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"Not Charity, but a Right": Carceral Citizenship and Digital Reintegration of Roma in Türkiye

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Abstract

The integration of digital technologies into public services has made "e-government" a mandatory digital threshold in modern welfare states—one that risks producing new forms of exclusion for historically marginalized groups. This article examines the digital re-entry of Roma formerly incarcerated people in Türkiye and the structural barriers they face after release. Drawing on Crenshaw's intersectionality and Ragnedda's digital capital, it analyzes how ethnic identity and a criminal record turn digital exclusion into a "double stigmatization." The study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 formerly incarcerated Roma individuals across five Turkish cities, analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Technological isolation during incarceration produces a disruptive "digital shock" and a difficult-to-recover "digital lag"; e-government systems function as "virtual walls" that obstruct access to rights; and participants resort to "tactical bypasses" based on neighborhood social capital and "warm experts" (Bakardjieva, 2005) to circumvent what they experience as algorithmic gatekeeping. Arguing that digital inclusion is a matter of rights and social justice rather than charity, the study extends the model of "digital rehabilitation" to an intersectional Roma and carceral case and proposes context-specific policy for the Turkish penal and re-entry system.

Keywords

carceral citizenship; digital exclusion; digital re-entry; digital rehabilitation; intersectionality; returning citizens; Roma

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1. Introduction

In welfare states with high levels of digitalization, service providers meeting basic needs such as health, finance, housing, and social security are undergoing a distinct shift from physical services to online platforms (Schou & Pors, 2019). The widespread adoption of e-government systems has transformed public administration by enhancing efficiency, transparency, accessibility, and citizen participation (Polat, 2005). However, particularly in contexts where digital penetration rates are low and regulatory measures are weak, e-government applications often exacerbate digital inequalities rather than mitigating them. Without robust regulatory frameworks, excessive reliance on digital infrastructure can lead to digital exclusion and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Eubanks, 2018).

Empirical and theoretical studies in the literature demonstrate a strong relationship between socioeconomic resources and digital exclusion (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Helsper, 2012; Ragnedda, 2018; Robinson et al., 2015; van Dijk, 2005). Among the disadvantaged groups most deprived of internet resources are older adults, women, people with little formal education, ethnic minorities, rural residents, and low-income groups (van Dijk, 2005). The digital divide is now widely theorized across three levels: access, skills, and the outcomes of use (see Section 2.1; see also DiMaggio et al., 2001; Ragnedda, 2018). The relationship between socioeconomic status and digital inclusion is far from one-to-one; the continued decisive role of income and education level demonstrates that the digital divide is shaped by intersectional inequalities and social mechanisms (Salemink, 2016).

Among the groups most affected by digital exclusion are people entering and leaving prison. For security reasons, prisons strictly limit access to technology (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016), so even short sentences leave people behind—what Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) call being "locked up and left out." On release, individuals struggle to find work, housing, and banking, since online application has become a prerequisite for employment (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019). This is part of what has been termed "carceral citizenship," a diminished citizenship based on the presumption of guilt (Miller & Alexander, 2016; Miller & Stuart, 2017), and a lack of digital skills directly raises the risk of recidivism (Bennett, 2017).

These barriers are far more pronounced among minorities facing intersectional vulnerabilities. The marginalization of Roma communities in Türkiye reflects not merely low income but generations of institutionalized discrimination in education, employment, and justice (Uzpeder et al., 2008), and Roma or Traveller communities are disproportionately represented in prisons (The Traveller Movement, 2021). Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality provides the framework for understanding how categories such as ethnicity, gender, and class interact to limit access to resources (Powell, 2016). For these communities, the exclusion and spatial stigmatization that begin in the classroom are reproduced in the digital age as "e-government labyrinths" and "algorithmic barriers" (Akkan et al., 2011): Despite the apparent neutrality of state digital services, physical-world prejudice is replicated in digital form.

Türkiye has seen rapid growth in internet adoption and digital government, driven by a young population and growing economy. Yet moving services such as healthcare, taxation, and social assistance online increasingly disadvantages those left behind (Polat, 2005). Older adults, people with disabilities, women, and rural residents are less likely to be online, and when the urban–rural gap combines with ethnic background, it produces far deeper exclusion (Zheng & Walsham, 2008)—depriving people not only of services but of the ability to exercise civic rights.

The literature on e-government adoption has largely focused on technological efficiency and quantitative methodologies; it has frequently overlooked the experiences of marginalized communities in using digital public services and the barriers to accessibility. Furthermore, research aimed at supporting the digital literacy of returning citizens remains limited. Therefore, Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) theoretical perspective on "digital rehabilitation" is essential: the model argues that comprehensive digital literacy education provided during and after incarceration is indispensable for economic, social, and personal integration. The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by thoroughly examining the digital barriers faced by Roma returning citizens and the nature of this intersectional exclusion within the context of Türkiye, where e-government initiatives are rapidly expanding.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature

This study is anchored primarily in Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality, which provides the central analytic lens: Digital exclusion is not the sum of separate disadvantages but the product of the interaction between ethnic identity, carceral status, gender, and class. The other frameworks play a supporting role in dialogue with this core. Ragnedda's (2018) digital capital specifies the resource through which intersectional disadvantage takes shape online; Wacquant's (2007) territorial stigmatization and the carceral-citizenship literature (Gurusami, 2019; Miller & Stuart, 2017) explain how the spatial and penal axes gain their force; and de Certeau's (1984) tactics account for the agency participants exercise within these constraints.

2.1. Digital Capital and Social Exclusion

Digital inequality goes beyond a simple issue of device access; it represents a complex interplay of access, skills, and the tangible benefits derived from this process (van Dijk, 2005). Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu's theory of capital, Ragnedda (2018) defines digital capital as "internalized abilities" (digital competencies) and "externalized resources" (technological hardware). This form of capital acts as a "bridge" between online and offline life opportunities, enabling individuals to transform their performance in the digital sphere into economic, social, cultural, and political capital. However, this accumulation is not distributed equally; the strong link between socioeconomic resources and digital inclusion traps low-income and educationally disadvantaged groups in a cycle of systematic exclusion (Helsper, 2012).

The literature on the digital divide analyzes the gap at three levels: technical access (first level), usage skills (second level), and the concrete outcomes of usage (third level; Ragnedda, 2018). Given the impact of social structures on technological adoption, practices of digital exclusion cannot be considered independently of individuals' offline disadvantages. In particular, when combined with poverty and minority status, deficiencies in experience—such as internet literacy and frequency of use—deepen digital exclusion; this situation transforms into a structural barrier that restricts the civic rights and life opportunities of vulnerable groups (Salemink, 2016).

The post-incarceration reintegration process into society is described in the literature as "locked up and left out" (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). The digital rehabilitation model developed by Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) argues that digital isolation during incarceration creates cumulative deprivation in economic, social, personal, and health domains following release. Individuals deprived of ICT skills in prison are unable to demonstrate

the "digital citizenship" performance necessary for survival after release; this situation structurally increases the risk of recidivism (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021). Crucially, these disadvantages are rarely acquired at the prison gate: characteristics such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, income, and education shape who is digitally excluded long before any contact with the criminal legal system, and they continue to structure that exclusion after release. The next section turns to intersectionality to specify how these axes combine.

2.2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes that categories such as race, gender, and class create an interconnected system of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In the case of Roma returning citizens, this structure produces a "multiple exclusion" where ethnic identity, criminal records, and spatial stigmatization intersect. At this point, the concept of "territorial stigmatization" conceptualized by Loïc Wacquant (2007, 2008) provides a critical framework for understanding how Romani neighborhoods are coded as "risky and marginal areas" in digital systems. In the Turkish context, for a Romani individual, release is merely a transition from one enclosed space (prison) to another stigmatized space (ghetto) where, in Wacquant's words, "urban outcasts" reside.

This stigmatization manifests not only in everyday social relations but also as an automated exclusion mechanism through e-government and algorithmic decision-making systems (Eubanks, 2018). The experiences of these formerly incarcerated Romani people illustrate Crenshaw's account of "structural intersectionality" in concrete terms. Inadequate housing, the tradition of informal labor, and the "communicational deprivation" in prison highlighted by Knight (2016) deplete the individual's technological capital. In this process, Romani identity, criminal record, and the neighborhood of residence become algorithmic factors of suspicion that prevent the individual from accessing rights in the digital environment; the individual is "locked out" of the system (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022).

A conceptual clarification is needed regarding Crenshaw's framework here. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) developed intersectionality at the intersection of race and gender, grounded in the experience of Black women whose disadvantage could not be captured by race or gender alone—a Black feminist insight that disadvantage is produced where axes of oppression meet rather than add up. Two adaptations require justification here. First, regarding gender: I retain it as a constitutive axis rather than setting it aside—the gendered patterning analyzed in Section 4.1.4 and in the gender discussion in Section 5 is itself an intersectional finding. Second, regarding race: I deliberately speak of ethnic identity rather than race. In the Turkish socio-legal setting, race is neither an official category nor a salient idiom of discrimination in the Anglo-American sense, whereas Roma ethnic identity is the primary axis along which structural and spatial marginalization is organized. Mindful that this risks decontextualizing a framework rooted in Black feminist thought, I treat ethnicity not as a softer synonym for race but as the category through which racialized, systemic exclusion is enacted here.

2.3. Tactical Participation and "Bypass"

Confronted with exclusionary, gatekeeping systems, marginalized groups exercise agency through "bottom-up" micro-level strategies, what de Certeau (1984) calls the everyday "tactics" by which people work around rigid institutional rules. In Roma communities, this takes the form of neighborhood-based solidarity that routes around official digital channels: Individuals lacking digital capital delegate transactions

to younger relatives, literate neighbors, or shopkeepers acting as "warm experts" (Bakardjieva, 2005), drawing on what Putnam (2000) terms "bonding social capital" to substitute for the digital capital their ethnic identity or record places out of reach. Such networks are fragile, however, under deep poverty, precarious work, and the spatial displacement produced by urban-renewal projects targeting Romani neighborhoods (Akkan et al., 2011).

These workarounds nonetheless have a cost: they position individuals as "secondary subjects" who access digital systems only through others, rather than as full digital citizens. Informal fixes—using a grocer's IBAN, or transacting through a line registered in someone else's name—offer temporary relief but carry no legal protection. As a result, these neighborhood-based bypass mechanisms cannot permanently dissolve the structural boundaries of the "carceral web" (Gurusami, 2019) that continues to keep returning citizens at the edge of formal employment and official social rights.

2.4. Türkiye's e-Government Momentum and Why the Roma?

Roma people are a paradigmatic example of structural exclusion as society transitions from an industrial to a post-industrial era (Granados Romero, 2008). International data show that Romani communities are represented in prison populations at a much higher rate than the general population, and that this situation necessitates targeted policy interventions (The Traveller Movement, 2021). In the Turkish context, Roma face the greatest obstacles to digital capital accumulation due to deep poverty, spatial segregation, and discrimination in education (Akkan et al., 2011; Gökçe, 2018; Uzpeder et al., 2008).

In this regard, Türkiye's e-government transformation process provides a unique sociological context that underscores the importance of this study. Ranked 80th in the index in 2012, Türkiye has shown a steady rise, reaching 27th place by 2024 and becoming one of the world's fastest-developing countries in digital governance (United Nations e-Government Knowledgebase, 2024). However, this extraordinary technological speed and success at the macro level acts as what might be termed a "disadvantage amplifier" for groups with intersectional vulnerabilities, such as formerly incarcerated Roma. Because the neighborhoods where they live in the physical world are stigmatized in the media and by law enforcement as "illegal ghettos" or "crime hotspots" (Romani Godi, 2024), this spatial labeling directly translates into online exclusion.

This transformation has turned access to health, employment, and justice into a mandatory "digital threshold." Where infrastructure is this advanced, a lack of internet literacy is no longer a simple deficiency but a form of "algorithmic gatekeeping" that strips individuals of civic rights. Roma returning citizens are excluded from this new performance of citizenship by both their ethnic identity and their criminal-record status, making Türkiye a distinctive and analytically significant case for studying carceral citizenship and digital exclusion together.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 formerly incarcerated Roma individuals (P1–P15) living in five major Turkish cities (Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, and Kocaeli) who had served prison terms of varying lengths (1–15 years). In selecting participants, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted

to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, occupational background, and length of incarceration, thereby reflecting the experience of re-entering the digital world from a range of standpoints. To reach this closed and "hard-to-reach" population, snowball sampling was used; in this process, local Roma associations played a critical role as "gatekeepers" who facilitated safe access to the field. The implications of this gatekeeping for the composition of the sample are addressed in Sections 3.2 and 5.1.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Turkish, in settings chosen by participants (homes, association premises, or coffeehouses), and lasted roughly 40–90 minutes. With informed consent, they were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into qualitative data-analysis software. A semi-structured guide covered six domains: (a) pre- and post-incarceration relationship with technology and the "digital shock" of release; (b) use of and exclusion from e-government and public e-services (the e-Devlet portal; MHRS, the central medical-appointment system; İŞKUR, the employment agency); (c) device ownership, connectivity, and neighborhood infrastructure; (d) sources of digital support and intermediaries; (e) ethnic and carceral stigma, surveillance, and self-expression online; and (f) expectations of authorities and the framing of digital inclusion as charity versus right. The full guide is in the Supplementary File; it served as a flexible prompt, allowing participants to lead.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis, treating the researcher as an active, situated interpreter rather than a neutral coder. The analysis followed the six phases of the approach:

1. Familiarization through repeated reading;
2. Generation of semantic and latent codes;
3. Construction of candidate themes;
4. Reviewing themes against the coded extracts and full data set;
5. Defining and naming themes;
6. Producing the analytic narrative.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, I did not pursue inter-coder reliability; rigor rested instead on reflexive memoing (Section 3.3), an audit trail from codes to themes, and sustained attention to disconfirming evidence (Section 5.1).

Because the interviews and all quoted material were originally in Turkish, the extracts presented in this article were translated into English by the researcher and subsequently checked by a second bilingual researcher, with selected passages back-translated to verify fidelity. Formal member checking—returning transcripts or interpretations to participants for validation—was not undertaken. Given the vulnerability and mobility of this population and the sensitivity of data concerning ethnic identity and criminal records, re-contacting participants would have posed disclosure and safeguarding risks that I judged to outweigh the methodological benefit. Instead, interpretive rigor was supported by reflexive memos written after each interview, which were used to surface and document the researcher's assumptions and to keep them under scrutiny throughout coding.

3.2. Sampling, Saturation, and Transferability

Sampling continued until the analysis reached thematic saturation in the interpretive sense appropriate to reflexive thematic analysis. I distinguish this from the notion of data saturation as exhaustive informational coverage: Following Braun and Clarke (2021), saturation here denotes the point at which additional data deepened and consolidated the existing analytic account rather than generating new themes. In practice, from about the twelfth interview onward no substantively new codes emerged; later participants reiterated patterns already established in earlier accounts, and the final interviews served chiefly to add nuance to existing themes. I therefore treat the sample as adequate for the exploratory aims of the study rather than as a claim to have captured every possible experience.

Two features of the sampling strategy bound the transferability of these findings. First, the sample is small (n = 15) and concentrated in five urban centers, so the findings are situationally bounded—best read as an analytically generative account of a specific intersectional position rather than as generalizable to rural Roma communities, Roma elsewhere, or non-Roma returning citizens. Second, participants were reached through local Roma associations acting as gatekeepers; while necessary for trust and safe access, this introduces a selection effect whose implications for the composition of the sample are discussed in Section 5.1.

Given the sensitive nature of the research and the vulnerability of the study group, international research-ethics standards were strictly followed throughout data collection and analysis. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Humanities Sciences at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University (decision dated 13 February 2026, No. 58/117; Document No. E-80110942–050.99–2600040069). All participants gave informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose and the use of their data, and, to protect sensitive information such as prior convictions and ethnic identity, all identifying details were anonymized and coded as P1–P15.

3.3. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Because reflexive thematic analysis treats the researcher as an active instrument of interpretation rather than a neutral conduit (Braun & Clarke, 2021), a statement of positionality is essential, particularly given the vulnerability of the study group and the sensitivity of data concerning ethnic identity and criminal records. The research was conducted by a non-Roma academic researcher located outside the community under study. This insider/outsider position carried both limitations and a degree of analytic distance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). On the one hand, the researcher did not share participants' lived experience of ethnic marginalization or incarceration and could not draw on insider cultural knowledge; on the other, the absence of community membership made the mediating role of the Roma associations indispensable for establishing legitimacy and trust.

Trust and access were negotiated over time rather than assumed. Initial contact came through association representatives who vouched for the researcher; interviews took place in settings chosen by participants, in everyday language, after the voluntary nature of participation had been explained. The researcher remained attentive to the asymmetries of the encounter—ethnicity, institutional affiliation, social position—and to social-desirability effects, whereby participants might understate non-compliant tactics or amplify grievances before a perceived institutional interlocutor. These were mitigated by anonymity and coding

(P1–P15), emphasis that the research was independent of any state or correctional body, and an interview style inviting concrete episodes. Reflexive memos written after each interview were used to keep the researcher's assumptions visible during coding (Finlay, 2002).

3.4. Participant Profile and Demographic Characteristics

The study sample consists of 15 formerly incarcerated Romani people who exhibit diversity in terms of age, gender, occupational background, and length of incarceration. Participants' technological proficiency and attitudes toward the digital world were identified as key factors directly shaping their experiences of social exclusion and digital reintegration. Anonymized demographic information for the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant profile and demographic characteristics.

Participant No.	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of Incarceration
P1	Male	24	Musician	2 years
P2	Female	45	Housewife	5 years
P3	Male	55	Musician	8 years
P4	Female	30	Unemployed	3 years
P5	Male	38	Scrap dealer	4 years
P6	Male	21	Day laborer	1 year
P7	Female	50	Housewife	6 years
P8	Male	42	Unemployed	10 years
P9	Male	35	Street Vendor	3 years
P10	Female	28	Housewife	2 years
P11	Female	40	Housewife	2 years
P12	Male	52	Self-Employed	13 years
P13	Male	20	Unemployed	2 years
P14	Female	22	Unemployed	2 years
P15	Male	36	Unemployed	15 years

4. Findings

4.1. Findings From the Field

The interview data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, interpreted in dialogue with the study's theoretical framework (intersectionality and digital capital). The analysis produced six interrelated themes, together with a cross-cutting analysis of gender (Section 4.1.4), summarized in the code tree below (Table 2).

4.1.1. Theme 1: Digital Shock and Spatial Marginalization—Infrastructure and Device Barriers

Field data indicate that the absolute isolation experienced during incarceration produces a jarring "digital shock" upon release. P3's description of the feeling of being cast into a void—"When I went in, there were push-button phones; when I came out, everyone had these glass-like things in their hands….It felt like I'd

Table 2. Code tree and thematic framework.

Theme (overarching)	Sub-codes (field data-based)	Illustrative data segment
1. Digital shock & spatial marginalization	Digital shock, lack of devices, weak neighbourhood infrastructure	"…like a frozen human being" (P8)
2. e-services as new "walls"	e-Government/İŞKUR/MHRS barriers, loss of rights, algorithmic gatekeeping	"e-Government…is like a maze" (P10)
3. Intersectionality: Double stigmatization	Ethnic identity + criminal record, address-based profiling	"…when the two combine, the system deletes you" (P1)
4. Fear of surveillance & digital insecurity	Carceral web, self-exclusion, concealment	"…a bomb with its pin pulled…" (P7)
5. Tactical participation & bypass	Warm experts, proxy use, identity substitution	"My…bank are that grocer…because he too is Roma" (P3)
6. Expectations for rights-based policy	Digital education as a right, not charity	"This is not charity, it is a right!" (P11)

landed in space," is a concrete manifestation of the state of being "locked up and left out," as conceptualized by Reisdorf and DeCook (2022).

Spatial and socioeconomic marginalization deepens infrastructural inequality. P8's account—"I went to get water; there was a machine. It said, 'Swipe your card,' but I didn't have a card.…The world has changed, but we've been left behind"—shows how even brief disconnections sever an individual from basic functionality, a reality directly linked to absolute poverty and missing infrastructure in Roma neighborhoods (Akkan et al., 2011). For people returning to households lacking heating, water, or electricity, "digital infrastructure" is an unattainable luxury, as P5's outburst makes plain: "The internet is for the well-fed. I'm hungry; I'm thinking about what I'll eat tomorrow."

The depth of this rupture is captured in participants' imagery. P8, released after ten years, described not mere disorientation but a kind of suspended animation: "I felt not like a fish out of water but literally like a frozen human being. People don't even look at the road; everyone's head is inside a piece of glass." For others the rupture recurred with every disconnection: P4 likened the day her internet was cut off for lack of money to being returned to prison, "the walls closing in."

4.1.2. Theme 2: E-Services as New "Walls" and Loss of Rights

The shift of public administration onto platforms such as e-Government, MHRS, and İŞKUR has erected new "virtual walls" for Roma returning citizens. Historically pushed into informal sectors such as scrap dealing and street vending (Akkan et al., 2011) and alienated from legal language (Romani Godi, 2024), a community already unable to draft a petition in the physical world is structurally shut out of complex digital bureaucracy. P10 summarizes it—"I log into e-Government, and it's like a maze. I can't find what I'm looking for"—and the barriers P1 met in the İŞKUR system illustrate the same gatekeeping:

> I went to İŞKUR, and they said, "Get an e-Government password, log in from there"…"Click this tab, upload your criminal record," and so on. How am I supposed to know which tab? When I log into the system, a huge "Convicted" label pops up. It's as if the system is mocking me.

This exclusion aligns with the concept of "carceral citizenship," which describes being pushed outside the system under the presumption of guilt (Miller & Stuart, 2017). These "virtual walls" not only highlight individuals' lack of technical knowledge but also suggest that digital systems are designed as if these groups were "invisible." In the private sector as well, P8's statement—"I need to open a bank account….My face looks tired, my phone is old. The app didn't recognize my face….My system has already crashed"—demonstrates that standardized algorithms cannot account for the worn-out realities of disadvantaged groups.

For the most impoverished participants, the mandatory digital threshold registered less as a skills gap than as a class barrier that precedes the question of access altogether. P5, a scrap collector with no smartphone, rejected the premise of the digital demand outright: "Brother, my gas cylinder is empty, my fridge is empty, and you tell me to "'og into e-Government.' The internet is the business of a man whose stomach is full." His account shows the e-government "wall" operating not through bureaucratic complexity but through a material destitution that makes the digital threshold experientially irrelevant yet administratively unavoidable.

4.1.3. Theme 3: Intersectionality—Double Stigmatization in the Virtual World

The experiences of Roma participants resonate strongly with Crenshaw's (1989) account of structural intersectionality: the intersection of ethnic identity and criminal-record status produces a compounded, structural double stigmatization in which neither axis can be understood in isolation. P13's statement—"I'm both Roma and a former convict; my place is already clear. This system isn't for us"—illustrates how this intersectional exclusion is internalized as a settled fact about one's position rather than experienced as a contingent obstacle.

The digitization of job applications has not eliminated spatial bias against Romani neighborhoods; by delivering address and record data to employers in seconds, it can intensify what participants experienced as address—and record-based "racial profiling" (Romani Godi, 2024; Uzpeder et al., 2008), now operating at the speed of an automated query. As P7 put it, the automatic surfacing of a criminal record makes the digital environment one that constantly reproduces a marginalized identity: "They already view me as a 'criminal,' and when I can't do anything online, I feel even more excluded."

Participants articulated this compounded exclusion with precision. P1's account is, in effect, a lay theory of intersectionality—neither axis alone is decisive, but their conjunction triggers rejection: "If I were only Roma he might say 'maybe'; if I were only an ex-convict he might say 'maybe.' But when the two combine, the system deletes you automatically." P4, caught between two excluding collectives, put it: "Because I am Roma the ex-convicts exclude me; because I am an ex-convict everyone excludes me." P9 went further still, calling the comment sections that adjudicate Roma returning citizens "a place of extrajudicial execution."

P1's image of being "deleted automatically" repays closer reading, but it should be read for what it reveals about experience rather than as a description of any algorithm: what participants encountered were interfaces and outcomes—instant rejection once an address or record became visible—not the decision rules behind them.

Read this way, it still does real theoretical work, showing Crenshaw's two axes as fused rather than additive, since it is the simultaneous legibility of a stigmatized neighborhood and a criminal record, in a single query, that produces exclusion. Digitalization does not invent this discrimination but changes its tempo and felt character—prejudice once requiring a face-to-face encounter is now immediate, impersonal, and seemingly built into the system, driving the withdrawal (Theme 4) and workarounds (Theme 5) below.

4.1.4. The Gender Axis: Differentiated but Intersecting Patterns of Exclusion

Because the study mobilizes an intersectional framework, the gender dimension is examined explicitly rather than absorbed into an undifferentiated category. The sample comprised six women and nine men of comparable ages and incarceration lengths. A foundational layer of experience was shared across gender: Both women and men described the post-release "digital shock," the experience of e-government as a "virtual wall," and recourse to proxy use. Beneath this shared layer, however, the accounts diverged in patterned ways along three axes—the orientation of digital need, the channel of proxy support, and the form taken by stigma and surveillance—each of which is intelligible only intersectionally.

For the women, digital life was organized around motherhood and the household: Their most urgent encounters with digital systems ran through children's schooling (the EBA e-learning platform, parent WhatsApp groups) and their proxy support through their own children. P2 located her entire digital capacity in her daughter—"…my daughter does all of it. When she is not home, I am nothing." Their maternal position also exposed them to a gendered double stigma; P4 was branded not only as a formerly incarcerated Roma woman but through a feminized vocabulary of contempt ("shrews, thieves, filthy"), and a recurring response (e.g., P14) was concealment online "behind a mask." This shaded into a gendered fear of surveillance: women such as P2 policed their own and their children's online conduct to avoid being "found," a dimension developed further in Theme 4.

For the men, digital need was oriented toward employment and the formal economy—İŞKUR postings, courier-platform registration, banking, and the record check that gates them—and their workarounds were more technical and identity-substituting. P6, blocked by the record check, described operating under a relative's identity: "I open an account in the name of my cousin who has no record….It looks as if he is riding the motorbike, but I am the one delivering the parcels." Others (e.g., P1) had a neighborhood-revealing residence PDF edited to show a different address. Where women routed support through kin at home, men more often used a paid or reciprocal neighborhood broker. The underlying barrier was shared; its gendered expression—maternal and concealing for women, employment-centerd and identity-substituting for men—was consistent.

These differences should not be overstated into separate worlds: the women's and men's accounts rhyme at the level of structural cause and diverge at the level of lived expression. This is what an intersectional reading predicts—gender does not act as an independent variable layered onto ethnicity and carceral status but is refracted through them, shaping who one turns to (a daughter versus a coffeehouse broker), which institutions one collides with (the school portal versus employment and banking), and the idiom in which one is shamed. Given the small number of women ($n = 6$), these are offered as contextually grounded observations rather than statistical claims, yet they are consistent enough to make gender analytically indispensable to this account.

4.1.5. Theme 4: Fear of Surveillance and Digital Insecurity

For formerly incarcerated people, the internet serves as a tool of state surveillance that triggers fears of being profiled (Gurusami, 2019). Even after being released from prison, individuals continue to feel the virtual shackles of the "Carceral Web." P12 describes this situation as follows: "It's as if an invisible eye is constantly following me….I feel as if 'convicted' is written on my forehead, and it's the same when I go online."

This surveillance anxiety drives individuals toward a conscious "self-exclusion." P6 states: "It's as if I'm outside but still being watched. That's why I don't want to use my phone"; P14 justifies her hesitation on social media by saying: "I use WhatsApp but don't share photos with anyone—you never know what might happen."

This surveillance anxiety was acute and, again, gendered in texture. Women such as P2 experienced the very act of touching a screen as quasi-criminal and policed their children's online conduct accordingly ("don't comment underneath; they'll find us online and once again we'll be the guilty ones"). P7, newly literate, rendered the smartphone itself as a live threat to a household that survives by remaining invisible: "That device in my grandchildren's hands feels to me like a bomb with its pin pulled….For us, to be invisible is to survive. The internet makes you visible, and that is our greatest fear." Here surveillance does not merely accompany exclusion; following Gurusami's (2019) "carceral web," it actively produces a self-imposed withdrawal from the very participation that reintegration now demands.

4.1.6. Theme 5: Tactical Participation and Bypassing the System

In the face of exclusionary formal systems, Roma individuals develop "bypass" tactics by leveraging neighborhood-based social capital: Rather than performing digital transactions themselves, they rely on "proxy use" through "warm experts"—younger family members or literate neighbors—as conceptualized by Bakardjieva (2005). Statements such as P2's "I give the phone to my nephew," P10's "I give it to my children," and P12's "The neighbor's daughter always handles my affairs" show that digital participation is facilitated through a collective network rather than as an individual act.

Even more striking are the institutional workarounds developed to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. P3's strategy—"I couldn't open a bank account, so I'm giving the grocer's IBAN….The grocer gives me cash"—or P7's approach—"I got a phone line in someone else's name, I'm using someone else's account"—are tactical survival reflexes developed to circumvent exclusionary algorithmic systems.

The substitutive logic of these tactics is vivid. P3, who refuses banks, relocates formal finance into a co-ethnic neighbor: "I give them the IBAN of the grocer on the corner….My e-Government and my bank are that grocer…because he too is Roma." P6, conversely, becomes the neighborhood's informal digital infrastructure, performing for others the state functions they cannot access. As P3's phrase makes clear, this solidarity rests on shared ethnic precarity, which both enables the bypass and confines it within a community that is itself materially fragile.

4.1.7. Theme 6: Expectations for Rights-Based Policy

Nearly all 15 participants demanded digital education from public authorities not as philanthropy or NGO assistance but as a "social right," viewing the infrastructure and training the state must provide as a legal obligation—an orientation aligned with the "digital rehabilitation" model (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018) and with work on the "digital maturity" of prison systems (Knight et al., 2023).

This rights-based consciousness was articulated with striking clarity. P11 rejected the framing of digital education as benevolence—"This is not charity, it is a right! We want Roma to be citizens who claim their rights, not people who are always asking for something"—an insistence on entitlement over charity that recurred across participants (P12, P13, P14) and echoes the demand for "social rights" in the classical citizenship literature (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992). P1 located the failure earlier, in the prison itself ("If they had taught us how to use computers in prison, I wouldn't be struggling so much now"), consistent with Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) argument that digital literacy is a prerequisite for successful re-entry and must begin during incarceration.

5. Discussion

The codes derived from the interview data reveal how a gap identified in the global literature—the near-absence of work situating digital re-entry at the intersection of ethnic identity and a criminal record—plays out in the lived experience of Roma returning citizens in Türkiye. The following sections read these findings against the study's theoretical framework and against comparable research from other contexts. The discussion covers five themes: the temporal rupture of re-entry, the intersectional and algorithmic character of the exclusion, the tactical resistance it provokes, the surveillance that accompanies it, and how gender cuts across all four.

The "digital shock" in the findings shows the prison functioning as a "time capsule" that severs the individual from the technological temporality of the outside world. The resulting disconnection is, as Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) emphasize, not merely a skills deficit but a modern form of penal suffering—being "locked up and left out."

Beyond this temporal rupture, the exclusion is fundamentally intersectional in Crenshaw's sense: It is produced where axes of disadvantage meet rather than add up. Ethnic identity and a criminal record converge to produce a double stigmatization. In line with Helsper's (2012) corresponding-fields model, the poverty, spatial segregation, and institutional discrimination individuals face offline directly fuel their online disadvantage. The barriers they meet in İŞKUR and e-Government enact an alternative "carceral citizenship" rooted in a presumption of Roma criminality: a community already deemed suspect in the physical justice system (Uzpeder et al., 2008) meets the "convicted" label again in e-Government after release. This excludes them from core welfare outputs—employment, banking, housing—deepening economic insecurity.

If the exclusion is intersectional, the responses to it are tactical. Practices such as using a grocer's IBAN or registering a line under another's name are tactical resistance to structural deprivation: lacking digital capital, participants substitute neighborhood-based social capital (Ragnedda, 2018). Yet these solidarity networks are fragile where the neighborhood fabric is fragmented by urban renewal and spatial dispersion (Akkan et al.,

2011). Family and neighborhood ties shield against stigma and secure survival after release (Powell, 2016), but such individual bypasses cannot transform the structural carceral web.

These tactics, however, unfold under a persistent sense of being watched. Participants' reserve toward digital platforms stems from perceiving the internet as a "tool of state surveillance" more than a means of inclusion (Gurusami, 2019). The reflex of concealing ethnic identity to avoid discrimination in prison (Romani Godi, 2024) carries over after release: an individual already coded as a "potential criminal" offline (Uzpeder et al., 2008) reads digital platforms as a space of profiling rather than freedom, and this sense of constant observation drives self-exclusion (Seo et al., 2022). Digitalization thus offers Roma returning citizens not an expanded sphere of rights but a new, invisible sphere of oppression in which surveillance has gone digital.

This surveillance dimension merits emphasis because it is where the carceral past is most clearly carried into digital life. Following Gurusami's (2019) account of the "carceral web," participants' wariness is not free-floating anxiety but a learned reading of digital systems as extensions of state monitoring. The consequence is a paradoxical, self-imposed withdrawal—minimizing an online footprint—in which individuals manage perceived risk by forgoing precisely the digital participation that reintegration now requires.

Read against the existing literature, the Turkish case offers a distinctive configuration rather than a confirmation. Studies from Finland (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021), the UK (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016), and the US (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018) largely theorize digital re-entry as a consequence of the prison's internal restriction of technology, against welfare states with mature digital infrastructures. The Turkish trajectory inverts part of this: A rapid, near-mandatory e-government expansion has raised the digital threshold of citizenship at speed, so the gap facing returning citizens is widened not only by what prison withholds but by how fast the outside world digitalizes during even a short sentence. Layered onto this is an axis largely absent from the Northern literature—entrenched, spatially marked Roma stigmatization—so systems presented as neutral efficiency gains operate here as accelerated mechanisms of address—and record-based exclusion—an instrument of "participatory punishment" (cf. Corda, 2026).

Cutting across all of these dynamics is gender. The gendered patterning of the findings strengthens rather than complicates the intersectional argument. Crenshaw treats gender, ethnicity, and carceral status as mutually constitutive rather than additive, and that is what the data show: one structural cause—the conjunction of Roma identity and a carceral record—produces systematically different trajectories for women and men. Women's exclusion is lived through motherhood and the household and policed through a feminized vocabulary of disrepute; men's through the labor market and identity-substituting tactics. This gendered division of digital labor is thus an effect of the intersection, not incidental to it. In this respect, the analysis returns to Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) founding insight: the salience of any single axis is context-dependent, and it is precisely the intersection of ethnicity, carceral status, and gender—not any alone—that shapes how digital exclusion is lived. Given the modest number of women, I offer this as a contextually bounded interpretation inviting further gender-stratified research.

5.1. Limitations

Several limitations qualify this study. As noted in Section 3.2, the sample is small (n = 15), urban, and reached through Roma associations acting as gatekeepers; the findings are therefore exploratory and situationally bounded, and the gatekeeping introduces a selection effect that may understate exclusion at the community's margins. As a qualitative study relying on self-report about sensitive matters, the data are subject to social-desirability effects, mitigated but not eliminated by the procedures in Section 3.3; and the small number of women (n = 6) limits conclusions about gender. Finally, the study is cross-sectional: A longitudinal design could trace how digital re-entry unfolds over time and when its most critical thresholds occur—dynamics single-moment data cannot capture.

A further limitation concerns the convergence of the accounts: The narratives point with striking consistency in one direction, and no strong disconfirming case emerged—even the most digitally skilled younger men framed their competence as repeatedly defeated by the record check rather than as a route out. I read this as meaningful but treat it cautiously, since the homogeneity may partly be an artefact of recruitment through associations and snowball sampling. The absence of counter-cases is thus both a finding about the depth of exclusion and a possible effect of who was reachable.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study examined the structural digital barriers Roma returning citizens face during reintegration in the context of Türkiye's rapid digitalization, and the tactical resistance they develop, within an intersectional frame. The findings show the digital divide to be not a mere "lack of devices" but a systematic mechanism of exclusion, deepened by the convergence of ethnic identity, poverty, and a criminal record—turning formerly incarcerated people into "the poorest groups of the digital age" and excluding them from employment, banking, and healthcare while heightening economic insecurity and the risk of reoffending.

Ensuring digital inclusion is not charity but a dimension of social and economic rights—reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals' commitments to reduced inequality (SDG 10) and inclusive institutions (SDG 16), to which equitable access to digital public services is now integral. The following interventions are recommended:

1. Digital rehabilitation and timing as a rights-based approach: The correctional system should move from a restriction-focused structure to one that prepares incarcerated people for digital society (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). To minimize the "digital shock," intensive hands-on training—real-life simulations of e-Government, İŞKUR, MHRS, and online banking—should run during the 3–6 months before release, so that individuals achieve working competency before leaving the prison gates. This timing-sensitive, rights-based approach aligns with international policy guidance: the UNICRI (2024) report on digital rehabilitation in prisons likewise frames digital skills as central to reintegration and to the Nelson Mandela Rules' commitment to preparing incarcerated people for life after release, while insisting that digital provision be balanced with human-rights and ethical safeguards.
2. Probation and critical digital literacy: Support for returning citizens should go beyond technical skills to target "critical digital literacy." Drawing on Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al. (2019), digital support offices should be established within probation services, so that individuals—through tools developed with civil

society organizations—can use digital platforms not as instruments of surveillance but for advocating their rights.
3. Low-threshold infrastructure and self-sufficiency centers: In Romani neighborhoods, low-threshold digital infrastructure centers providing free internet and hardware access should be established under the leadership of local governments. The training offered at these centers should be designed using a peer mentorship approach that enhances participants' self-reliance, thereby breaking the perception of being "seen as in need of a handout" as expressed by participants in interviews.
4. Measurability and cost-benefit analyses: Quantitative measurement tools should be adapted to the Turkish context so that policymakers can anchor digital inclusion to a national minimum standard, supported by economic analyzes showing how investment in the digital skills of formerly incarcerated people reduces long-term public costs by preventing recidivism.

These recommendations are framed for the Turkish institutional setting and speak directly to the bodies that govern digital re-entry, i.e: the Ministry of Justice's Directorate General of Prisons and Detention Houses and the probation directorates (denetimli serbestlik); İŞKUR, whose employment services are now largely mediated through the e-Devlet portal; and municipalities, positioned under their social-service mandate to host neighborhood-level provision. Anchoring digital inclusion in these existing structures—rather than as a discretionary add-on—would give the proposals a concrete institutional home within Türkiye's own digital-transformation agenda.

Where the state accelerates digitalization without matching socio-economic support and digital guidance, e-government risks becoming a new e-enforcement mechanism that restricts the rights of disadvantaged groups. Future research should examine the implicit biases of algorithmic systems toward such groups and the tactical resistance they develop.

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Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and to protect participant confidentiality, the qualitative data generated in this study are not publicly available. The interview guide is provided as supplementary material.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used a large language model to assist with language editing and formatting. All analytical work, interpretation, and final content are the author's own.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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