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Jail craft of prison officers in post-authoritarian prisons: a comparative research in Belgium and the Netherlands

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A comparative perspective offers a valuable lens for understanding how prison officer work takes shape across different penal contexts. This dissertation develops such an approach by examining prison officer work in Belgium and the Netherlands, two systems marked by distinct institutional arrangements and reform trajectories.

Based on thirteen months of comparative ethnographic fieldwork in four prisons (two in each country), the study analyses how officers perform, interpret, and negotiate their roles in post-authoritarian contexts. Central to the analysis is jailcraft: an embodied and relational form of expertise through which officers navigate the moral, emotional, and practical complexities of prison life.

The findings show that access to, and the erosion of, jailcraft are structurally mediated. Institutional conditions, such as staffing levels, spatial configurations, and policy frameworks, shape the extent to which craft can be developed, sustained, or undermined. Cross-national differences, particularly in role differentiation and proximity, produce distinct configurations of prison work, while broader shifts towards risk governance contribute to the erosion of craft across both contexts. By foregrounding situated practices, this dissertation demonstrates that jailcraft is not an individual competence, but a socially embedded and context-dependent form of professionalism.

This is a volume in the series of the Meijers Research Institute and Graduate School of the Leiden Law School of Leiden University. This study is part of the Law School's research programme 'Criminal Justice: Societally Effective Criminal Justice 2023-2029'.

Jail Craft of Prison Officers in Post-Authoritarian Prisons

A Comparative Research in Belgium and the Netherlands

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