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Prisons as a place of reintegration? Insight into the reintegration process and problems in the Netherlands

Gefängnisse als Orte der Resozialisierung? Einblicke in den Resozialisierungsprozess und die Probleme in den Niederlanden

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Abstract: Approximately 23 000 adults are released from a correctional institution in the Netherlands every year. Since recidivism rates are high in the period immediately after release, Dutch aftercare policies have focused on improving the reintegration process by addressing structural and personal factors associated with (re)offending. In this study we combine data from a national aftercare monitor for all adults released in 2017, 2018 and 2019 and a longitudinal, qualitative study on the experiences of 100 (formerly) imprisoned individuals during their reintegration process. We find that a substantial group experience problems with employment, income, housing, and debts after release. Individuals experience barriers to the labor market due to criminal records and limited formal support following release from prison. This raises questions about the function of prisons as a place of reintegration.

Keywords: reintegration, prison policy, mixed methods

Zusammenfassung: Jedes Jahr werden in den Niederlanden etwa 23 000 Erwachsene aus einer Justizvollzugsanstalt entlassen. Da die Rückfallquote unmittelbar nach der Entlassung hoch ist, konzentrieren sich die niederländischen Nachsorgemaßnahmen darauf, den Reintegrationsprozess zu verbessern, indem strukturelle und persönliche Faktoren, die mit (erneuten) Straftaten in Zusammenhang stehen, angegangen werden. In dieser Studie kombinieren wir Daten aus einer nationalen Nachsorgebeobachtung für alle Erwachsenen, die 2017, 2018 und 2019 entlassen wurden, mit

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einer longitudinalen, qualitativen Studie über die Erfahrungen von 100 (ehemals) inhaftierten Personen während ihres Reintegrationsprozesses. Wir stellen fest, dass eine beträchtliche Gruppe nach der Entlassung Probleme mit Beschäftigung, Einkommen, Wohnraum und Schulden hat. Die Betroffenen sehen sich aufgrund ihrer Vorstrafen und der begrenzten formellen Unterstützung nach der Entlassung aus dem Gefängnis mit Hindernissen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt konfrontiert. Dies wirft Fragen zur Funktion von Gefängnissen als Ort der Wiedereingliederung auf.

Schlüsselwörter: Reintegration, Strafvollzugspolitik, Mixed Methods

Imprisonment fulfills several functions within modern penal systems, including incapacitation, and rehabilitation. While the punitive and preventive purposes of incarceration remain central to criminal justice policy, prison scholars and policy makers have directed attention towards the importance of reintegration. Reintegration refers to the process through which formerly incarcerated individuals re-establish themselves as members of society, often by addressing the structural and personal factors associated with (re)offending. Central to this perspective is the recognition that successful reentry depends not only on the absence of criminal behavior but also on access to stable housing, employment, education, social support, and financial stability.

Consequently, and based on the life-course approach (Farrington 2019, Laub & Sampson 2003, Maruna 2001, Mears et al. 2013) five so-called basic conditions for reintegration have been a central part of Dutch aftercare policies since 2004. The aim of these policies is to have the following basic conditions met before individuals are released from prison: 1) obtaining a valid identity card, 2) finding employment and a source of income, 3) acquiring accommodation, 4) taking an inventory of outstanding debts and discussing strategies for how to deal with these debts, and 5) receiving suitable physical and psychological healthcare. The idea is that help in these practical areas will likely reduce recidivism. Moreover, these conditions are relatively practical ways in which professionals can help individuals and which can be impacted by policies.

Since Dutch prison policies have clear goals set-up, it is important to investigate to what extent these goals are reached, and so a national monitor was set up. The Dutch Research and Data Center (in Dutch: *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Data-centrum*, *WODC*) conducts an aftercare monitor every two years¹. Each monitor

¹ The most recent (7th edition) monitor was published in 2024 (Berghuis et al., 2024). Since the 5th edition, the aftercare monitor also examines the relation between the basic conditions and recid-

describes the extent to which (formerly) incarcerated individuals meet the five basic conditions necessary for reintegration before and after their time in prison. Prior aftercare monitors have made it clear that individuals released from Dutch prisons experience many problems with meeting these conditions, both prior to imprisonment and after release, and that such problems are related to recidivism risks. To further our knowledge about experiences in the reintegration process, an additional longitudinal research project was set-up entitled 'Prison and Beyond' (in Dutch: *Van Bajes naar Buiten*).

In this current study, data is combined from both projects. By utilizing a mixed method approach this study provides insight into the workings of Dutch aftercare policies and, more broadly, the extent to which prisons can function as a place of reintegration. Since the European Court of Human Rights stated that it is a positive obligation for member states to provide imprisoned individuals with opportunities for reintegration (Martufi 2019), the findings of the current study hold value for all countries with modern penal systems. Moreover, as rehabilitation is one of the important functions of imprisonment it is important to consider to what extent prison stays affect the reintegration process.

Theoretical notions

There are conflicting theoretical perspectives on whether prison stays can have a positive, negative or no impact on the reintegration process. On the one hand, prisons can act as a turning point (Harding et al. 2019, Hickert et al. 2021, Soyer 2014). Individuals who struggle with addiction, need extra care or have a hard time finding their place in society can receive help and build a daily routine while in prison. More generally, individuals can take part in trainings and courses to work on or gain new skills which can potentially help them in the reintegration process. On a more cognitive level, individuals in prison have time to think about their past, present and future and in that sense, imprisonment can serve as a potential 'hook for change' (Giordano et al. 2002). When realizing what their life will look like when they continue crime given the negative consequences of their criminal involvement, they may start to envision a future without crime. These changes in identity can motivate actions to work towards a 'desired self' (Paternoster & Bushway 2009).

ivism. Due to a minimum follow-up period of two years for recidivism measures, the most recent monitor was conducted for incarcerated adults who were released from a Dutch prison in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The 8th monitor is currently in preparation and examines the cohorts released in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

Current Dutch prison policies seem to operate from the idea that prisons are a place of reintegration since individuals can receive help from both internal and external professionals. These policies operate on Offender Management (OM) models which focus on individual needs, the role of case managers and community-based professionals in prison, and offering support following release. Case managers, probation workers, and other professionals are meant to collaborate to provide suitable reintegration support, both in the area of risk management and supporting the process of desistance (Maguire & Raynor 2006, 2017; McNeill 2006). From this point of view, prisons serve as a space where individuals can ask for and receive support that is deemed necessary to pursue a crime-free life.

On the other hand, prisons are isolated institutions and the conditions (with many hours spent in cells) are not necessarily conducive to (positive) change (Boschman et al. 2025). Social isolation is a key aspect of imprisonment, which can have quite large impacts on individuals' lives as they may not be able to keep their job, house, and have limited contact with loved ones. This loss of bonds to society makes the reintegration process difficult. Moreover, prisons often work isolated from other social services, while many individuals who enter prison were already receiving help or seeing professionals from other organizations. Finally, spending time in prison can also lead to further isolation after release as individuals are often excluded from (certain types of) work due to their criminal record. Individuals who struggle to find employment also experience injustice and a loss of empowerment as they are viewed as unworthy by members of society (Blandisi et al. 2015).

From previous international research into the process of transitioning back to society following a prison sentence, it is known that establishing a daily routine, visualizing an ideal future, and being able to rely on external support contributes to successful reintegration (Buck et al. 2022). Lack of financial resources, employment opportunities, difficulties with social and family adjustment and drug and health problems are known risk factors (Buck et al. 2022, Mourão et al. 2025). From prior Dutch studies, we know how specific aspects of prison life affect recidivism and the desistance process (see for example more about employment: Ramakers 2014; contact with professionals: Pasma 2023; visits: Berghuis 2022, Doekhie 2019), but few studies examine multiple basic conditions at the same time for a large group. Moreover, we know very little about the reintegration process, even though there has been a lot of policy directed specifically at improving this process.

Current study and context

To bridge this gap, this study has three central research questions: 1) What is the situation on basic conditions after release? 2) What kind of (sub)groups can

be distinguished based on problems in these areas six months after release? 3) How do these (sub)groups experience their reintegration process during and after prison?

By answering these questions, the current study provides insight into the prison system from continental Europe. The Dutch incarceration context is characterized by a low imprisonment rate, a relatively high pretrial population, and a high percentage of short-term sentences: around 70% leave prison after a stay of maximum three months (Dutch Custodial Agency 2018). The prison climate is internationally considered as rather liberal and humane, even though in recent years jails and prisons have limited their programming (Boschman et al. in press).

Dutch aftercare policies stipulate that all individuals are meant to be screened on their needs in the five basic conditions upon entry (which is shared with relevant aftercare partners) and that release plans (so-called detention and reintegration [D&R] plans) are made. Prior research shows that professionals do not always manage to reach individuals in prison with stays shorter than three months (Pasma 2023, Doekhie et al. 2024). This can be problematic as a person's social benefits (such as public assistance and employment benefits) stop once they enter prison in the Netherlands. Individuals can apply for financial aid provided by the municipality to cover the rent of their apartment during imprisonment, but there must be very urgent reasons, and the expected prison stay must be six months or less. In order to arrange this during a persons' stay, close collaboration between the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency and the municipalities is necessary.

Many individuals spend a significant amount of their time awaiting trial in jail regimes, where there are limited opportunities for appropriate courses and reintegration activities (De Jonge et al. 2024). Awaiting trial can take up to three months, meaning that individuals with short sentences might be released directly after their trial. Most programming concerning reintegration is only offered once individuals have been sentenced and placed in so-called prison regimes. This is also where regular meetings should take place with a case manager, municipality worker, and other reentry partners. Individuals undergoing an unconditional prison sentence of at least six months can also participate in reintegration activities outside of the prison (such as working or going on furlough). Lastly, individuals with sentences of up to two years are eligible for early release after one year which is individually assessed based on several criteria, such as low risk assessment, good behavior in prison, and the condition that early release does not infringe upon victims' interests. Early release is also tied to parole supervision, usually with (a combination of) strict conditions such as frequent reporting, location bans, drug testing, and attending courses or trainings. A key point to mention here is that only a small part of the total prison population is released under supervision of the probation services,

meaning that most individuals serve their full sentence. This is the case since most adults serve sentences shorter than three months and only a specific group meet the eligibility requirements for early release.

In the context of reintegration, it is also important to note that the Dutch approach to criminal record management is based on the ‘right to be forgotten’, with the aim of protecting the privacy of criminal record information, as well as promoting offender rehabilitation and re-entry into society (Herzog-Evans 2011). For certain types of jobs Certificates of Conduct are obligatory. While third parties, such as landlords, do not generally have access to criminal record information in the Netherlands, all (potential) employers can request one for every kind of job application. They do need consent from the formerly imprisoned individual. This way, the employer can assess if that individual poses a risk based on their criminal record. Although the Dutch model is in theory quite restrictive, specifically compared to the United States (Jacobs 2015), in practice we see the extensive and expanding use of criminal records for the purpose of employment screening which is shaped by concerns about protecting society (Zand-Kurtovic & Boone 2023).

Method

To address the research questions, data from two larger Dutch studies is used. First, data from a quantitative national aftercare monitor is used (Berghuis et al. 2024). This monitor describes the extent to which (formerly) incarcerated individuals meet the five basic conditions after their time in prison using large administrative (population level) data sets. Second, qualitative data from the longitudinal Prison and Beyond study is used (Doekhie et al. 2024). In that study, imprisoned individuals were interviewed when reaching their release date up until six months after release. We describe the data from both studies below. We will then describe the sample and measures used in the current study. Lastly, we outline the analytical strategy for both the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The national aftercare monitor

The most recent aftercare monitor describes the situation on the basic conditions of all (formerly) incarcerated adults who were released from a Dutch prison in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Unfortunately, information was not available for all five basic

conditions for all formerly incarcerated individuals. For the cohorts in this study, no data was available on whether individuals had a valid ID or had received suitable healthcare after incarceration. These two basic conditions were therefore not included in this study. Since having a supportive social network is seen as an important protective factor for reentry success, we control for whether individuals lived with a partner and/or child(ren) after release, however, it was not possible to determine whether these social ties are supportive since no data was available about the *quality* of these relationships.

The data used in this monitor consists of three data sources linked at the individual level. First, admission² and release dates from a Dutch penitentiary (including jails and prisons) were extracted from the Custodial Institution Agency's registration system. Dates were provided for all adults released from a Dutch jail or prison in 2017, 2018, and 2019 *and* who planned to return to a Dutch municipality after release³ ($N = 55,690$). Second, criminal history data was gathered from the Dutch Offenders Index (DOI), a comprehensive research database sourced from the Dutch judicial system. The DOI is an anonymized derivative of the Judicial Documentation System, the official record of criminal cases handled by Dutch prosecutors and courts. It encompasses the complete and updated criminal history of all registered offenders since 1997 (Blom et al. 2025). Third, data about individuals' situation on the basic conditions work, income, housing, and debts after release were extracted from Statistics Netherlands. This database is primarily based on micro-integration of administrative registers, such as the jobs register, the social welfare payments register, the tax income register, the Municipal Base Administration (MBA), and several educational registers (Bakker et al. 2014). Due to Statistics Netherlands' statutory task to compile statistics and make outcomes available to the public, municipalities and government agencies are required to provide data about residents. The administrative data therefore covers the full population of Dutch residents.

Prison and Beyond

The Prison and Beyond study examined experiences in the process of reintegration by conducting interviews with 100 individuals. Participants for the study

² The focus of this study is on the situation after release, however, since many problems already exist prior to incarceration we also used admission dates to examine individuals' situations on the basic conditions prior to incarceration.

³ Only individuals who plan to return to a Dutch municipality are eligible for aftercare assistance.

were recruited in five prisons in the Netherlands which were selected based on type, location, level of urbanism, and population. All participants were routinely informed about the research, anonymity and confidentiality, the right to be forgotten, and given the opportunity to ask the researcher questions. Informed consent was obtained as well as permission to audio record the interview. Participants were first interviewed in prison when approaching release and contacted again three and six months after release. After release, interviews took place in participants' residences, libraries, public parks, or in prison when someone was reincarcerated. Emphasizing voluntary participation for the interview in prison, there were no incentives given. However, the research team always brought cookies or something similar to the interview as a token of appreciation. A cash incentive (20 euro) was provided at the end of the post-release interviews as a 'thank you'. The study was conducted in 2022 – 2024 and approved by the Committee Ethics and Data of Leiden University.

Sample: aftercare monitor

In total, 55 690 individuals were released from a Dutch jail or prison to a Dutch municipality in 2017, 2018, and 2019. We successfully linked 91% of these individuals in the prison registration system to the Statistics Netherlands data ($N = 50,841$). For the results discussed here, we selected the most recent release data (as some individuals⁴ were released several times between 2017–2019). Some individuals did not have any observations on debts after release and therefore they were excluded ($N = 9,694$). This resulted in a total sample of 41 147 adults. Compared to the total releasees sample, the subsample used in this paper is similar in terms of age and number of prior incarcerations. Individuals in the subsample were more likely to be male (OR = 1.29, 95% CI [1.18 – 1.42]) and were incarcerated longer (on average 141 days versus 81 days, OR = 1.01, 95% CI [1.00 – 1.01]).

Sample: Prison and Beyond study

In total, 100 imprisoned individuals approaching their release date were interviewed in 2022. Among them, 69 individuals were interviewed at least once after release (three or six months after release) and 50 individuals were interviewed at

⁴ Most individuals were only released once during 2017–2019 ($N = 39,253$, 77%), some were released twice ($N = 9,100$; 18%) and a smaller group was released from a prison stay in all three cohort years ($N = 2,478$; 5%).

both interview waves. The sample included both adult men and women and individuals with short (one to three months) and long stays (longer than three months) in prison. The median incarceration stay was 131 days (range 30 – 7796) and 72 % of the sample had been in prison before. The average age of the individuals was 37 years ($SD = 12$). Individuals who were *not* retraced and/or interviewed again after release (participant attrition) were on average imprisoned for shorter periods of time; average age was similar ($M = 38$ years, $SD=11$).

Measures used in the aftercare monitor: work, income, debts, and housing

As previously mentioned, the most recent aftercare monitor investigated the situation of individuals released in 2017, 2018, and 2019 on three basic conditions: work and income, housing, and debts. Information from all three measures came from Statistics Netherlands. We recorded individuals' monthly source of income immediately after release (one month after) and six months after release. If income was acquired through work, we recorded that individuals were employed *and* had an income that month. If individuals received an income through social benefits, we recorded that individuals had an income but no employment. Only those individuals who had no source of income were recorded as having no income.

To measure housing, we considered whether an individual had a place to live (i.e., had a registered address) or not in the first month and six months after release. Individuals who had no known address or who received benefits for not having a place to live (i.e., homeless⁵) were recorded as having no registered address. It is important to note that individuals may be registered at an address⁶, but not necessarily live there. Contrastingly, some individuals may have a place to live but did not officially register their address.

5 This likely underestimates the actual number of releasees who are homeless, as not all individuals would have requested such benefits. Recent studies namely showed that most of the Dutch homeless population neither live in a shelter nor on the streets, but have temporary (unstable) shelter with friends or family (sofa surfing), in a car, garage or mobile home (rough sleeping) (Schel et al. 2023, Wewerinke et al. 2023).

6 12% of the total sample is registered as living in an institutional setting, meaning the person lives in a facility that provides housing and daily assistance. This could be an addiction or psychiatric clinic, a healthcare facility, or a jail or prison. Since we were unable to link the address to the type of facility, we do not know at which (type of) institution individuals were registered. These individuals were included as having an address.

To measure debts after incarceration, a dataset was used which shows whether individuals or their households had registered “problematic” debts at specific dates, namely January 1st 2018, January 1st 2019, January 1st 2020, and October 1st 2020. The first date after release was used to determine the situation after release.⁷ Statistics Netherlands defines debts as problematic when they meet one of the following criteria: participation in a legal debt restructuring program, long-term nonpayment of health insurance, unpaid fines from the Central Judicial Collection Agency, long-standing tax or student loan debts. This dataset includes registered data from a number of institutions (such as the Dutch tax authority and Central Judicial Collection Agency) but does not include other types of debt such as from commercial companies (for example, telephone companies) and informal debts (from family or friends).

Additional measures used in the aftercare monitor

In addition to the measures on the basic conditions, the following background characteristics were also examined: demographics (sex and age at release), personal circumstances prior to incarceration (whether individuals lived with a partner or had children), criminal history (number of prior criminal justice contacts), index offense, and incarceration characteristics (incarceration length [reported in days] and prior incarcerations).

Analytical Strategy: aftercare monitor

To answer the first research question descriptive data is presented on whether individuals were unemployed, had no income, no registered address or debts immediately after release (1st month after release) and at six months after release. This was done for the full sample ($N = 41,147$). Then, to determine what kind of groups can be distinguished based on problems in these areas (research question 2) we conducted latent class profile analysis (LCA, Collins & Lanza 2013). LCA is a mixture model method that uses categorical indicators to identify (sub)groups (“classes”) based on patterns in reintegration problems at six months after release (Bartholomew 1987). This is done through an iterative process based on maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors, thus using complete and partially complete data.

⁷ Unlike work, income, and housing we do not have specific data on debt at six months after release. For some individuals the information on debt was available quickly after release, while for others it was much later (up to a year after release).

We excluded individuals who had no reintegration problems ($N = 3,620$) from the LCA, as the risk of individuals with few problems being pulled into a group with no problems would have complicated a comparison between individuals with no problems versus few problems. In appendix A descriptive statistics of this group can be found. Notably, in comparison to individuals who had at least one reintegration problem, this group had fewer prior contacts with the criminal justice system and were more likely to have been released from their first prison sentence. The LCA were performed in R version 4.3.2 (R core team 2021) with help from package *poLCA*.

Measures used in the Prison and Beyond study – topic list

All interviews were guided by a semi-structured topic list focusing on reintegration and the five basic conditions. In prison, participants were asked about their background and their expectations regarding life after release, and reintegration support during imprisonment. Example questions were: “which support have you received in prison and which support would help you for life after prison?” and “what do you expect to be the biggest challenges after release?” The interviews after release focused on reintegration support and experiences in the system in the months after release. Example questions were: “which setbacks did you experience since release?” and “which support did you receive from reintegration organizations (or others)?”

Analytical strategy: Prison and Beyond

All interviews were transcribed using transcription software *Express Scribe*. Available transcripts of participants of all interview waves were read thoroughly and thematically coded for protective and challenging factors in the reintegration process in a hybrid way using deductive and inductive codes (Braun & Clarke 2021). Individuals' basic conditions before imprisonment and expectations for release were also recorded from the interview transcripts. As noted earlier, not all participants were interviewed after release and some were only interviewed at either three months or six months after release. Since we are interested in the months after release, we excluded the participants who were not interviewed after release ($N = 31$). Using a scoring system (1 = problem present, 0 = not present), the situation on basic conditions (employment, income, housing and debts) was recorded for the time points three and six months after release. This was done by the second author and a research assistant. They met several times to discuss the

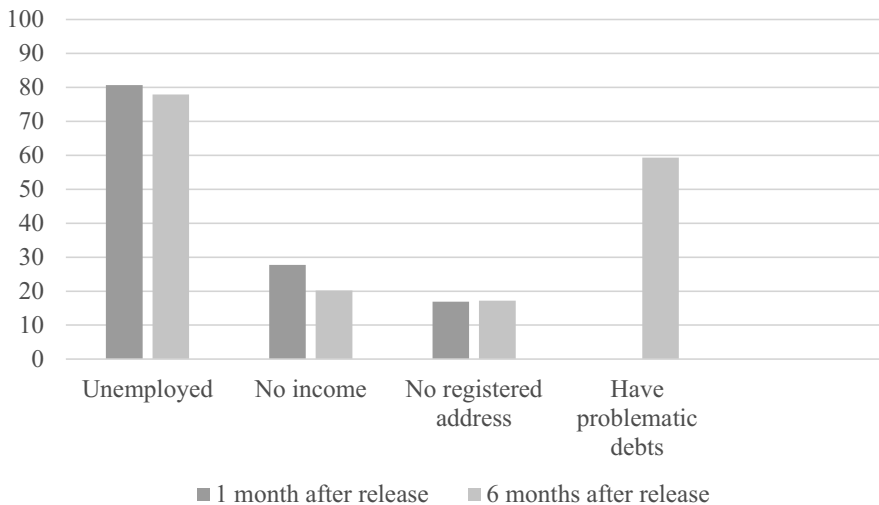


Figure 1: Descriptive statics on basic conditions after incarceration (N = 41,147)

Note: Data on problematic debts was only available on specific dates, and thus is not necessarily six months after release as displayed. Rather, this should be read as (maximally one year) after release.

scoring of the problems and the meaning of certain fragments in interviews. The aforementioned scoring system was used to select cases that match the classes identified in the LCA.

Results

What is the situation regarding basic conditions after release?

In the month immediately after release, around 81% of the sample was unemployed, 28% had no source of income, 17% had no registered address, and 59% had problematic debts. As can be seen in Figure 1, the proportion of individuals who had problems with these basic conditions six months after release is relatively similar; slightly fewer individuals did not have an income six months after release in comparison to the first month after release (20% versus 28%). Taken together, this means that a large group of individuals experience problems in these areas after release⁸.

⁸ Of course, it is possible that individuals also had problems in these areas before incarceration. These problems, thus, are not necessarily a result of the incarceration itself.

What kind of classes can be distinguished based on problems in these basic conditions six months after release?

Latent class analysis was utilized to distinguish potential (sub)groups based on problems in work, income, housing, and debts after release. To select the optimal number of classes, we began with estimating a two-class model and proceeded up to a six-class model. Model fit indices provided support for a four-class model (see Table 1), as both the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC, Schwartz 1978) and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC, Akaike 1998) reached a minimum. Additionally, the four-class model performed well in terms of classification accuracy as average posterior probability and entropy values exceeded the recommended threshold of .80 for each (Collins & Lanza 2013), and thus indicate good assignment accuracy.

Table 1: Latent class analysis (N = 37,527)

Model	BIC	AIC	Log likelihood	Entropy	Avg_PP	Class membership (N)
1	155801.20	155767.07	-77879.54	2.08	1.00	37527
2	150329.42	150252.63	-75117.31	2.00	0.99	5459, 32068
3	148953.24	148833.78	-74402.89	1.98	0.99	1315, 32068, 4144
4	148588.44	148426.32	-74194.16	1.98	0.72	8494, 5006, 23574, 453
5	148641.02	148436.23	-74194.11	1.98	0.75	8494, 7690, 1826, 453, 19064
6	148693.68	148446.23	-74194.11	1.98	0.66	453, 3564, 22201, 4144, 4106, 3059

Based on the proportions of problems on each basic condition (see Table 2, column ‘six months after release’), classes were labelled as: (1) unemployed (23%, $N = 8,494$), (2) living with debts (51%, $N = 19,064$), (3) searching for (stable) housing (4%, $N = 1,194$), and (4) maximum challenges (22%, $N = 8,322$). Class 1 is labeled as “unemployed” since all individuals are unemployed, but otherwise have no problems on the other basic conditions. All individuals have an income (primarily through social benefits), no debts, and are registered at an address.

In the second class, labeled as “living with debts” all individuals have problematic debts post-release. In addition, many are unemployed (74%) and some are without an address (19%). These individuals do, however, have an income (through social benefits). The third class is a very small group (4% of the total sample) which seem to have comparatively little financial hardship (as they have an income and no problematic debts), but do not have a place to live. This group is therefore labelled as “searching for (stable) housing”. Finally, the last class “maximum challenges” has problems in all basic conditions. Not only are individuals unemployed, but they also

Table 2: Reintegration problems prior to incarceration and six months after release across classes

Class 1				Class 2				Class 3				Class 4			
N	8,494 (23%)			19,064 (51%)			1,194 (4%)			8,322 (22%)					
(% total sample)	Prior to incarceration			Prior to incarceration			Prior to incarceration			Prior to incarceration					
	Six months after release			Six months after release			Six months after release			Six months after release					
	%			%			%			%					
Unemployed	92			81			88			87					
No income	9			19			41			59					
Problematic debts	14			89			25			61					
No registered address	4			18			69			23					
	0			19			100			100					
	0			100			0			64					
	0			100			100			22					
Description of class	Unemployed			Living with debts			Searching for (stable) housing			Maximum challenges					

Note: Problematic debts was measured within the first year after release. McNemar tests were performed to test the difference between problems on the basic conditions prior to incarceration and six months after release. *** $p < .001$. While the demographic and personal circumstances of individuals were not included in the LCA (see appendix A for descriptive statistics on all background characteristics for each class, including the group who had no problems six months after release), it is interesting to examine differences between classes, especially on their situation prior to incarceration on each basic condition. This helps to understand the persistence of problems and taps into ways in which these conditions may have been altered by individuals' time in prison.

do not have an income *and* have problematic debts. Around 22% of this group is not registered at an address.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics on the reintegration problems each class experienced (in the month) prior to incarceration, as well as tests of significance. Here we see that the “unemployed” class was most likely to have been unemployed prior to incarceration when compared to other groups. Notably, they also had some other problems prior to incarceration but (at six months) after release all individuals have an income, no problematic debts, and are registered at an address. Potentially the time in prison helped these individuals get connected to social services (municipality workers) to sign up for social benefits, get help with debts, and/or register for social housing. Alternatively, these individuals may also have a strong(er) social network which can support them in these areas. Notably, when compared to the other classes this class was most likely to be “first-timers”, and thus, it is also possible that this group is least likely to be (negatively) affected by their incarceration as we know that individuals experience cumulative disadvantages as they experience multiple incarcerations.

For the classes “living with debts” and “searching for (stable) housing” it is notable that more individuals are employed in the six months after release than before incarceration (for example, for class 2 74 % are unemployed six months after release versus 81% prior to incarceration) and more individuals have a source of income (for example, for class 3 everyone has a source of income six months after release, whereas 41 % had no income when entering prison). However, predominant problems which were already prevalent upon entry (namely for class 2 debts and class 3 housing) have persisted, or have even worsened in the six months after release. Moreover, for class 3, new problems arise as a quarter of the class has problematic debts (and did not have them prior to incarceration).

Lastly, while it is apparent that the last class had problems in multiple areas prior to incarceration, it is also the only group which shows no “improvements” in comparison to the situation prior to incarceration. Problems concerning employment and income have actually worsened, and problems concerning debts and housing have persisted.

How do these (sub)groups experience their reintegration process during and after prison, and which factors foster or hinder the process of reintegration?

To illustrate how the lives of individuals in the classes identified from the LCA can unfold after release, participants from the Prison and Beyond project were ‘matched’ to the different classes, based on their situation on the basic conditions

and demographics, such as partner and children. The vast majority of participants could be matched to a class. However, the class ‘searching for (stable) housing’ posed some challenges. A substantial part of participants who seemed to match this class in relation to income and no registered address, also mentioned having debts in the interviews. It is possible that they were talking about more informal debts or debts with commercial companies as opposed to registered debts. Also, since it is such a small group (4% of the total sample of the national monitor) we may have just not reached many individuals in this class.

For each class, one participant was selected to illustrate that specific class. This does not mean that the lives of all individuals in that specific subgroup will look the same. The selected cases are examples of what the reintegration process may look like for a specific class when they leave prison with or without (a combination of) basic conditions. Selection of the presented cases was based on the extent of representation of that class, diversity in participants, and the richness of information about a certain topic in the interviews. For example, someone could be matched to the ‘unemployed’ class, but if he or she did not report a lot about the impact of unemployment or experiences with job interviews and/or rejections, the ‘material’ to work with to be selected for the case description was minimal. For each class identified from the LCA, the experiences in the process of reintegration of one individual will be presented. Together these case descriptions illuminate factors fostering or hindering the process of reintegration.

Class 1 ‘Unemployed’: Dana

Dana is a single mom in her mid-twenties who used to live with the father of her son before she got imprisoned. It was her first time in prison and she served a six-month sentence for a violent crime. Although she mentioned in the in-prison interview that her relationship with her parents was not always great, they were very supportive during her stay in prison. Her plan was to live with them again after release together with her son. She received little reintegration support in prison, but also stated she did not need anything specific: she would have a place to stay after prison, she would apply for social benefits with financial support of her parents, she did not have any ongoing debts, and no need for healthcare. Before release, she expressed concern about finding a job after release because of her criminal record. In this fragment, Dana refers to perceptions of stigma and the notion of (un)trustworthiness related to being a formerly imprisoned individual (LeBel 2012, Buck et al. 2022).

If you get out of prison, you always have a mark, ‘cause you are just a criminal. And people don’t trust you if they can’t see you, or talk to you, because you come from prison. So you’re just a criminal and they don’t want to have you working [there].

After release, Dana experienced a lot of problems in her search for a job. Three months after release, she had already been rejected a couple of times. She was doubting if she would tell future employers about her criminal record or choose rather not to disclose it.

Then they ask, like, there's a gap in your resume. "what did you do during those six months?" I thought, I might as well be honest, because if they find out some other way, they'll be really shocked. Which I get — I'd feel the same if someone told me that. So then the next day you get a call: "We've chosen another candidate." But if I'm not honest and they find out later on, what kind of situation am I creating?

Although Dana's pre-release expectations matched the stark post-prison reality, she was still very surprised that it was this challenging to enter the labor market. It was disappointing. Her parents were supporting her financially, but she really longed for a job to be able to support herself and her son. Six months after release she did manage to find a job where they did not ask for a Certificate of Good Conduct in the job interview. Dana was happy that she could finally work and earn money, but was still uncertain if there was a chance they could find out about her past anyway.

The case of Dana for the class 'unemployed' illustrates the challenges she experiences due to her criminal record when attempting to enter the labor market. She visualized a future for herself and her son (Healy 2014, Buck et al. 2022), being able to work and make a living. She kept on trying to find a job, but felt excluded after being rejected. Although she had a place to live, a form of income, and no debts, limited employment opportunities challenged Dana's reintegration process and her membership to society.

For class 2 'Living with debts', Jonathan is followed on his way out, struggling with various debts and the impact these had on his life.

Class 2 ‘Living with debts’: Jonathan

Jonathan is a man in his mid-forties serving a short sentence of three months for an unfulfilled community service sentence which was replaced by a prison sentence. This was his third time in prison. When he entered prison, he immediately contacted a case manager, because he wanted to apply for financial aid for his rent so he could retain his house. His application took a few weeks to process and he almost lost his house. With help from his sister who contacted the landlord and the municipality to ask for an extension, he was able to retain his home. Jonathan entered prison with various outstanding debts at the tax administration, health insurance, and housing corporation. Debt has always been a big part of his life and he had been in a debt restructuring program before. Even though Jonathan's stay in prison was relatively short, it had a great impact on his life. When he entered prison, important sources of financial support were cut off, such as rental subsidy, health care allowance, and social benefits. His debt situation worsened, because he got behind with the rent of his apartment while being imprisoned.

Upon release, Jonathan could return back to his house and received social benefits soon after release. Yet, he still had one month of unpaid rent. Job coaches encouraged him to find employment, but Jonathan was rejected a lot in the past because of his criminal record and therefore lacked motivation. Alternatively, they would try and connect him to volunteer work to create some daily structure. Six months after release, Jonathan's situation did not improve. His debts were mounting and his social benefits were partly seized to pay off his creditors. He was hesitant to submit a second application for the debt restructuring program:

You know what it is, I can try, but it's just so much. I have to submit all this paperwork. I have a large pile here... and I... whatever, it's fine. I am just going to ride it out. I am not 24 anymore. To solve all this...I just put them [debts letters] aside and we'll see what happens.

Jonathan did not take part in volunteer work and felt that if he started with a job, they would seize more from his wages to pay off creditors. As a result, he felt little motivation to change his situation and felt as if he was ‘fizzling out’:

I just sit at home all day, I don't do anything, I'm stuck. I also don't have any transportation, no money, so then there's not much more I can do.

Jonathan's case first of all shows the impact of a short prison sentence. He almost lost his house and was lucky to have someone in his social network to actively support him in this matter. Fortunately, he utilized financial aid available

from the municipality to pay his rent. Upon release though, his debt situation worsened as he fell behind on paying his rent. There was little notion in his interviews about formal support from the system after release. As months went by, his interviews were characterized by a sense of hopelessness, not opening his letters, and sitting at home doing nothing. As his debt situation was clouding daily life, he felt little motivation and powerless to change things around.

Class 3 'searching for (stable) housing' is represented by Leo who had plans to buy a trailer after release to live in, but he ended up sleeping on the streets for a while. He longed for a place of his own but was also dealing with a lot of other (drug-related and mental) problems and was struggling to navigate the complexities of everyday life.

Class 3 'Searching for (stable) housing: Leo

Leo is in his fifties and sent to prison for a third sentence, this time for six months for a violent crime. He is a father of four kids, although he was not always allowed to see his children, as he had a lot of problems with his ex-partner in the past. Due to these problems, Leo got involved in drugs and had mental health problems. He lost his house before he got imprisoned. During imprisonment, there was contact with someone from a housing corporation, but Leo said they couldn't do anything for him. He was placed under guardianship to manage his finances for quite some time and did not have any debts. In prison, he received help from a psychiatrist. During the in-prison interview, Leo planned to buy a trailer to be 'free' and thus expected to have housing after release. He had no social network to rely on.

Upon release, Leo did not have a place to stay and spent some time sleeping on the streets and sofa surfing until he found a place in a shelter. At first, he was glad to have a bed to sleep in, but over time he grew unsatisfied with this place, because it was quite isolated from the city. He did not feel at home, and there was a lot of fighting and arguing in the shelter. Because he was there voluntarily, he sometimes left to stay with 'friends'. After a couple of days, the shelter would call the police. Leo always returned since he received his medication there. Even though he was still smoking marihuana every day, he felt the shelter stopped him from using more serious drugs. He was still under guardianship which meant he received social benefits, but he only received a small allowance to pay for his daily expenses. For the future, he wished to have a place of his own, where he is not a burden to anyone.

For my return to society I would like to have a place of my own, if only there's a bed there, then you can have some peace of mind. But you have to sort everything out and I am not a good 'fixer' and also not a good 'caller'.

To illustrate class 4 ‘maximum challenges’, the experiences of Imro give insight into the process when dealing with multiple reintegration challenges.

Class 4 ‘Maximum challenges’: Imro

Imro is a young man in his early twenties serving a (partially conditional) sentence of eight months for a drug-related crime. He has previously been in contact with the criminal justice system several times. He reports to have friends who have a bad influence on him, but he also experiences some support from his family in particular in relation to housing. Before this prison sentence, he lived with his parents and this is also where he returns after release. He had a lot of debts when entering prison and the goal he expresses in his pre-release interview is to be debt-free within two years. He also wishes to finish school or find a job, and disengage from his friends involved in crime. During imprisonment, Imro has contact with a case manager and a detention & reintegration plan is created. However, they do not manage to arrange some basic needs for him, such as an income upon release. Eventually, he is released without an income, unemployed, and without any daily activities. After release he applies for a lot of jobs, but he is rejected or not invited for an interview. Imro is under supervision of the probation services, but he does not see his probation officer much. He spends his days going to the gym with his sisters’ membership to stay out of trouble, but he admits the criminal life beckons, particularly in the absence of work and income.

Interviewer: What are the chances for you to get back into crime?

Participant: That is a real chance yeah. If there is no work, then you will probably go... You want to keep those doors closed, but if the other doors to improve your life do not open... Then you will open the closed doors again, ‘cause you already have the keys to those.

I: Which doors are not opening?

R: Work mainly. For income, but also to have some daily activities. To have a routine, get up at 8 or something

Six months after release he confessed to have reconnected with old friends from his criminal network, that he is a suspect for a new criminal case, and risks another prison sentence.

From the cases of Dana, Jonathan, Leo, and Imro, several factors can be identified that foster or hinder the reintegration process. First, regardless of which problems are present, the role of the social network in providing support is crucial. Both

Dana and Imro were allowed to live in the house of their parents after release and Dana's parents also supported her financially. For Jonathan, his sister helped him with administrative issues and contacting organizations while he was in prison. Otherwise, he might have lost his house. Second, the importance of finding a job is highlighted for financial resources, but also to help with a daily routine (Imro) and to give a sense of purpose and autonomy (Dana). Both Imro and Jonathan have little structure in their day, which leads to boredom (Imro) and defeatist outlook (Jonathan). For Imro, this eventually adds to him being involved in criminal activity again. Related to the search for employment is the anticipated or enacted stigma (LeBel 2012) due to criminal records, in other words the experience of not getting a chance to enter the formal labor market. Dana and Imro feel they are trying to find a job, and being rejected or not invited for job interviews can feel frustrating and discouraging. Dana, as many others returning to society from prison, eventually finds employment somewhere she feels they are willing to give her a chance (by not doing a criminal background check). This emphasizes the role and responsibility of employers and the wider society to include formerly imprisoned individuals.

Third, experienced support in the system from reintegration professionals after release seems to be little. Leo does have contact with professionals, because of his medication and other problems and Jonathan mentions job coaches in his interviews, so there is some support initiated for them. Interestingly, Dana and Imro, who are actively seeking jobs, do not mention any support in this area while they might have benefited from help. Also, in the area of debts, we see ample support for Jonathan and Imro with their debt situation. In the context of the social network, Leo, Jonathan, and Imro have a weak and/or criminal network and there seems to be no efforts from reintegration organizations to strengthen the pro-social network.

Discussion

Imprisonment serves multiple purposes, including incapacitation and rehabilitation. Increasingly, policymakers emphasize reintegration—the process of helping formerly incarcerated individuals successfully reenter society through access to housing, employment, income, social support, and financial stability. In the Dutch prison system, aftercare policies have specifically focused on these practical needs. Implicit in these policies is the idea that Dutch prisons can function and operate as a place of reintegration.

In this study we find that a large number of adults experience problems with work, income, housing, and debts after being released from a Dutch prison. We identified that nearly a quarter of our sample had specifically problems with (finding)

employment six months after release. A very small group (4%) had problems finding (stable) housing. The rest of the sample (over 70%; more than 25 000 individuals) had multiple problems, with half of the sample struggling mainly with debts, and just over 20% struggling in all areas. Notably we see that problems present prior to incarceration minimally change after release, and that especially the group that has the most problems see little to no improvements after their stay in prison.

The reintegration process poses many challenges, especially given the problems individuals experience concerning basic conditions. In the interviews, several particular challenges were highlighted. First of all, individuals who seem motivated to work after release experience impediments in finding a job due to their criminal record. The importance of employment and a stable source of income has been highlighted extensively in the previous literature (Ramakers 2014, Blandisi et al. 2015, Buck et al. 2022, Mourão et al. 2025). Not only does it provide an income, but it also contributes to a daily routine, sense of belonging, and increases autonomy. The increased use of criminal background checks in the Netherlands (Zand-Kurtovic & Boone 2023) seems to impede reintegration goals. It is therefore necessary to further investigate the legitimacy of these checks in terms of risk management (see also Zand-Kurtovic & Boone 2023 for a discussion on this topic), as currently it seems that anticipated or enacted stigma (LeBel 2012) leads to exclusion from the labor market and is demotivating to individuals.

Another challenge we find has to do with limited formal support from aftercare partners after release. When it comes to help in finding a job, some form of daily activity, or with debts problems, formerly imprisoned individuals hardly mention formal support. While there are organizations to help in these areas, our findings illustrate that support does not reach the population in an effective way. Formal debt programs usually continue after prison, so individuals who are for example placed under guardianship receive support, but aside from that, most people still have debt problems six months after release. It appears to be difficult for individuals to find their way to organizations that can help with financial management. Finally, our results show that a supportive (informal) social network is crucial to cushion setbacks in the reintegration process. This is regardless of the types of problems individuals face.

Thus, informal (i.e., social network) and formal systems (i.e., aftercare partners and broader societal practices) play an integral role in the reintegration process and can both hinder as well as foster success. While the importance of a supportive social network has been highlighted in policies and research (see Blinded Citation 2022), practical ways of building and strengthening networks are limited in reintegration policies. More attention has been paid to increasing involvement from formal support systems, however, we see limited contact with municipality workers or other aftercare partners. We are not the only ones to note this. Recent evaluations

from the Dutch Inspectorate of the Ministry of Justice and Security (2022) concluded that while some improvements in the cooperation between prisons, municipalities, and the probation service have been seen, there is a lot of room for improvement. Improvements in this area are crucial as prisons typically operate as isolated institutions, so the question is: How can they work in a less isolated way to be able to serve as a place of reintegration, with reintegration efforts continuing after release?

This study highlights opportunities for improving this landscape and provides an overview of the problems formerly incarcerated individuals experience in the Netherlands. That said, the administrative data used in this study has its limitations. For example, no information was available about whether individuals had a registered address for nearly a quarter of the study population. Even when data was available about housing, it was not always clear whether this was a place where someone actually resided. Data about debts was also not available for all individuals. In addition, we do not have any information about credit debts nor informal debts which means we might be underestimating the number of individuals with problematic debts. This might explain why it was challenging to match individuals in the ‘search for (stable) housing’ class to the Prison and Beyond study. Participants who seemed to match this class in the Prison and Beyond study reported having debts. It is possible that they were referring to informal debts or debts with commercial companies and thus in the administrative data were not recorded as having problematic debts. More generally, by using administrative data we are only able to report on sources of legal, registered work and income, however, formerly incarcerated individuals often work in informal sectors or have income from undeclared work, about which we have no data.

While the interview data from the Prison and Beyond study provided more information about how reintegration (support) was experienced, no information was recorded about actual received support. It is possible that certain support was initiated behind the scenes or put in motion from organisations, but participants were not (clearly) informed about this or felt it was too minimal to tell us about it. Also, despite great effort to contact as many participants as possible after release, we were not able to reach all participants for the follow-up interviews. Even though there was a high response rate, some relevant data or participants may have been missed as a result of attrition. We could not, for example, match a lot of participants to the third class (“search for (stable) housing”). It is possible that the participants that were not found were partly the ones who did not have stable housing and were more difficult to retrace after release.

Another limitation to this study is the time lag between the most recent national aftercare monitor and the Prison and Beyond study. The first uses data from individuals released in 2017, 2018, and 2019; the latter uses interview data from individuals released in 2022. In 2019 an important policy initiative was signed in which

the prison system, municipalities and the probation service aimed to increase their collaboration to improve the reintegration process. Individuals in the Prison and Beyond study experienced this change (to a certain extent for the individuals serving longer sentences), whereas only a few individuals in the aftercare monitor could have profited from any potential benefits stemming from this closer collaboration. Future work should consider whether and how this policy initiative affected reintegration process and problems. Despite these limitations, this mixed method study provides insight into the workings of Dutch aftercare policies and, more broadly, the extent to which prisons are a place of reintegration. While it is clear that Dutch policies operate on the idea that prisons can be a place of reintegration, our findings call this into question. Perhaps this is an unattainable goal, especially since current policies place a strong emphasis on individual reintegration, through focusing on basic conditions and promoting behavioral change. Consequently, reintegration seems to rely predominantly on the motivation and behavior of the (formerly) imprisoned individuals themselves. Yet, reintegration is a process that involves multiple factors operating at different levels, such as personal, social, community and institutional (Rubio Arnal & McNeill 2024, Russell et al. 2022). In order to have successful reintegration in modern societies it is therefore crucial that aftercare policies are embedded in the formal system, beyond prison walls, and that these policies promote societal acceptance of formerly incarcerated individuals by creating opportunities for individuals to be a worthy part of society.

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Appendix A: Background characteristics of classes, including group who had no reintegration problems after release

	No problems (N = 3,620)		Class 1: unemployed (N = 8,494)		Class 2: Living with debts (N = 19,064)		Class 3: Searching for (stable) housing (N = 1,194)		Class 4: maximum challenges (N = 8,322)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>										
Male	0.94	0.23	0.91	0.29	0.91	0.29	0.92	0.27	0.94	0.24
Age (at release)	33.59	11.49	40.96	13.56	37.22	11.33	39.77	12.38	33.88	11.19
<i>Personal circumstances</i>										
Lived with a partner	0.28	0.45	0.21	0.41	0.17	0.38	0.03	0.17	0.16	0.37
Has child(ren)	0.45	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.39	0.49	0.41	0.49
<i>Criminal history</i>										
Number of prior criminal justice contacts	5.59	9.38	14.51	21.34	13.67	17.46	14.24	21.07	11.82	16.93
<i>Index offense</i>										
Property crime	0.26	0.44	0.34	0.47	0.32	0.47	0.27	0.44	0.35	0.48
Violence	0.20	0.40	0.22	0.41	0.15	0.35	0.13	0.34	0.14	0.34
Sex offense	0.08	0.27	0.04	0.20	0.01	0.11	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.11
Destruction of property	0.08	0.28	0.08	0.27	0.06	0.24	0.06	0.25	0.06	0.24
Drug offense	0.16	0.37	0.14	0.34	0.09	0.29	0.18	0.39	0.14	0.35
Traffic violation	0.09	0.29	0.06	0.24	0.10	0.30	0.04	0.18	0.08	0.27
Other	0.13	0.33	0.13	0.33	0.27	0.44	0.31	0.46	0.22	0.41
<i>Incarceration characteristics</i>										
First prison sentence	0.64	0.48	0.39	0.49	0.28	0.45	0.28	0.45	0.35	0.48
Incarceration length (days)	179.07	414.82	158.56	364.60	120.43	275.05	266.17	585.89	131.77	287.29