



# Understanding the links between perceived prison conditions and prison staff<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In the Dutch prison system, motivational treatment is seen as one of the key contributors to a dignified and humane prison climate, stimulating inmates to assume personal responsibility and to change their lives. Staff are seen as the crucial factor to attaining this goal. The assumption is that the staff's work situation has an impact on how inmates are treated. How inmates are treated in turn influences how they perceive prison conditions. In this study, we will examine the correlations between work situation, treatment styles and perceived prison conditions by means of a multilevel linear regression. The results show that a good work situation for prison staff is a precondition for practicing an active approach to inmates. In addition, inmates are more satisfied with the prison conditions if the various treatment styles are thoroughly applied. A balance between providing support and structure for inmates appears to be very important. Motivational treatment proves to be significantly correlated to the inmates' satisfaction regarding prison conditions.

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## 1. Introduction

When studying prison conditions, researchers often choose to look at it from the perspective of the inmates. The behaviour and experiences of inmates are explained, for instance, from a psychological, (neuro-)biological or sociological perspective. Here we choose a different approach: that of the organisational sciences and human resource management. The rationale for this choice lies in the need to find factors that not only influence inmates' perception of their prison conditions, but that *can be influenced* by the prison organisation as well. We assume that prison staff exert an influence on the perception of being imprisoned. A recent study has shown, for instance, that treatment styles used by staff are directly related to inmates' perceived prison conditions (Molleman and Leeuw, 2012). However, it also emerged that the work situation of staff is *not* directly related to the perceived prison conditions. This study therefore recommended to examine more closely the correlations between the work situation, treatment styles and perceived prison conditions, through separate analyses. The present study follows this recommendation.

The Dutch prison system strives to provide for a safe and dignified prison service, and cooperates with various organisations (e.g. municipalities and probation service) and the inmate to achieve a successful reintegration in society (DJI, 2009). In many other western countries, prison systems have similar mission statements. Several publications have indicated that issues like safe, humane and reintegrating prison conditions are important with a view to (preventing) violent disturbances in prison. According to Specter (2006), prison conditions and violence in prison are closely related. Although violence in prison can be attributed in part to inmate-related factors such as mental illnesses and gang affiliations, these factors are only a part of the explanation. Outdated and unhygienic facilities, a lack of proper healthcare or purposeful activities may create circumstances that feed deviant behaviour within the walls.

Boin and Rattray (2004) state that two conditions are necessary for a riot to occur. First, prison managers and staff must hold divergent views, which may undermine their ability to anticipate and prevent violence. Second, the development of dysfunctional interaction patterns between prisoners and staff may incite inmates to engage in (collective) violence. Even a small event, like changing the menu, unexpected lock-ups or a last minute cancellation of the programmes, can easily disrupt the balance between staff and inmates and create the chance of conflict (Boin and Rattray, 2004). Moreover, another study states that prisoners who perceive the prison environment as violent, intimidating and frightening are more likely to reoffend (Listwan et al., 2013).

Several countries offer striking examples of how inmate's negative perceptions of prison conditions can lead to disorderly situations within the prison walls. In January 2012, prisoners in the Fulham Correctional Centre in Australia armed themselves with gym equipment and gardening tools and refused to return to their cells. They set fire to an office and stormed to the rooftop. The riot started when prisoners were forced to use flexible toothbrushes for safety reasons. There was also discussion concerning a pay-TV deal and dress standards that inmates objected to (The Age, 2012). About 300 prisoners at Mississippi's Adams County Correctional Facility rioted in May 2012 because they were upset over mistreatment by prison staff. One guard was killed, 20 people were injured and the damage to the prison was estimated at more than 1.3 million dollars. An FBI agent declared that the riot was started by a group of Mexican inmates who felt they were treated disrespectfully by guards and who were angry about the poor food and medical care (Huffington Post, 2012). In the prison of Andenne in Belgium, a religious issue sparked a major riot in November 2011. After the prison director prohibited prayer during the evening activities, about 150 prisoners occupied half of the prison units, caused fires and sabotaged fire equipment (Het Laatste Nieuws, 2011; Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2012).

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