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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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1.1 BACKGROUND

It is widely acknowledged that both the relationships between prison officer and incarcerated individuals and staff professionalism are central to both the experience and functioning of prison life (Home Office, 1984; Liebling, 2011). This recognition highlights the pivotal role played by prison officers (POs) in shaping the everyday realities of the custodial environment. POs are not merely agents of control but are also key actors in maintaining institutional order through relational means. One concept that captures this dual function is dynamic security – a term introduced by Dunbar (1985) to describe a model of prison security based not only on physical infrastructure and surveillance, but also on consistent, constructive staff-prisoner interactions.

From this perspective, engagement with incarcerated persons is not peripheral to prison security but lies at its very core. The concept of *dynamic security* refers to a model in which institutional security is maintained through the combination of an active, purposeful regime and the cultivation of constructive staff-prisoner relationships. It emphasizes the importance of consistent, respectful communication and meaningful presence on the wings. Marshall (1997) underscores the significance of such interactions, arguing that they contribute not only to order and compliance, but also to a more legitimate and humane custodial environment. However, the implementation of dynamic security is not without tension. It requires a shift away from purely instrumental or punitive conceptions of the prison officer roles, and toward a more relational, engaged, and emotionally intelligent form of prison work. One that is often undermined by resource constraints, managerialist pressures, and persistent cultural divisions within prison staff hierarchies.

Morgan (1992) argues that the stability of a prison regime depends on maintaining a delicate equilibrium between four core functions: custody, order, care, and justice. In recent decades, the expectations placed upon prison officers in relation to these elements have become increasingly complex, shaped by both shifting policy agendas and evolving operational demands. This complexity reflects a broader transformation in penal governance, wherein traditional security functions are progressively integrated with human service responsibilities. As King (2009) observes, this shift acknowledges the

dual role of prison officers as both agents of control and facilitators of care. However, this expanded role is far from unproblematic. It places officers at the intersection of often conflicting mandates, requiring them to navigate a terrain marked by emotional strain, ethical ambiguity, and institutional constraint. Numerous studies have highlighted how this convergence of roles intensifies the emotional labour required of prison officers, complicates their professional identities, and exposes them to heightened risks of stress, burnout, and moral fatigue (Crawley, 2004a; Garrihy, 2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Nylander Lindberg & Bruhn, 2011; Tournel, 2015). These developments call into question not only the sustainability of current staffing models, but also the institutional capacity to support officers tasked with fulfilling such diverse and demanding responsibilities.

Building on this complexity, the everyday practice of prison work relies heavily on what has been termed jail craft – a form of occupational expertise rooted in experiential knowledge, practical intuition, and culturally embedded skills (Crewe et al., 2015; Garrihy, 2020;2021; Nixon & Woodward, 2024; Peacock et al., 2017). Far from being reducible to formal training or policy directives, jail craft reflects the informal and often improvised ways in which prison officers navigate the moral, emotional, and relational demands of their environment. It encompasses the subtle capacity to read situations, interpret behaviour, maintain authority without escalation, and strike a workable balance between enforcement and empathy. As Lipsky's (1980) concept of the *street-level bureaucrat* suggests, prison officers operate at the interface between institutional policy and lived practice. In doing so, they exercise considerable discretion in how rules are interpreted, how order is maintained, and how interpersonal dynamics unfold on the wings (Lin, 2000). Their interactions with incarcerated individuals do not merely implement policy – they actively shape its meaning and effects on the ground. As such, prison officers hold significant power to either reinforce or subvert the normative aims of the institution, including its commitments to discipline, rehabilitation, and justice (Kjelsberg et al., 2007). Recognizing the centrality of jail craft thus foregrounds the embodied, situated, and often invisible labour through which prison order is maintained, or contested, on a daily basis.

Despite their importance to the functioning of penal institutions, prison officers remain strikingly underrepresented in international comparative penological research. While some scholarly attention has been directed toward the role of officers in Scandinavian contexts (Bruhn et al., 2017; Kolind et al., 2015) and in comparative studies between Anglophone and Nordic models (Horowitz et al., 2021; Pratt, 2008; Pratt & Eriksson, 2013), systematic analyses that extend beyond these dominant geographies remain scarce. This lacuna reflects a broader pattern within prison ethnographies, wherein studies on the topic are scarce and non-Anglophone perspectives are frequently marginalized or rendered peripheral to theoretical develop-

ment (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012). The persistent divergence between Anglophone and continental European penal traditions underscores the urgency of expanding the comparative frame. The notion of prison officers as the “invisible ghosts of penality” (Liebling, 2000: p.337) captures their paradoxical presence: central to the functioning of prison life yet overlooked in broader academic and policy discourse (Garrihy, 2020). This research seeks to challenge that invisibility by offering a grounded, comparative analysis of prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands, two jurisdictions currently undergoing significant transformations in correctional policy and practice. By bringing these contexts into conversation, the study contributes to a more pluralized understanding of prison work, institutional logics, and the lived realities of penal governance.

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The relevance of this research lies in the broader transformation of penal power within prison systems towards post-authoritarian carceral institutions (van Zyl Smit & Snacken, 2009). These systems are characterised by a diminishment of pure coercive authority, the relocation and dispersal of power, and the deferral of power through governing at a distance (Attrill & Liell, 2007; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2011). In Belgium and the Netherlands, such transformations are reflected in the introduction of rights for incarcerated persons (Daems, 2020; Laemers et al., 2001; Snacken, 2015), the expanded integration of social workers and psychologists in providing guidance during detention and post-release (Hanrath et al., 2019; Polfliet, 2015), the launch of the digital platform PrisonCloud for incarcerated persons in Belgium (Beyens & Geerts, 2024; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020), the promotion & demotion system in the Netherlands (Boone, 2012; Ginneken, 2018; Elbers, 2024) and the shift of the prison officer (PO) role from that of a traditional warden to a more socially engaged function, shaped by an increasingly complex and demanding prison population (Beyens et al., 2021; Gravestijn et al., 2018; Kommer, 1991; Tournel, 2015). How the redistribution of power reshapes the position and role of prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands, and how these are enacted and experienced within the evolving dynamics of post-authoritarian prison contexts, remains insufficiently understood. Within this shifting institutional landscape, only limited ethnographic research has been conducted on the role of prison officers in both countries, with few studies placing them at the centre of analysis, notably those by Kommer (1991), Tournel (2015) and van Dijk (2023).

Policy reforms in the last decade in both jurisdictions further underscore the need for such inquiry. In Belgium, the enactment of the Penitentiary Act (March 23, 2019) has introduced substantial reforms to the organisation of penitentiary services and the status of prison officers. Specifically, the Act brings about significant changes in several key areas, including the training

protocols (Art. 11), job descriptions (Art. 13), and overall organizational structure of prison officers (Title IV). Moreover, it addresses the issue of minimum service requirements during officers' strikes (Art.15-20), ensuring that essential functions within the penitentiary system continue to operate even in the face of labour disruptions.

A particularly notable aspect of the Belgian Penitentiary Act is its recognition of the demanding nature of the work performed by Belgian POs (PO^{BE}). The Act acknowledges that their roles require a high level of skill and expertise, reflecting the complexity and intensity of their responsibilities. This acknowledgment aligns with the broader objectives of imprisonment, which were originally outlined in the 2005 Prison Act. These objectives include not only the maintenance of security and order within the prison but also the critical goal of facilitating prisoner reintegration into society. However, a significant challenge identified by the Act is the existing division of institutional powers within the Belgian prison system. This division delineates a separation between the roles focused on security and control and those centred on rehabilitative and care functions. As a result, while Belgian POs are able to employ dynamic security practices, sustained, constructive interaction with incarcerated persons that supports safety and order, they are nonetheless constrained in their capacity to participate more fully in reintegrative and social programmes. This structural separation limits their direct involvement in initiatives that are essential for preparing incarcerated persons for successful reintegration into society.

In contrast, the situation in the Netherlands offers a different perspective. Dutch prison officers, referred to as '*Penitentiaire Inrichtingswerkers*' (PIW-ers, or Dutch Prison Officers, (PO^{NL}s)), have a more integrated role within the prison system. These officers are directly involved in engaging with incarcerated persons and participate in dynamic security practices, often described as 'warm' custody (Beyens, 2019; Breuls, 2016; Vanhouche et al., 2021). This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining positive relationships and interactions between staff and incarcerated persons, which is believed to support the reintegration process. The Dutch model seems to promote a more holistic relational approach to correctional work, where the focus is not solely on maintaining security but also on fostering an environment conducive to rehabilitation (Beyens & Boone, 2013; Kruttschnitt & Dirkzwager, 2011; Liebling et al., 2021).

Additionally, within the Dutch prison system, there is a distinction between PO^{NL}s and another category of staff known as '*complexbeveiligers*' or BEWAs (or, security officers (SO^{NL}s)). SO^{NL}s are primarily responsible for static security, which is often characterized as 'cold' custody (Beyens, 2019; Breuls, 2016; Vanhouche et al., 2021). Their role is more focused on ensuring the physical security of the facility and managing high-risk situations. This division of labour within the Dutch system highlights the nuanced approach to

prison staffing, where different roles and responsibilities are clearly defined to address various aspects of prison management and incarcerated persons care (Kommer, 2018; van Ginneken & Abbing, 2024).

In addition to structural and cultural conditions, the spatial dimension of prisons remains comparatively underexplored in relation to the practices and experiences of prison officers. Drawing on insights from carceral geography (Jefferson & Gaborit, 2015; Moran et al., 2018), existing research shows that prison architecture is not merely a neutral backdrop but an active agent in structuring institutional routines and carceral relationships. Spatial configurations – such as the contrast between panopticon layouts and campus-style designs (Beijersbergen et al., 2014) – mediate visibility, interaction patterns, and officers' sense of control and security. Open, decentralized facilities tend to foster informal dialogue and relational engagement, whereas enclosed and heavily monitored environments may produce distance, strain, and alienation (Jewkes, 2018; Mario et al., 2024). Furthermore, the sensory and affective atmospheres of prisons – lighting, noise, temperature, and movement – affect not only how officers work but how they feel and inhabit their environment (Crewe et al., 2014; Turner & Peters, 2015). In this sense, spatial organization both enables and constrains institutional logics, making the spatial dimension integral to understanding how Belgian and Dutch officers enact their roles in everyday practice.

In summary, this research is driven by a need to critically examine how prison officer roles in Belgium and the Netherlands are shaped, enacted, and experienced within the shifting dynamics of post-authoritarian prison systems. Rather than treating staffing models as fixed or coherent, the study explores how prison officer roles are shaped, constrained, and negotiated within specific institutional settings. By comparing the Dutch and Belgian contexts, the research sheds light on how organisational structures, policy expectations, prison space and day-to-day realities influence staff-prisoner relations, institutional legitimacy, and professional identity. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about the future of prison staffing, the operationalization of care and control, and the significance of frontline prison work in contemporary penal governance.

1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND DESIGN

This study aims to develop a deeper explanatory understanding of the lived experiences of prison officers in Belgian and Dutch prisons by examining how their actions, orientations, and occupational culture are shaped by underlying institutional structures, cultural norms and spatial design. Occupational cultures are treated not as static or purely discursive constructs, but as dynamic social realities emerging from the interplay between structure and agency, between the formal mandates of penal systems and the situated

strategies of those who enact them on the ground (Alvesson et al., 2008). The study seeks to address how prison officers in both countries navigate the tensions between care and control, discretion and accountability, emotional labour and institutional rationality. The comparative design provides an opportunity to identify similarities and differences, by comparing how staffing models and institutional configurations may produce distinct outcomes, while remaining attentive to the challenges of “comparing like with like” and avoiding ethnocentric assumptions in cross-national research (Nelken, 2010, p.56). By making visible the often-underacknowledged forces shaping prison officer practice, the study contributes to an internationally relevant understanding of contemporary prison work. It is guided by several research questions aimed at identifying and explaining the structural, relational, cultural, and spatial dimensions of prison officer experiences across jurisdictions.

1. How do structural, cultural, and legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape the construction of prison officers’ occupational identities, and how are these perceived by prison officers?

This question seeks to uncover the generative mechanisms – structural (e.g., staffing models, job descriptions), cultural (e.g., shared values, informal norms, role expectations), and legislative (e.g., penal acts, role differentiation, policy frameworks) – that underpin how prison officers come to understand their roles. It invites a layered exploration of how these roles are shaped from above, for example through legislation such as the Belgian Penitentiary Act (2019) and the Dutch Punishment and Protection Act (2021), as well as through formal role differentiation, and how they are perceived from below by prison officers themselves.

2. How do institutional logics and structural conditions in Belgium and the Netherlands shape local prison officers’ practices, and how are these embedded in their day-to-day work?

This question examines the interaction between institutional logics and structural conditions (e.g., staff shortages, regime type, role definitions, local prison policy) in shaping core aspects of prison work. Practices of prison officers are not understood as isolated skills, but as contextually situated responses to and constraints imposed by specific institutional environments. The aim is to trace how institutional and structural differences produce distinct styles of prison officer conduct, and how these are experienced, negotiated, and enacted in everyday prison life.

3. In what ways do spatial configurations in Belgian and Dutch prisons influence prison officers’ interaction patterns and everyday work practices?

This question examines how the physical layout and architectural design of prisons affect officers' ability to interact with incarcerated persons and with each other. It focuses on how spatial arrangements shape opportunities for contact, observation, and relationship-building, both in terms of physical closeness and the ease of social interaction. It considers how design features, security routines, and institutional policies may facilitate or hinder sustained, constructive interaction, and how these spatial conditions may influence officers' daily practices and professional orientations.

This study draws on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork and 76 interviews in four institutions – two in Belgium and two in the Netherlands – to examine the everyday practices and lived experiences of prison officers. The comparative design enables analysis of how different penal logics, staffing structures, and institutional cultures shape officers' behaviours, perceptions, and relationships, while also identifying cross-jurisdictional patterns. Informed by the concept of jail craft, the study situates local practices within broader debates in penology. At a time when European prisons face overcrowding, staff shortages, rising complexity among incarcerated persons, and competing demands for security and rehabilitation, understanding the role of frontline prison staff is urgent (O'Connell & Rogan, 2023; Rogan, 2019; Snacken et al., 2022). Despite their central role in maintaining order, delivering care, and enacting the goals of imprisonment, prison officers remain underexamined in comparative penological research, particularly in continental Europe (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011; Nelken, 2010). This study addresses that gap.

Methodologically, this study is grounded in a critical realist approach, seeking to uncover the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions that shape the observable practices and experiences of prison officers. Ethnography is not simply deployed as a method of data collection but as a lens through which the layered reality of prison working environments can be examined, capturing both surface-level events and being aware of deeper generative factors that produce them. While remaining attentive to participants situated narratives and practices, the analysis moves beyond description to interrogate the institutional, cultural, and spatial structures that constrain or enable action.

Fieldwork is central to this endeavour. Through extended immersion in prison settings, the study traces how seemingly routine interactions are anchored in broader systemic logics. Rather than treating prison officer perspectives as purely subjective accounts, the research situates them within a stratified ontology, where agency and structure are mutually constitutive.

In doing so, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically. It illuminates how prison officers in Belgium and the Netherlands enact and make sense of their roles within divergent carceral regimes, and how

institutional design, occupational culture, and spatial configuration mediate staff-prisoner relations. Ultimately, the research offers a deeper explanatory understanding of prison officer practice under conditions of penal transformation, speaking not only to academic debates but also to questions of policy and professional development.

1.4 CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY WITHIN THE BELGIAN AND DUTCH PRISON SYSTEMS

Both Belgium and the Netherlands saw their prison populations increase in the 1980s (Beyens et al., 2014). Not only was the Dutch prison system confronted with a shortage of capacity, but they were also faced with severe budget cuts in this period (Kommer, 1991). This gradually translated into a downsizing of detention regimes with fewer activities for incarcerated persons, more hours on cell and the (partial) introduction of multi-person cells (Boone & Moerings, 2008; De Jonge, 2007). Dutch POs that had to work under these circumstances indicated that these measures and the related work pressure limited their possibilities to adequately maintain contacts with prisoners (Moors et al., 2004). From 2005 onwards, the prison population started to decline. In their interpretation of this decline, Boone and Moerings (2008) point to a complex interplay of factors that are mainly related to a changing policy at the level of the police and the Public Prosecution Service, which focuses more on lighter forms of crime, and a changing immigration policy. The 2009-2014 Masterplan (2009) for the Prison System therefore included proposals to reduce capacity by closing several penitentiary institutions. This capacity reduction was continued, partly due to a new austerity assignment, with the implementation of the DJI Masterplan 2013-2018 (2013), which also built on developments that had already been set in motion: further degradation of regimes, intensification of multi-person cell use, downward adjustment of the staffing establishment, closure of penitentiary institutions (PIs), and consequently many departures and changes of staff due to (among other things) job insecurity (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2016). In response to these developments, in 2017 the Dutch House of Representatives received a memorandum, 'Appellation for Safety', from the Central Works Council of the Judicial Institutions Department (DJI) on behalf of prison staff, to highlight the effects of the cuts, which are so tangible that safety within the PIs could no longer be guaranteed (Inspectie JenV, 2018). According to the staff, there is understaffing, insufficient personnel, high work pressure, high levels of absenteeism and insufficient time to carry out assignments consistently and to a high standard (Gravesteijn et al., 2018). The executive penitentiary personnel have less opportunity to perform their relational task, including treatment (de Groot, 2019; RSJ, 2019).

While the Netherlands is closing prisons due to a decrease in the prison population, overcrowding in Belgian prisons is a constant source of concern that has dominated and hampered detention policy since the late 1980s (Beyens et al., 1993). Despite the introduction of alternatives to pre-trial detention and the custodial sentence, the partial or non-execution of prison sentences of up to three years and the execution of prison sentences by electronic surveillance, successive Belgian Ministers of Justice are unable to control the rising prison population. The main explanations are the increasing duration of pre-trial detention and the longer detention periods of convicted prisoners (Beyens, Dirkzwager & Korf, 2014; Beyens & Tubex, 2002; Maes, 2010). Due to persistent overcrowding, cell-sharing is no longer an exceptional measure in Belgium but a structural feature of the prison system. Incarcerated persons have long protested substandard living conditions in Belgian prisons; decades of CPT reporting, ECHR case-law, and national monitoring document persistent overcrowding, dilapidation, and hygiene deficits (Deschuyteneer et al., 2023). Most Belgian prisons date back to the 19th century and are characterised by star-shaped or traditional Ducpétiaux architecture (Tournel, 2015). The living conditions for prisoners are the working conditions for POs. Overcrowding leads to more tensions for incarcerated persons and staff alike and ensuring a dynamic security and good relations with the incarcerated persons became increasingly difficult (Snacken, 2005). The welfare of the incarcerated persons is linked to the welfare of POs. Continuous tensions between incarcerated persons and POs regularly lead to strikes, while guidance or treatment of the prison population leaves much to be desired.

The Belgian Prison Act of 2005 emphasizes the protection of incarcerated persons' dignity (Art. 5), the normalization of regimes (Art. 43; 53-70), and the implementation of dynamic security (Art. 105), all with a view to facilitating reintegration (Art. 9). However, these normative ambitions often clash with the prevailing occupational culture of Belgian prison officers, which remains largely rooted in a security-oriented ethos (Tournel, 2015). In response to persistent national and international criticism, the 2019 Penitentiary Act introduced reforms aimed at redefining the professional role of prison officers. It acknowledged the complexity and skill involved in prison work (Beyens et al., 2021) and proposed changes in training, task differentiation, and service continuity during strikes (Beyens, 2019; Daems, 2020b).

Notably, the 2019 Act drew inspiration from the Dutch prison officer model. In the Netherlands, a clearer distinction is made between prison officers, prison officers (PONL) involved in daily engagement, mentoring and dynamic security, and prison officers (SONL) focused on static security (Beyens, et al., 2021; Kommer, 2018; van Ginneken & Abbing, 2024). In Belgium, by contrast, the separation of institutional powers between security-oriented prison officers and care professionals means that, although Belgian POs may engage in elements of dynamic security, their formal remit places

less emphasis on sustained reintegrative work, with many such responsibilities allocated to external professionals (Tournel, 2015).

However, it remains uncertain how the envisioned system will, or can, be meaningfully implemented within the Belgian context, given the complexities of Belgium's federal state structure, the persistence of long-standing penal traditions, and the deeply embedded occupational cultures of its prison officers (Beyens, 2019; Tournel, 2015; van Dijk, 2023). Belgium's gradual convergence toward elements of the Dutch model thus invites a critical examination of the underlying differences and convergences between the two national penitentiary systems. As previously noted, Belgian prisoners held in PI Tilburg expressed appreciation for the Dutch approach to prison officer conduct, suggesting its perceived relational quality and responsiveness (Beyens & Boone, 2013). Similarly, Liebling et al. (2020) identified the 'present-oriented' stance of Dutch officers in PI Norgerhaven as one of their defining strengths – an orientation that manifests in equal, respectful communication, attentiveness to everyday interpersonal dynamics, and a focus on engaging with incarcerated individuals in the immediacy of the here and now.

At first sight, the Dutch prison context seems to portray a much more positive image compared to the Belgian prison context, such as a decreasing prison population and no overcrowding, no strikes or strong unions who impede the introduction of incarcerated persons' rights, better staff interactions and a more positive atmosphere in prison in general (Beyens & Boone, 2013; Liebling et al., 2020). It should be noted however that the differentiation of functions also poses practical problems for the Dutch prison service. For certain positions, the labour market is so tight that it is not always possible to meet the need for POs in time, by means of recruitment. For certain function groups, it is possible to cooperate with external parties to provide trained staff at short notice (e.g. security officers). But for the function group of PONL, temporarily hiring external staff is not an option. In that case, (experienced) facility guards are called in to fill in at the living units (Algemene Rekenhof, 2019; DPMO, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2018). The question then arises as to what extent these SONL have the necessary competences that are required of PONL. Furthermore, the Dutch prison context has been subject to change and social turmoil as well.

With the introduction of the Sentencing and Protection Law (2021), the Dutch prison system increasingly emphasizes future-oriented goals, such as rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism. This legal shift builds on the promotion-demotion system introduced in 2014, where incarcerated persons' (un)desirable behaviour is systematically assessed and linked to internal and external freedoms (Boone, 2021; Elbers, 2024; Struijk, 2020). As a result, prison officers are expected to play a more active role in shaping future outcomes through their behavioural evaluations and motivational engagement.

However, this growing reliance on formal assessment mechanisms introduces new tensions into prison officers' work. As Beyens and Boone (2013, p.197) already asked during their study of PI Tilburg, how compatible is the Dutch officer's strength – working relationally in the 'here and now' – with a system that increasingly demands predictive judgement?

While these tensions are partly rooted in the future-oriented logic of the law, other scholars (Kommer, 2018; van Kleef, 2019) point to a parallel development: the rise of registration and administrative accountability in prison work. This shift reflects a broader managerial trend toward evidencing performance, which may sideline the interpersonal and relational aspects of officer-prisoner interaction. Although not inherently driven by future-oriented goals, this administrative emphasis reinforces a mode of working where formal documentation may begin to displace embodied knowledge and human connection.

Since the 1970s, Dutch executive penitentiary staff, especially prison officers (known as "PO^{NL}"), have been required not only to undertake security tasks but also to promote a positive atmosphere and a healthy living environment (Molleman, 2021). Prison officers are expected to achieve this through "bejegening" – which means interacting with prisoners in a respectful, understanding, and equitable manner, based on a negotiation-based approach (Zwezerijnen, 1972). Over the years, this responsibility has grown, with the consequence that the degree of humane execution of custodial sentences and measures, and the minimization of detention-related harm, heavily depends on how well prison officers dedicate themselves to their duties (Grapendaal et al., 1985; Kommer, 1991). During the 1980s, the Dutch prison system faced both a shortage of capacity and significant budget cuts (Kommer, 1991). This gradually led to more austere detention regimes, with fewer activities for incarcerated persons, more time spent in cells, and the (partial) introduction of shared cells (Boone & Moerings, 2008; De Jonge, 2007). The executive penitentiary staff working under these conditions reported that these austerity measures and the associated workload limited their ability to maintain adequate contact with incarcerated persons (Moors et al., 2004).

The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) (2017) and the Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles (RSJ) (2019) have also raised alarms about the high workload for executive penitentiary staff. They report that the workload, which has been high for years, has increased further due to additional tasks, including behavioural assessments under the promote-demote system. Some authors note that the increased focus on recording behaviour has reduced the attention given to the humane side of the work (Kommer, 2018; van Kleef, 2019). The cited safety issues are not only due to staff shortages but also to the complex prison population, characterized by a high degree of psychosocial problems (den Bak et al., 2018; Inspectie JenV, 2018; RSJ, 2019). Due to the combina-

tion of a changing prison population and reduced staffing, higher demands are placed on staff, requiring additional guidance and training (Gravesteyn et al., 2018). To address staff shortages, DJI launched a large nationwide recruitment campaign in 2017, alongside regular recruitment efforts, to quickly resolve the shortage of executive penitentiary staff. Despite the tight labour market, this resulted in over 1,100 new employees in the following two years, stabilizing the situation somewhat (DPMO, 2019).

However, for certain positions, the labour market is so tight that recruitment alone cannot always meet the demand for executive penitentiary staff in a timely manner. For some roles, cooperation with external providers allows for rapid staffing solutions (e.g., for static security roles), but such flexibility does not apply to the prison officer function. In practice, this has led to experienced security staff being temporarily deployed on living units, where direct interaction with incarcerated persons is required (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2018; DPMO, 2019; Inspectie JenV, 2018).

This functional shift raises concerns about whether these staff members possess the necessary competencies to fulfil the relational and communicative demands of the prison officer role. Previous research has underscored the importance of these skills: earlier in this text, reference was made to the ‘present-focused’ orientation of Dutch prison officers (Liebling et al., 2020). Such qualities were similarly appreciated by Belgian prisoners during their stay in the Tilburg prison under Dutch custody (Beyens & Boone, 2013). These findings suggest that substituting trained prison officers with staff from more security-oriented backgrounds may risk undermining this essential relational dimension of prison work.

However, with the “Sentencing and Protection Act” (2021), the focus is less on the “here and now” and more on future goals. This law introduces the idea that an incarcerated persons behaviour will have consequences for detention phasing and conditional release (Boone, 2021; Elbers, 2024; Struijk, 2020). As a result, motivating interactions and judgments by executive penitentiary staff are instrumentalized to achieve future goals as set out in the law (Molleman, 2021). This raises the question of how this evolution aligns with the skills of prison officers to work in the “here and now”. To what extent is what prison officers excel at today, working in the immediacy in a humane and equitable manner, compatible with the growing importance of future goals? How do they experience this shift in roles? What does it mean for their interactions with incarcerated persons when executive staff are expected to make efforts to change their future behaviour? And what does this mean for recruitment and training needs?

To address current and future developments, DJI views investing in “craftsmanship” and “sustainable employability” of executive penitentiary staff as a crucial prerequisite, as stated in the strategic personnel plan DJI 2019-

2025, noting that there is no guarantee that the work will look the same in five years as it does now (DPMO, 2019). Specifically, craftsmanship refers to staff skills, including guiding/interacting with incarcerated persons, facilitating a humane and resocializing detention environment, and ensuring safety through relational security (Kommer, 2018). In 2018, DJI implemented this with the “craftsmanship” program under the agreement “Working on a Solid Personnel Policy”. This program was designed to enable prisons to offer staff job-specific training. However, due to previously mentioned capacity problems and work pressure, there is not always the opportunity to participate in these training sessions (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2018; Inspectie JenV, 2018; RSJ, 2019).

Taken together, these developments illustrate how the Belgian and Dutch prison systems have evolved under distinct structural pressures, policy trajectories, and occupational orientations. Although both jurisdictions confront similar challenges, balancing security with care, managing increasingly complex prison populations, and sustaining adequate staffing, their institutional responses and organisational arrangements differ in significant respects. Examining how these systemic contexts influence the everyday practices, role perceptions, and professional identities of prison officers forms the core concern of this thesis. The subsequent chapters build on this comparative foundation to address the research questions, progressing from the theoretical framework and methodological design to the presentation and analysis of the empirical findings.

1.5 OVERVIEW THESIS

This dissertation is structured around five core chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework, drawing on key notions surrounding jail craft, such as occupational culture, dirty work, emotional labour, authority, discretion, role embeddedness and proximity. It sets the theoretical lens through which the experiences and practices of prison officers are interpreted.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology. It explains the comparative ethnographic approach, the critical realist lens, the rationale behind site selection, and the process of data collection and analysis. The chapter also reflects on the challenges and ethical considerations of conducting research in carceral settings.

Chapter 4 examines how legislative mechanisms in Belgium and the Netherlands shape prison officers’ roles, and how officers themselves interpret and enact these roles in daily practice.

Chapter 5 focuses on the mechanisms within each institution that reproduce or challenge existing professional orientations. It examines how officers embody their roles, manage moral ambivalence, and sustain a sense of professional purpose in light of institutional expectations.

Chapter 6 analyses how interactions are shaped within institutional settings. It conceptualizes proximity not just as spatial closeness, but as a relational condition influenced by the institution's material lay-out and the staffs' position within it. It shows how this affects their ability to enact authority, maintain care, and sustain professional identity. The comparison reveals how spatial and organizational differences in Belgian and Dutch prisons enable or constrain relational practice.

Together, these chapters aim to provide an in-depth, comparative understanding of contemporary prison officer work in Belgium and the Netherlands, with a view to both empirical insight and theoretical development.