I intend to dismiss these efforts; rather, this contemplation serves as an affirmation.

## **If I were a journalist**

If I were a journalist, I would make sure to present all sides of a story—I would do my utmost to ensure that the truth for everyone involved was uncovered.

If I were a journalist, I would always remind myself that behind every “good story” there are one or more real human beings of flesh and blood, with real and fragile emotions. I would also remember that these people have families, children, and loved ones who would also be affected by my story.

If I were a journalist, I would always ask myself whether the story I want to publish is important enough to justify an intrusion into someone’s private life.

If I were a journalist, I would turn toward the crowd and seek to shed light on what remains in the dark—I would always dig deeper and not just jump on the mainstream clickbait wave. I would take pride in being able to inform the public.

If I were a journalist, I would strive to disprove my assumptions rather than seek to confirm them. I would make sure that, as a journalist, I acted as the public’s watchdog – not its bloodhound.

If I were a journalist, I would do everything in my power not to contribute to the construction of false narratives, and I would keep in mind that the influence of bias can heavily affect how information and knowledge is selected—“what you seek is what you find.”

If I were a journalist, I would always remind myself how much power I hold and the impact my writing can or will have on the individuals I write about. I would make sure I was well-informed, and I would think long and hard before publishing anything that could cause significant harm or grief to the people involved.

- N.S.H

## 9. Concluding remarks

N.S.H.'s creative text offers a wealth of insights, reminders, and pointed appeals. Her call for a different writing practice around 'crime cases' resonates far beyond journalism. I understand it as a challenge addressed to all of us who write about lives shaped by criminalization. Her plea is clear: affirm the humanity of people who have committed penalized acts and acknowledge their relational entanglements with those close to them—all of whom are affected by how stories about 'crime' are told. In closing, N.S.H. offers what might be understood as a harm-conscious publication ethics; one that urges writers to reflect carefully on the possible effects their words may have on the people whose lives they depict, and to acknowledge that, at times, the most responsible decision is to refrain from publishing. This ethic has informed the research design, guided my theoretical commitments, and shaped my writing practices, and it continues to serve as a principle I aim to carry forward in future work. As this thesis comes to an end, I hold the hope and conviction that the study has carried enough value to warrant the time, trust, and stories I was granted by the women and prison staff. This conclusion first revisits the key empirical and analytical insights and contributions developed through the study. It then returns to the methodological and theoretical commitments woven throughout the thesis, offering them as a response to N.S.H.'s call to write more generatively about those who have crossed legal boundaries. The chapter closes by staying with what remains unfinished; questions and possibilities that may be taken up by others.

### From the lived to the speculated: empirical and analytical contributions

In a way, this study began in the aftermath—when the women were already incarcerated, and I was drawn to understand how this situation had come to be. It grew from my interest in exploring the institutional encounters and harm preventive interventions they may have experienced prior to imprisonment. This led to the first research question: How did the women experience their encounters with the Danish penal welfare system, both before and during incarceration? In answering this question, I presented four hybrid stories of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise that illustrate both shared and distinct routes through, and experiences with, the penal welfare system. More than simply presenting these

stories, the analysis proposed *hybrid storytelling* as an approach to holding the layered and intersecting nature of lived experience. As a collective narrative method, hybrid storytelling allows for rich depictions of lived experiences and social conditions without tying them to a single person. This narrative approach was constructed to foreground the collective and structural dimension of experiences while resisting detached modes of storytelling. Naming the hybrid figures serves as an invitation to consider the real people behind the stories. Drawing on figurations to structure the empirical material enabled a strategic engagement with temporary fixation; providing form to complex journeys so they could be more readily thought with and remembered (Lury et al., 2022; Suchman, 2012). These hybrid characters carry a hope: that institutional reform and policy design might one day be guided by the lives of people like Maja-Louise and Uzma-Aicha.

Drawing on insights from incarcerated women and prison staff, the study placed their perspectives in dialogue, turning their experiences and reflections on the penal welfare system into a parallel analysis. Long before their imprisonment, most of the incarcerated women had been in extensive contact with specialized institutions within the penal welfare system. Many had reached out to public services in efforts to manage or transform challenging social conditions in their lives. Yet, when they recounted these encounters, they almost never named particular professions or offices. Rather, they tended to speak broadly of “*the municipality*,” noting how their experiences across different units seemed to blur into one another. This illustrates how the municipality is experienced not as a network of distinct services and professionals, but as a single, monolithic entity. Lea’s evocative description of professionals as “autotuned” captures how many incarcerated women experience them as stripped of the capacity to respond authentically and contextually, constrained instead by layers of bureaucratic procedure. Both incarcerated women and prison staff observed that the system’s rigid infrastructure often impedes, rather than facilitates, meaningful forms of support. Staff stressed that robust relationships are the foundation for supportive personal change, but rigid procedures can prevent the sustained, responsive engagement required. Women who missed appointments within the public system experienced often not being met with curiosity or flexibility, but with reduced support or punitive sanctions. Not showing up was interpreted as non-compliance, rather than as an indication that the system had not met them in their circumstances. This pattern of misrecognition extends across the life course: several women traced a trajectory from childhood institutions into adult penal settings, revealing a long arc of disciplinary responses in which they seldom met professionals who appeared invested in understanding them. The focus was on managing disruptive behavior, rather than addressing the deeper unmet needs behind it. Such patterns cast significant doubt on the penal welfare system’s capacity to engage with the full complexity of the women’s lives. A striking example of this neglect is that incarcerated women receive four times as much medication as the men previously held in Jyderup Prison, yet still have limited access to the therapeutic or relational support they need to process emotional struggles and past harms. As staff member Janna reflects, do any institutions within this system truly have the capacity to respond meaningfully to the women’s situations? As such, this dissertation has highlighted the incarcerated women’s enduring yearning for professional relationships marked by attentiveness, recognition, and consistency. To capture part of their experience, I have introduced the concept of *protective*

*pessimism*, describing how some women shifted from hoping for support to anticipating its failure. Still, within the penal welfare system, the women also remembered specific workers who, despite systemic constraints, were able to be genuinely present, responsive, and supportive beyond the limits of institutional scripts. I conceptualize these individuals as *The Engaged Professionals*; a figure which embody qualities making such relationship supportive: personally invested, accessible and responsive, willing to step outside formal roles, and able to help process difficult experiences. Though rare, these relationships were profoundly meaningful, shaping the women's recollections of moments when they genuinely felt supported.

These empirical findings speak to the study's second research question: what can the incarcerated women's experiences teach us about the workings of the Danish penal welfare system? Rather than claiming to depict the system in full, the research has analyzed and presented how the system is experienced from a specific social position; the perspectives of women who, at a certain stage in their lives, became criminalized and incarcerated, alongside the viewpoints of prison staff who work closely with them. While it is indeed likely that other social groups have experienced the penal welfare system differently and perhaps as more supportive, the women in this study often found their encounters with institutions and professionals inadequate or harmful. Their challenge was not to the state's presence in their lives per se, but to the nature of that presence: how attentively it listened, how effectively it responded, and how meaningfully it engaged with their life circumstances. While prior literature on incarcerated women in Denmark often focuses on their experiences during imprisonment (Damsa, 2024; Mathiassen, 2011, 2021b; Smoyer & Minke, 2019), this study extends knowledge by examining their lives and institutional entanglements prior to incarceration. The stories of Anna-Maria, Sarah-Johanne, Uzma-Aicha, and Maja-Louise make it clear that current practices of female incarceration in Denmark frequently ensnare those in the most marginalized social positions. Following the language of Braithwaite (1979: 187), these are individuals ensnared in illegality as a consequence of "too little power and wealth". Against this backdrop, the hybrid stories and the thematically organized account of women's interactions with the penal welfare system in Chapter 6 highlight the system's persistent inability to produce transformative change for women whose lives have long been marked by deep structural marginalization.

Thus, in another sense, the study began not in the aftermath, but in the middle. Driven by curiosity about the women's lived experiences and the "what-ifs" of their pasts, it has endeavored to imagine and articulate alternative futures. This ties to yet another research inquiry; How had these women hoped their contact with the penal welfare system would have unfolded? At the heart of this question is the recognition that, if we truly aim to prevent harm—including the acts that led to their incarceration—we must also consider how institutions and the broader societal structure better can nurture relational autonomy, create pathways to meaningful futures, and transform entrenched patterns of social harm. When the women imagined 'the otherwise' of public support structures, their reflections were often entwined with personal aspirations for transformation. Given this, the study does not pursue the research question through coherent speculative pasts or hybrid narratives, since the empirical

material followed a different path. Instead, it attends to the fragmented “I would have liked...” statements, unfolding these longings for alternative institutional qualities in Chapter 7. This chapter can be used as a practical and reflective resource for those working with similar populations, offering orientation and a potential starting point for dialogue on how meaningful public support might be organized and facilitated. The first—and most vividly articulated longing—was to be genuinely listened to. This referred to a kind of listening that was neither directive nor rushed, that accepted their stories as valid on their own terms, and that allowed what was shared to meaningfully influence what happened next. Such listening is more than a communicative skill; it reflects a systemic capacity to respond, include, and adapt to lived experience. The second longing was to be seen not only for who they were in a given moment, but also for where they came from and who they might become. This was a call to be acknowledged beyond static or binary categories such as victim or offender, recognized instead as layered and evolving selves. The women stressed that their actions could only be understood in connection with the harms they had endured and the ways they had tried to cope. They called for institutions capable of embracing this complexity, letting go of retributive approaches, and cultivating a sustained curiosity about the forces that shape a life. The third longing centered on receiving support to confront and work through past harm, as a way to diminish its grip in the present. Although many kept returning to early and formative wounds, they resisted being reduced to them. Instead, they called for accompaniment: institutional responses capable of holding space for the emotional labor of reckoning, as an integral part as part of creating possibilities for new futures. Finally, the women longed for public structures to support them to learn, grow, and live in ways that made space for both independence and interdependence. At its heart was a desire to become more enabled and grow in autonomy; emotionally, relationally, and intellectually as much as economically and practically. This asks of public institutions not just to respond to and prevent harm, but to nurture becoming and enable thriving.

These insights relate to the last research question; What do the women’s longings and critiques invite us to envision in terms of public prevention efforts? The analytical arguments and the envisioned alternative harm prevention paradigm are shaped by, and remain attentive to, the incarcerated women’s expressed needs and desires. This stance enables a perspective that moves beyond the constraints of what retributive or rehabilitative justice cultures may deem ‘realistic’, centering instead the possibilities for change articulated by the women and nurtured by the radical imagination inherent in alternative justice frameworks. In this spirit, the study aligns with the principles of non-reformist reforms (Gorz, 1967/1964): prioritizing loyalty not to the maintenance of the current harm prevention paradigm and penal welfare system, but to the promotion of human flourishing. Chapter 8 offers a vision for a *Transformative harm prevention paradigm* grounded in the lived realities and imaginative capacities of the research participants. This speculation both serve as a counter-spell (Wang 2018: 316) to the current carceral paradigm and as a form of aftercare in response to the exposure of the women’s wounds. Drawing on Lissi’s insight, writing about the harms experienced by others should always provoke reflection on what we provide in response. The contribution of this study lies in extending the women’s desires for change, articulating a harm prevention paradigm that may be better equipped than the current system to attend to these harms. At its core, this

paradigm carries a dual orientation: to *prevent* social harm and to *enable* human thriving. Here, prevention shifts from the narrow task of anticipating criminalized acts to a wider orientation; one that engages with the conditions that make positive and sustainable cohabitation possible. Speculating on how social-pedagogical work can nurture connections between individuals and groups, and accountable communities, this study aligns with research emphasizing the importance of designing prevention efforts that cultivate communities capable of supporting transformation and growth (Mørck et al., 2023). Central to the paradigm is the development of infrastructures that nurture autonomy, promote relational accountability, and sustain interdependence. In this way, what began as an inquiry into the women’s encounters with the penal welfare system and its harm prevention efforts ultimately expanded to consider institutional infrastructures and governance more broadly. This reflects the study’s core commitment to understanding prevention not merely as intervention, but as a political and structural concern. I speculate that introducing co-creation and collective self-determination into public systems could provide a pathway to transcend the limitations of bureaucratic procedures. I envision these structures as better equipped to respond to the incarcerated women’s longings and to foster the conditions in which *The Engaged Professional* can thrive. Through this speculation, I propose that life-affirming institutions may find their most fertile ground in the tension between formalism and informality—where the rigor and predictability of formal structures intersect with the adaptability and relational care inherent in informal practices. The transformative harm prevention paradigm thus affirms the significance and relevance of scholarship exploring co-creation and collaborative deliberation as approaches to public governance (Ansell et al., 2025; Larsen & Caswell, 2022; Røiseland et al., 2024), while pushing these ideas further. In this sense, the study’s empirical insights arrive at points similar to those explored in theoretical work on the abolitionist state (Davis, 2011; Lamusse, 2023; Lester, 2021; Lipsitz, 2004; McLeod, 2018), and in community-led transformative justice practices (Burk, 2011; Howe, 2018; Kaba, 2021) have also been moving, albeit following distinct trajectories. What this research offers, then, is an empirically informed rearticulation of how we might orient ourselves in the pursuit of a society with less harm.

## Researching with the unfinished ethos: methodological and theoretical contributions

Through its theoretical framings, conceptual commitments, and broad empirical curiosity, this project has ventured into relatively underexplored terrain. It investigates the Danish penal welfare system through the lived experiences of incarcerated women and, to a lesser degree, prison staff, grounded in abolitionist, zemiological, and transformative justice traditions. In this process, it challenges the limited scope of much crime prevention research, which frequently centers on individual responsibility, rehabilitation, or siloed institutional responses. Analytically, this research disavows carceral logics by intentionally avoiding frameworks rooted in carceral epistemologies—including the category of ‘crime,’ which has long served as a cornerstone of the criminological tradition (Hulsman, 1986). Instead, I have

approached harm prevention as a structural and relational project, grounded in the understanding that people are shaped by the social, economic, and political conditions around them. This perspective is informed by research showing that incarcerated women (and girls) frequently experience multiple forms of social harm prior to being criminalized for an illegal act (Henriksen, 2021a; Koch & Jensen, 1981a, 1981b; Lund-Sørensen & Clausen, 2014; Mathiassen, 2015a, 2021b). In light of this empirical reality, a study like this becomes both timely and necessary: an effort to grasp the workings of the current harm prevention paradigm while opening space to imagine possible improvements. In doing so, I have revisited existing literature on the penal welfare system through the novel interpretive lens of *impulses*. This conceptualization builds on earlier work that reveals the complex intertwining of welfare, regulation, discipline, and punishment in the broad institutional landscape of the Nordic countries (Bengtsson, 2015; Bjerre & Brinkgaard, 2025; Christensen et al., 2024; Smith & Ugelvik, 2017b). The concept of impulse provides a way to describe both the inclination and its effect in shaping how social problems are understood and addressed within the penal welfare system. Reading across three bodies of scholarship—welfare work and citizen encounters, punishment and rehabilitation, and bordered penalty—this study advances the understanding of these intertwined workings by reflecting this in an integrative literature approach. From this synthesis, I have identified four central impulses, articulated through verbs, that animate how the penal welfare system structures institutions and frames available responses: 1) fragmenting social issues, 2) individualizing culpability and enforcing productivity, 3) differentiating reactions towards different social categories, 4) regulating the population through bordered penalty. The study argues that the ‘penal welfare system’ emerges through these impulses; offering legitimacy to the conceptualization and naming of its current workings, while also pointing to its contestability.

A key methodological contribution of this study lies in reinterpreting the ‘unfinished ethos’ of abolitionist research, guided by Mathiesen’s (2015/1974) notion of *the unfinished*. At its core, the unfinished ethos affirms that research must reach beyond descriptions of what is to assist the ever-evolving task of imagining and constructing ways of existing; what could be. Approaching analysis and critique as ‘unfinished’ entails committing to a form of research that resists the comfort of definitive conclusions. From this perspective, the alternative harm prevention paradigm proposed in this study is inherently unfinished—open-ended, evolving, and resistant to closure. Embracing this orientation requires acknowledging that we, as researchers, can be transformed by the work itself. Anchored in the principle “human first, then researcher,” I have undertaken this study as an implicated subject (Rothberg, 2019); entwined in the same structures I sought to analyze, though differently positioned within them. Relationality has served as both a key empirical theme and methodological orientation throughout this study. The women and staff repeatedly returned to relationships; their fragility, their failures, and their formative power in supporting change. Through the process of conducting this study, I have gained reflections and insights from engaging with community-based participatory research ideals (Hacker, 2013). While collaborative aspects of this research remained imperfect and limited, it nonetheless shaped the research in significant ways, including the establishment of a community advisory board and open discussions with the incarcerated women about the study’s trajectory and their aspirations for its development.

This participatory engagement was enriched through writing workshops that created space for self-authored expression, imaginative exploration, and affective engagement expression (Walsh et al., 2013). While the writing prompts were co-developed with author Lee Langvad, the resulting texts emerged from the women's own voices and the paths they chose to follow. Poetic, emotionally resonant, and often fragmentary, these contributions added a unique texture to the empirical material. Among them was the text by N.S.H. asking for more attentive and responsible ways of writing about individuals who have committed illegal acts, providing an ethical and reflective guide that I have sought to uphold in this research and in my wider engagement with such work. This ethical stance was further explored when Nathalie Mortensen, a community advisory board member with both lived incarceration experience and professional work with youth in care, reviewed Chapter 4. Her reflections offered an important moment to assess whether the chapter upheld the dignity and care intended. She noted that, rather than "plastering" my own adjectives or analytical framings onto their experiences, the chapter left space for the group of women behind each hybrid story to suggest the meaning of their experiences.

While abolition, zemiology, and transformative justice opened possibilities for understanding the current harm prevention paradigm and imagining alternatives, they also posed challenges for the execution of this study. Often resistant to fixed ontological commitments or alignment with established academic disciplines, I found how this openness complicates methodological coherence. Emerging across both academic inquiry and grassroots struggle, their strength lies not in a unified theoretical framework but in their ability to speak from and to lived experience, to name what dominant frameworks overlook, and to orient us toward the transformation of the structures that generate harm. Precisely because they prioritize resonance over rigor and openness over closure, these approaches can be difficult to operationalize within conventional research designs.

From this perspective, critiques sometimes made of abolition, zemiology, and transformative justice—such as their lack of firm coherence—might equally apply to this study. To reinforce the conceptual framework, I engaged with complementary ideas, including Mackenzie's (2013) *relational autonomy* and Anderson and Honneth's (2005) *autonomy-undermining injustices*. Nevertheless, the study was not intended to pin down the ontological structure of these traditions or produce a comprehensive mapping of structure-actor dynamics. Instead, its contribution lies in demonstrating the analytical relevance of these frameworks through empirical application. The theory chapter was designed with this purpose in mind: to present the frameworks on their own terms while showing how they are deployed within this study and their importance for understanding harm prevention. Over the course of the research, I observed that these frameworks not only made space for but, in certain respects, required the inclusion of perspectives from other disciplines to more fully capture the dynamics influencing the experiences of incarcerated women and prison staff. They particularly underscored the importance of empirical inquiry of penal welfare work in Denmark, directing attention from overarching debates about justice paradigms toward the immediacy of everyday interactions and emotional responses. Following this approach, the study has engaged a diverse range of scholars and research traditions in conversation, traversing disciplinary boundaries to enrich

the analysis. In her generous proof-reading of this dissertation, independent scholar Susan Zekiros rightfully noted that the dissertation seems to actively decenter singular theoretical authorities or frameworks. This choice reflects a methodological and ethical commitment to follow the empirical material where it leads, rather than rigidly adhere to any specific theory. At the same time, I am aware that decentering singular theoretical authorities can compromise transparency, making it more challenging for readers to trace the assumptions and analytical decisions shaping the study. This is a significant critique of research that seeks to uphold situated knowledge while grounding it in responsibility and clarity (Haraway, 1988). The tension between honoring the complexity of lived experience and maintaining theoretical coherence is evident, and learning to navigate this tension has been a central part of the research process, which remains unresolved for me.

The theoretical anchor informed the development of three research strategies, which may also serve as valuable tools for future studies in related domains. The first, *decentering the individual*, shifts the analytical focus away from viewing people in isolation toward considering the wider structural, institutional, and relational interconnections that shape experience. By doing so, it creates space to reconceptualize prevention and supports a more nuanced understanding of culpability, autonomy, and the conditions in which harm arises. The second research strategy is to *replace carceral language as analytical categories*, a well-established approach that forms the very foundation of zemiology as a field (Canning & Tombs, 2021a). This strategy retains analytical authority within the research process itself, empowering the empirical material to determine which phenomena are central and which may inform efforts toward prevention or transformation. By refusing to confine the women to risk categories or criminal labels, this approach allows for a more layered understanding of subjecthood, resonating with their own calls to be recognized in the context of their life histories, social relationships, and ongoing processes of becoming. *Engaging speculation and counter-spells* is the third research strategy; challenging dominant justice paradigms and creating space for non-linear temporalities. This approach enabled the women to be understood not only through what had occurred, but also through what could have happened and what is still becoming. Speculation permeated the research, guiding both the design and analysis—from interview prompts that encouraged “what ifs” to writing workshops that reimagined professional roles within the penal system. Engaging in this process also meant grappling with the contingency of the empirical material: how findings might have differed had I occupied other social positions, how narratives could have shifted if the penal welfare state had responded differently to harm, and how to account for the untold stories. Importantly, this included acknowledging the agency embedded in non-participation, exemplified by Naya-Ann, whose absence was rendered present in the analysis. In taking these speculative gestures seriously, the study foregrounded the evaluative authority of the incarcerated women’s and prison staff’s knowledge. This approach reverses the conventional logic of crime prevention research, which often examines criminalized individuals primarily to control or modify *their* behavior (Agozino, 2010). Here, the participants assessed the penal welfare system—its failures, limits, and possibilities—rather than being evaluated by it. Although the speculative approach allows the research to offer an empirically informed rearticulation of an alternative harm prevention paradigm, a notable limitation lies in how this

exploration was framed. By asking the women to reconsider institutional responses, the study concentrated on secondary and tertiary prevention (Brantingham & Faust, 1976), emphasizing targeted interventions rather than broader structural or societal dimensions of harm prevention. Although the focus of the study offered valuable insights into institutional aspirations, it simultaneously constrained the possibilities for reimagining broader structures. In this framing, the women may have been unintentionally cast more as respondents to existing systems than as agents theorizing structural change. Yet, through its speculative approach, the research illustrates how analysis can navigate multiple temporalities, including lived pasts, speculative pasts, and the present moment. Such temporal layering emphasizes that envisioning futures with less social harm requires research not only to account for what is or what has been, but also for what could have been and what might still emerge.

### What is still unfinished...

A central tension in the study remains whether focusing on the penal welfare system inadvertently reinforces state-centered thinking or whether it creates space to imagine alternatives, including new ways of conceptualizing the state itself. Across the Nordic states, responsibilities for care, relational support, and everyday logistics have increasingly moved from families, friends, and communities to the state. This dependence on state-provided solutions during times of crisis, rather than on mutual support networks, is a defining feature of the Nordic welfare model, carrying both positive outcomes and drawbacks (Andersen, 2020). This deep reliance on state institutions sheds light on the appeal of carceral feminism<sup>70</sup> in the region, which aligns with a broader cultural trust in the state's role to protect, intervene, and provide care. Such faith reflects not only punitive tendencies but also deeply ingrained expectations of institutional responsibility and support (Lauri et al., 2023). This cultural orientation may have influenced me and the research design to centering reworking existing systems. Even so, grounding rearticulations and alternatives in existing structures is a crucial exercise, as it strengthens our collective capacity to imagine and supporting prefigurative action (Gerber, 2021). The necessity of such an effort was made clear by how difficult the incarcerated women and prison staff found it to envision alternatives. By heeding Lamusse's (2023) call to work within the material realities at hand, the study offers empirical insights that can inform and support transformative efforts grounded in the here and now.

Given that deprivation and excess produce different conditions and motivations for harmful behavior, future research might investigate harm prevention through populations that seldom come into contact with the carceral system. Upper-class privilege, for instance, has been linked to social disengagement, lower generosity, and prioritization of one's own welfare over others (Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012: 4086), whereas experiences of deprivation can give rise to other forms of harm, as reflected in the experiences of most

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<sup>70</sup> Carceral feminism believes in solving social issues—such as gender violence—through carceral means (Bernstein, 2010).

research participants in this study. Consequently, this research provides empirical insights primarily from one end of the inequality spectrum, which naturally limits its scope for imagining a fully encompassing alternative harm prevention paradigm. I invite future studies to build on, challenge, or expand these insights by exploring harm prevention from other social positions, enriching our collective understanding of what such paradigms might entail.

At a time when political discourse around ‘crime’ and prevention is increasingly shaped by competitive displays of punitiveness (Carvalho & Chamberlen, 2018; Smith, 2023), this study offers a crucial intervention. The empirical insights indicate that truly confronting harm necessitates moving past frameworks of retribution and rehabilitation toward more relational and context-sensitive approaches. Integrating the perspectives of incarcerated women and prison staff highlighted areas of complementarity and partial alignment in their views on effective prevention work. Together, these insights point toward an alternative paradigm of harm prevention—one that prioritizes relational approaches and a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of behavior. As such this study offers a perspective, where the political line of prevention may partly be considered deviant to the lived experiences and professional insights of those most directly affected—the incarcerated women and the staff supporting them. Addressing and engaging with this gap is an ongoing, unfinished endeavor.

In various ways, this thesis has sought to act as a bridge across the carceral divide: by placing the voices of prison staff and incarcerated women in dialogue, by staging the women’s creative texts and their receiving, and by carrying these experiences beyond the prison’s confines. Yet a possible bridge remains to be constructed; the transition from articulation to concrete action. The research design itself can be understood as enacting a participatory process, inviting incarcerated women to envision how the penal welfare system’s preventive efforts might be reimagined. Yet this approach carries an inherent risk: that the women may once again be asked to share their perspectives and experiences of harm, only for their voices to remain unheard. The insights generated here are unsolicited by institutions, and while learning from the women’s speculations is vital, it carries the possibility of unintentionally reinforcing patterns of neglect. There might, however, be a potential strength in openly acknowledging this exposure. By doing so, I hope to invite curiosity and engagement, fostering a connection between you, the reader, and the messages this dissertation conveys; an affirmation of our shared interdependence.

In this spirit, it concludes with an open address: Who will carry forward these insights?

**Elizabeth, student and listener of the creative texts**

Thank you for having the courage to share. The texts I heard were very beautiful. I became deeply aware of how hard it must be to have been placed in the category of “criminal”—both being labeled by the system, by law, but also the fear that those you love might also place you in that same category. Or whether, to them, you are still who you’ve always been. I realized how painful it must be to carry other people’s categorization of you and to face it head-on. All that anger, guilt, shame, and grief you’re forced to process, without any real help available. I truly respect that. I also found that many of the emotions you wrote about were surprisingly relatable, even though we are in very different places and arrived here for entirely different reasons.

**Mathilde, student and listener of the creative texts**

I was deeply moved by hearing these texts—they were truly beautiful, honest, vulnerable, and reflective. So many thoughtful reflections on harsh realities, on grief, pain, hope, wishes, and dreams. They were written so beautifully. In a way, it feels strange to be allowed into their deepest thoughts without being able to give something back, because I wish I could tell them that I understand—that it was very relatable—but also that I have enormous respect for their courage, for who they are, and for what they are struggling with and fighting for.

I sincerely hope there will be more focus on them as individuals and people with a past, a future, and a story—and not just as inmates. And that there will be better relationships between them and the staff, and that they will be met in the difficult and painful parts of their lives.

I hope they reach their dreams, and they should know that their words and poems mean something to me—and that I see them as equal women, just like myself, with both sorrow, pain, joy, and hope in life.

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\_\_\_\_\_, reader of this study and the creative texts

# 10. Acknowledgements

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And of course, thank you to my supervisors, Dorthe Staunæs and Charlotte Mathiassen.

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To Dorthe, for grasping the overall spirit of the research, offering rearticulations with such careful attention to words, and providing emotional support and guidance until the very end.

Beyond the many people I have had the privilege to encounter along this journey—and those I may have forgotten to name in this section but not in my heart—I also want to acknowledge that ChatGPT was used to help shorten sections, edit grammar, and offer rearticulations. Yet a venue to think about abolition.

# 11. Participants' writings in Danish

## Hvis jeg var minister

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg se nærmere på strafferammerne

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg gøre en indsats i resocialisering,

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg åbne op for muligheder

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg fokusere mere på uddannelser i fængsler

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg fokusere på nærhedsprincippet og opfører flere kvindefængsler og udslusningsfængsler, bedre fordelt

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg give mulighed for velfungerende indsatte også får chancen for at gøre en ekstra indsats

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg ikke gå ind for straf men gå ind for hjælp

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg lytte på hvad de indsatte selv har at sige og imødekomme det

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg få styr på vores psykiatriske hospitaler så fængselsbetjentene ikke står med en opgave de ikke er uddannet til

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg åbne plejehjemsfængsler til ældre og svage indsatte med behov for ekstra sygepersonale

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg sørge for at vi fik de indsatte bedst ud på den anden side

Hvis jeg var minister, ville jeg besøge fængsler og opleve det på egen hånd

- S.N.

## Fra indsat til værdsat

Hun er i tvivl, om hun gør det rigtige  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun er god nok  
Hun er i tvivl, om det hele lykkedes  
Hun er i tvivl, om det hele falder sammen  
Hun er i tvivl, om de tager imod hende  
Hun er i tvivl om sin fremtid  
Hun er i tvivl om sin fortid  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun nogensinde kommer videre  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun kan klare det pres der kommer

- Anonym

## Hun er i tvivl

Hun er i tvivl, om hun er et godt menneske  
Hun er i tvivl, om folk ved, at hun sidder i fængsel  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun nogensinde får sit liv tilbage – et normalt liv, som hun havde før  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun har svigtet sin familie og sit barn  
Hun er i tvivl, om hun kan klare det; om hun kommer ud stærkere eller en knækket tom sjæl  
Hun er i tvivl, om hvad hun har gjort i sit liv for at fortjene denne skæbne  
Hun er i tvivl, om hvornår dette mareridt slutter  
Hun er i tvivl, om hvem hun er  
Men hun er ikke i tvivl om, at hun ikke har gjort det, hun er dømt for

- Layla

*/Text 2*

## Hun er vred

Hun er vred over, hvordan hendes mor håndterede hende, da hun var lille.

Hun er vred over, at hun er blevet udsat for brutale og grumme ting, da hun var lille.

Hun er vred over, at ingen greb ind og stoppede det, eller var opmærksomme på hende.

Hun er vred over, at der ikke blev taget sunde og fornuftige valg for hende, men i stedet blev der handlet hurtigt og selvisk.

Hun er vred over at blive smidt rundt i systemet—igen og igen og igen. Hun følte sig hurtig alene og ubetydelig, hvorfor skulle hun have den følelse, havde hun virkelig fortjent den? Var det meningen?

Hun er vred over, at der ikke blev lyttet til hende, hun blev ikke forstået og hørt. Hun blev tit en kasterbold i systemet. Hun følte sig hurtig opgivet.

Hun er vred fordi, at dem som sagde de elskede hende, de passede ikke på hende. De lyttede ikke, de så hende ikke, når hun havde brug for.

At blive set.

De mærkede hende ikke.

Hun er vred, fordi hun nu gennemgår smerten igen. Hun bearbejder stadig smerten, krænkelser, tabet, håbet, mm.

Hun er vred over, at andre mennesker skulle have lov at fylde i hendes rygsæk, at hun ikke selv valgte, hvad der skulle være i den. Hun skal bære rundt på andres valg og beslutninger, som hun blev en del af uden selv at vælge.

Hun er vred over, at man kunne overse mistro i så slem grad, som hun var udsat for.

- Emmelie

### **Casper, studerende og modtager af de kreative tekster**

De får mig til at tænke over, at det kunne være alle, der sad i det fængsel. Det kunne være mig, min mor, min søster, min kæreste. Det får mig til at tænke, at fængslet og de indsatte er indespærret, men i allerhøjeste grad ikke er udelukket for refleksion.

Det får mig til at tænke, at disse mennesker bliver uretfærdigt behandlet, og får mig til at tænke, at fængselsstraf er dybt uproduktivt på et menneskeligt og følelsesmæssigt plan. Det får mig til at tænke, at essentialising, politisering og økonomisering af menneskers identitet, er dybt forkasteligt.

Ingen mennesker er mindre menneske end andre mennesker.

Det får mig til at tænke på de pårørende. På forældre og børn og venner.

### **Anonym studerende og modtager af de kreative tekster**

Efter at have hørt jeres digte, sidder jeg med en opspændthed i kroppen, min kæbe var spændt og mine arme krydset så jeg nu har mærker efter min t-shirt på mine arme.

Jeg er frustreret over den dobbelthed, der ligger i individet der er indsat og har oplevet ubegribeligt svigt og tab, men samtidigt har gjort noget, der er vurderet har været slemt nok, til at skulle have en straf. Hvordan kan et individ være begge steder på én gang?

Jeg kæmper med dobbeltheden mellem individet der er datter, mor, ked af det, og undrende, men også straffet. Hvordan kan denne dobbelthed for mig være så frustrerende, og hvordan overlever de indsatte i en hverdag hvor denne dobbelthed og kompleksitet kan være altoverskyggende?

Jeg er frustreret over vores system der så tydeligt ikke virker. Jeg er frustreret over, at vi ikke passer bedre på hinanden. Jeg er frustreret over, at de vigtigste erhverv i vores samfund (socialarbejder, betjente, m.m.) ikke er værdsat nok. Jeg er frustreret over den manglende medmenneskelighed mellem politibetjent og indsat.

Jeg er frustreret over, at dette projekt, har været en once in a lifetime mulighed for at blive hørt uden for murene. Jeg håber at I vil læse dette, og vide at jeg var herude, jeg lyttede, og jeg er her, og anerkender at I her. I har ret til at eksistere, og eksistere i en verden hvor jeres stemmer kan blive hørt lige så tydeligt som min

### Spørgsmål til dommeren i min retssag:

1. Har jeg fortjent at få 8 måneder, for noget jeg ikke var en del af?
2. Hvorfor kom du for sent den dag?
3. Fik jeg den straf, fordi du var sur over:
  - a. Din forsinkelse
  - b. At din sekretær ikke var med
  - c. Computersystemet, som ville ikke starte
4. Gad du ikke at komme på arbejde den dag og det gik over mig?
5. Har du overhovedet hørt på det, jeg har sagt?
  - a. Ja
  - b. Nej
  - c. Delvist
6. Har du dømt mig bare til at komme ud med dine frustrationer på grund af din dårlige dag?  
Da det ikke kun skal være dig, som har en dårlig dag?
7. Var jeg for dig kun én i rækken som skal have et stempel og en envejsbillet til fængsel?
8. Har du kun på få sekunder afgjort, om "hun har gjort det eller ej"?
9. Er vi for dig personer eller kun sagsnumre?
10. Hvorfor brugte du kun 3 min til at beslutte at ødelægge mit liv?
11. Tænkte du over, at jeg også har et liv og en familie, som du har straffet sammen med mig?
  - a. Har du en familie?
12. Har du nogensinde tænkt, at det er uretfærdig, hvad du har gjort mod mig?
13. Har du ikke dårlig samvittighed? Kan du leve med det?

- Laura

## Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg altid prøve at lytte så ingen følte sig snydt.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg være mere forstående og ikke nær så pågående.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg aldrig kalde de indsatte ved nummer. Jeg ville lære deres navne.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg se mennesket og ikke kriminaliteten.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg gøre mit bedste for at hjælpe den enkelte.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg tale med de indsatte og ikke til dem.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg se de indsatte i øjnene når jeg taler med dem.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg aldrig bakke mine kollegaer op, hvis jeg synes de var uretfærdige.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg møde mennesker med åbent sind.

Hvis jeg var en fængselsbetjent, ville jeg aldrig låse mennesker inde.

Det er derfor, jeg aldrig kunne blive fængselsbetjent.

Fordi mit hjerte ville ikke kunne være det bekendt.

- Layla

*/Text 6*

## Spørgsmål til min mor (Min barndom)

Fortryder du, at du fik mig i en alder af 18 år?

Hvad vil du gerne gøre anderledes, hvis du havde muligheden?

Vil du kunne tåle at høre, hvordan jeg har det inderst inde?

Hvis jeg åbnede op over for dig, ville du så skånes for min hårde spørgsmål og kritiske fremgangsmåde? Hvis ja, hvorfor?

Hvornår følte du, at det begyndte at gå skidt i min barndom?

Syndes du selv, at du har været en ansvarsbevidst forælder?

Syndes du, at du fuldendte din rolle som mor over for mig?

Er du vred og skuffet på dig selv, over den måde du håndterede mig på?

Føler du skyld og skam, efter du fandt ud af, at jeg var blevet seksuelt misbrugt?

Føler du, at du er skyld i min manglede tro på mig selv?

Fortryder du, at du ikke fik dig et arbejde og en uddannelse, så du havde bedre økonomiske forhold til at forsørge mig/os?

Føler du skyld, efter du selv er blevet seksuelt misbrugt? Altså, føler du skyld over for dig selv, efter du blev udsat for det?

Føler du, at du opgav mig til systemet?

- Emmelie

### Spørgsmål til min far:

1. Hvorfor var du der aldrig for mig?
2. Hvorfor valgte du stofferne frem for mig?
3. Hvorfor er min mor så sur på dig?
4. Hvorfor fandt du mig aldrig?
5. Har jeg andre søskende?
6. Ved din familie, at jeg eksisterer?
7. Ved du noget om mig?
8. Ved du, at du er morfar?
9. Hvorfor forlod du denne verden?
10. Kommer jeg nogensinde til at se dig igen?
11. Har du det bedre, der hvor du er nu?
12. Hviler du i fred?
13. Kan du se mig nu? Er du med mig, hvor jeg er?
14. Hvis du kunne starte forfra, ville du så ændre noget?
15. Ved du at jeg tilgiver dig?
16. Ved du at jeg elsker dig?

- Layla

## Hvis jeg var journalist

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg sørge for at bringe alle sider af en sag frem – jeg ville gøre mit ypperste for at sandheden for alle involverede parter kom frem

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg altid huske mig selv på at der bag hver eneste "gode historie" findes et eller flere ægte mennesker af kød og blod med ægte og skrøbelige følelser. Herudover ville jeg huske på at disse mennesker også har familier, børn og pårørende som også ville blive berørte af min historie

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg sørge for altid at spørge mig selv, om historien jeg vil bringe, er så vigtig at det kan retfærdiggøre en indgriben i hensynet privatlivets fred

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg altid vende mig mod mængden og søge det ubelyste belyst – jeg ville altid dykke dybere ned og ikke blot hoppe med på mainstream-clickbait-bølgen. Jeg ville sætte en ære i at kunne oplyse befolkningen.

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg forsøge altid at gendrive mine antagelser fremfor at søge dem bekræftet. Jeg ville sørge for at jeg som journalist var befolkningens vagthund og ikke jagthund

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg gøre alt for ikke at medvirke til at bygge usande narrativer op og jeg ville holde mig for øje at påvirkning af bias kan have stor indflydelse på måden hvorpå informationer og viden selekteres – "det du søger, skal du finde"

Hvis jeg var journalist, ville jeg altid huske mig selv på hvor meget magt jeg har og den påvirkning min skrivelse kan eller vil have på det individer eller de individer jeg skriver om. Jeg ville sørge for at være grundigt oplyst og jeg ville tænke mig godt og grundigt om før jeg bragte noget som kunne medføre betydelig skade og sorg for de omhandlende mennesker.

- N.S.H

## **Elizabeth, studerende og modtager af de kreative tekster**

Tak for at have mod til at dele. De tekster jeg hørte, var meget smukke. Jeg blev meget bevidst om hvor hårdt det må være at i er blevet placeret i kategorien "kriminell", både at blive kategoriseret gennem systemet, lovgivningen, men også bekymringen om dem i elsker, også placere jer i den samme kategori, eller om i for dem, stadig er jer, som i altid har været. Det gik op for mig, hvor hårdt det også er at stå med andres kategorisering af dig og se den i øjnene. Alt den vrede, skyld og skam, sorg i er tvunget til at bearbejde, uden at der er nogen hjælp at hente. Det respekterer jeg virkelig. Jeg synes også at mange af de følelser i skrev om, overraskende relaterbare, selvom vi er vidt forskellige steder, af helt forskellige årsager.

## **Mathilde, studerende og modtager af de kreative tekster**

Jeg blev meget rørt over at høre disse tekster, de var virkelig smukke, ærlige, sårbare og reflekterede. Så mange fine tanker om barske virkeligheder, om sorg, smerte, håb, ønsker og drømme. De var virkelig smukt skrevet. På en måde føler jeg det er underligt, at få lov til at høre om deres dybeste tanker, uden at kunne få lov til at give noget tilbage, for jeg ville ønske at jeg kunne fortælle at jeg forstår dem, det var meget relaterbart, men også at jeg har enormt stor respekt for deres mod og for hvem de er og det de kæmper med og for. Jeg håber inderligt at der vil komme mere fokus på dem som individer og personer med en fortid og en fremtid og en historie, og ikke bare som indsatte, og at der vil blive bedre forhold mellem dem og de ansatte og at de vil blive mødt i det svære og hårde.

Jeg håber, at de når deres drømme, og de skal vide, at deres ord og digte har en betydning for mig og at jeg ser dem som ligeværdige kvinder som jeg selv, med både sorg, smerte, glæde og håb i livet.

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