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Locked In, Logged Out: Digital Participation of Residents in Danish Carceral Facilities

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Abstract

Digital tools are no longer supplementary features of modern life but constitutive to it, and exclusion from digital participation increasingly means exclusion from public services, employment, and social life. For incarcerated residents, this exclusion compounds existing disadvantages and undermines the reintegration process that penitentiary institutions are expected to facilitate. This is particularly consequential in Denmark, one of the most digitalized societies in the world, where all civic services are accessible only through digital infrastructures and the Danish Prison and Probation Service formally commits to digital inclusion as part of its rehabilitative mission. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with current and former residents, prison staff, and NGO representatives across different types of Danish carceral facilities, this article examines how digital participation is organized and governed through the analytical lens of positive (enabling) and negative (restrictive) security. The findings reveal a graduated, ladder-like approach in which digital provision increases across facility types but arrives too late and too abruptly to constitute meaningful rehabilitation preparation. By conceptualizing digital participation as a security practice rather than a purely technological matter, the article argues that a more balanced integration of positive and negative security logics throughout the sentence (rather than their sequential alternation) is necessary for digital inclusion to meaningfully support rehabilitation and resettlement.

Keywords

digital inclusion; empirical research; incarceration; Nordic prison systems; positive and negative security

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1. Introduction

We open with a quote from our research participants:

> I believe the real prison is when you're handed a bag of money which only lasts for 1 week of the month and then the rest, people go out and try to make money in other ways…then they take your time which is the most valuable to you, if they can convert this time to something constructive it'd be a win-win situation….We're not only inmates; we are also residents of society, so it'd be great if we started to rebuild our relationship with society from here.

The digital permeation of Western societies has transformed the use of digital tools from a common condition into a *necessary* one. Access to these tools and the competencies to use them are no longer supplementary features of modern life but constitutive to it, as public and private services, employment, and interpersonal communication are progressively accessible only through digital interfaces (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Consequently, exclusion from digital participation means, across a significant range of domains, exclusion from participation in those domains entirely. This is often attributed to the digital divide, i.e., the inequality in accessing and beneficially using digital technologies, which is understood not as a secondary concern but as a primary vector of social exclusion (van Dijk, 2020). For incarcerated people (henceforth residents), digital exclusion compounds the stigma of a criminal record (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016) and results in severe shortcomings in economic, social, personal, cultural, and health dimensions undermining the reintegration process that penitentiary institutions should facilitate (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). These shortcomings are added to the disadvantaged conditions many residents faced before custody (Western & Pettit, 2010). While serving their sentences, these vulnerabilities are intensified, adding specific carceral deprivations (loss of autonomy, attenuated social ties, unemployment, digital exclusion) to the conditions that may have made incarceration statistically likely in the first place (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Often, the outcome is a population that is released from custody more vulnerable than it entered and less ready for the societal participation that it is expected to sufficiently undertake.

Denmark, the country where this study is carried out, is among the most digitalized countries in the world, consistently ranked at the top of the EU Digital Economy and Society Index for public service digitalization, broadband penetration, and the number of citizens who regularly interact with government services digitally (European Commission, 2026). Digital access is essentially a prerequisite, since all civic services—social benefits, housing applications, bank accounts, tax services, health appointments—are accessible through online portals utilizing an official digital identity infrastructure. Moreover, Denmark's Agency for Digital Government follows an ongoing strategy of societal digitization that "focuses on creating more coherent and user-friendly solutions that are tailored to the different life situations of citizens" (Danish Agency for Digital Government, 2026).

Denmark is also frequently cited for its exceptionally humane prison conditions in comparison to other penal systems (Smith, 2011). Nordic prison systems (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) have been characterized by lower incarceration rates, shorter sentences, more focus on the reformative rather than the punitive aspects of imprisonment, and greater emphasis on reintegration than the Anglo-American models (Pratt, 2007; Rentzmann, 1996). Nevertheless, this model of normalization, the idea that life in prison should resemble life outside insofar as it does not pose serious security threats, shapes Nordic penal systems' focus

on providing adequate education, helping them foster responsibility through autonomy that allows them to carry out a significant part of their everyday prison routines, while allowing them to have ample space and minimize the feeling of institutionalization (Rentzmann, 1996). Since digital tool use is a necessary condition for today's Danish society, normalization of digital access during custody is also an important aspect of rehabilitation. The Danish Prison and Probation Service (KF) has reflected these priorities across successive institutional reports (Kriminalforsorgen, 1998, 2023). Their 1998 report outlined a principle-program that encompassed all the ideas of normalization, education, responsibility, openness, and security, aligning with the Nordic reformative model. Their 2023 strategy report commits to improved educational conditions and use of digital affordances—by which we mean the action possibilities enabled by digital technologies and infrastructures available to residents—both to provide digital literacy and to strengthen the organization's own digital infrastructure. The report also describes the need for individual behavior assessment rather than categorical measures, and the provision of self-service digital solutions, positioning digital inclusion as integral to rehabilitation.

While previous studies have documented digital exclusion in carceral settings and the barriers to prison digitalization, less attention has been paid to how digital participation itself becomes governed through competing security logics. This article therefore asks how digital participation is organized across different Danish carceral facilities and how these arrangements can be understood through the lens of positive and negative security (Hoogensen Gjørv, 2012). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with current and former incarcerated people, prison staff, and NGO representatives, the findings suggest that the prison services follow a graduated, ladder-like approach to digital provision that increases across facility types but arrives too late and too abruptly to constitute meaningful rehabilitation preparation. The article thereby contributes to debates on prison digitalization by conceptualizing digital participation not merely as a technological issue but as a security practice that shapes opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration. Finally, the article argues for neither technological solutionism nor determinism, but it attends to the competing concerns and tensions that must be acknowledged and navigated when discussing digital participation in carceral contexts.

2. Related Work

2.1. Digital Inclusion and Incarceration

The literature on digital inclusion for incarcerated individuals highlights both the problematic nature of prisons' digital infrastructures and the potential societal and individual benefits of increased digital participation. According to Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016), incarcerated individuals are amongst the most digitally impoverished groups affected by the digital divide: Not only is there an absence of commonly used digital infrastructures, but residents serving long sentences have grown averse to technologies otherwise integral to societal life. These conditions reflect restrictive policies that frame prison digitalization as a luxury rather than a necessity (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Similar narratives emerge in Taugerbeck et al.'s (2019) public discourse analysis of German prison ICTs and Smith's (2013) analysis of digital access in Denmark as a human right: Although digitalization is occasionally framed as a vector for resocialization, dominant narratives overemphasize security due to fears of breaches, limited understanding of technologies' capabilities, and the view of carceral digitalization as a luxury. A similar pattern emerges in Hadlington and Knight's (2022) survey of UK public attitudes toward prison digitalization. Although 80% of respondents

feared internet access would enable residents to contact victims and 86% believed it would facilitate criminal activities, many also acknowledged its rehabilitative value, recognizing that digital access could make prison time more productive and improve digital skills and employability. The contrast between emotional and deliberate responses captures the political context within which prison digital inclusion is developed, i.e., fearmongering narratives that perpetuate a vicious cycle of fear-based public opinions which in turn make evidence-based policies difficult to enact.

These tensions are reflected in the limited deployment of digital tools across Western prisons. Hofinger and Pflegerl (2024), in their study of Austrian prisons, show that the overwhelming majority of residents have no access to digital tools. Where access exists, it takes the form of study rooms with offline computers unlocked on a case-by-case basis, or the exceptional provision of offline laptops treated as a major concession. Järveläinen and Rantanen (2021) identified three main barriers regarding ICT use in Finnish carceral settings: digital access, digital skills, and interpersonal skills, the latter referring to the relationships among residents and between residents and staff. This indicates that digital participation depends not only on institutional rules but on interpersonal relationships. Their findings reveal that limited digital skills remain a problem, but also that prison digitalization can raise concerns about the reduction of human contact upon which carceral social life depends. This tension highlights the importance of implementing ICTs within a reformative logic rather than as a purely infrastructural solution. Similarly, Barreiro-Gen and Novo-Corti (2015) report limited offline-only ICT access in Spanish prisons, with digital literacy linked to social and collaborative skills. In Denmark, Chatzipolakis and Yasuoka Jensen (2025) describe how, despite the prisons' intranet platform being normally available for education up to a BSc level in closed facilities, and despite physical infrastructure that is ostensibly oriented towards reformative ideals, both digital and physical infrastructure remain limited by insufficient resources, low processing power of the platform, inadequate computer hours, and poor population sectioning, which constrain meaningful digital engagement.

In contrast, Becker-Pestka (2022) identifies considerable cross-national variations in prison ICT provision. Sweden operates a central ICT network with learning centers in each penitentiary unit, where teachers deliver educational opportunities regardless of security level. However, recent changes in Swedish prison policy (i.e., notably the controversial 2026 law permitting the imprisonment of children as young as 13) complicate both narratives of Nordic exceptionalism and the future trajectory of ICT provision. Norway's Internet-For-Residents network, introduced in 2009, provides supervised internet access for education in classrooms across all prisons, treating digital technologies as a routine part of course delivery. Germany's intranet portal (operational since 2007) provides e-learning through both distance and in-person teaching, while Poland offers e-learning solutions but remains constrained by limited human and infrastructural resources. Collectively, these approaches position digital inclusion as a prerequisite for education. The most robust quantitative evidence for digital inclusion as a driver of rehabilitation comes from McDougall et al.'s (2017) seven-year study across 13 UK prisons, which found a 5.36% reduction in reoffending within a year of release, suggesting that digital inclusion can have meaningful reformative effects.

In the USA and Australia, ICT deployment primarily takes the form of e-learning systems, prison kiosks, and in-cell tablets. Kerr and Willis (2018), in an audit of prison ICTs in Australia, conclude that correctional departments lack the evidence base to determine best practice, and the digital divide will widen unless jurisdictions make deliberate commitments to technology investment. In the USA, prison kiosks have been deployed mainly for purposes such as account balance checking, visit scheduling, and communication with

case managers, alongside minimal educational content. However, access is shaped by institutional hierarchies: Equipment is shared under restricted hours, and competition for kiosk use is intense (Bardelli et al., 2022). A significant development has been the introduction of in-cell tablets since 2017, now adopted in 25 states. Although distributed at no cost, these tablets charge premium fees for functions such as music, games, e-books, and emails. Bardelli et al. (2022) characterize this as predatory, finding not only an inordinate financial burden on residents and their families, but also that behavioral, communication, and consumption data are made available to providers and law enforcement, effectively making users finance their own monitoring. This illustrates how digital inclusion can simultaneously expand access and reproduce new forms of inequality.

The consequences of digital exclusion extend beyond custody. Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) argue that digital exclusion during incarceration hampers rehabilitation by undermining the digital dimensions of five domains necessary for reintegration: economic, social, personal, cultural, and health. Consideration of digital inclusion during incarceration should accommodate the residents' familiarity with these domains through technology. The negligence of this is also reflected in Reisdorf and DeCook (2022), where formerly incarcerated people describe themselves as "digital immigrants," positioned as outsiders in a society structured around digital fluency. At the same time, Knight et al. (2024) caution against both technological and social determinism, warning against the assumption that digital implementations will automatically produce rehabilitative outcomes. Digitalization adopted as an immediate solution can rapidly transform fundamental practices and introduce more complexities than anticipated.

Taken together, this literature shows that prison digitalization exists at the intersection of competing concerns. Digital technologies can support education, family contact, employability, and reintegration, while simultaneously enabling surveillance, commercialization, exploitation, or criminal communication. Legal and policy debates increasingly frame digital devices as distinct security concerns—different from other forms of material access—because of their communicative reach, information storage capacity, and networked nature (Smith, 2013; Taugerbeck et al., 2019). Understanding how prison systems navigate these tensions is therefore central to contemporary debates on digital participation and rehabilitation. The present study engages with these debates by combining existing insights with data from Danish prisons and the framework of positive and negative security elaborated below.

2.2. Positive and Negative Security Framework

The distinction between positive (enabling) and negative (restrictive) security derives from a broader debate in security studies regarding the moral values of security as a concept (Nyman, 2016). Traditional security studies situate security as an institutional or governmental force whose primary goal is to prevent or counter threats—what has come to be called *negative* security: the prevention of threats, protection against danger, and removal or suppression of what is harmful. When enacted, however, this type of security can compete with social goods that are sacrificed in anticipation of impending dangers, setting aside conditions that could lead to human flourishing. Hoogensen Gjørv (2012) articulates *negative* security as "security from" (prevention or removal of danger even through violence, i.e., grounded in fear) and positive security as "security to" (ability for individuals and communities to pursue connection and flourishing conditions, i.e., grounded in trust). Importantly, these two types of security are not independent dimensions but coexist and interact. The important question is not whether to have negative security (as prevention of danger is a prerequisite in total institutions such as

prisons), but whether negative security exhausts the possibilities for enabling conditions in the context it is enacted in.

Schuilenburg and van Steden (2014) integrate these concepts into institutional criminology, and find that criminology in practice is dominated by *negative* security—with an emphasis on control and punishment inherently connected with policies around digital inclusion of residents—producing strictly restrictive conditions with little to no leeway for enablement. As a response, their *positive* security framework is predicated on three aspects: a socio-biological discourse invoking the need for human connection and empathy; an anarchic discourse, premised on the possibility of self-governance as a source for internal security; and a solidarity discourse in which a sense of belonging becomes a source of enabling security that cannot be achieved in solely threat-removing practices. These aspects bring together a conception of *positive* security as a safety mechanism constructed through relationships and participation, leading to conditions of agency and connection that preclude the possibility of harm.

Nyman (2016) notes that these terms are used inconsistently across authors, sometimes analytically (to describe the two types of security in practical applications), and sometimes normatively (to evaluate a configuration of security as good or bad), and proposes that their use be clearly delineated within the context of application. She argues that the analysis of a security configuration should be carried out pragmatically: identifying the contextual significance of security elements, evaluating their importance within that context, while showcasing the restrictive and enabling elements that are present or overlooked. This article applies this theoretical lens to digital inclusion in Danish prisons.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context and Access

The empirical data were collected in two closed state facilities in Denmark: Prison A (located on an island in south-eastern Denmark) and Prison B (located in central Denmark). Fieldwork was conducted over two periods in the summers of 2022 and 2023, consisting of two visits in each facility lasting 4–7 hours each. Initial access was granted after email correspondence with a senior developer of the Danish prisons' platform, who pointed us towards two teachers working in Prison A. Prison A was selected due to its status as a model institution for humane treatment and the high participation of its residents in the SKnet digital platform. The teachers relayed the information about our work to residents and got us in touch with residents who wished to talk about the platform. Overall, six interviews were conducted with a teacher present and five without (no guard or teacher present). It is important to consider that residents might have participated to stay in teachers' good graces. However, this concern was dispelled by their expressed problems and hopes to improve both the platform and their daily lives through raising awareness of their situations, and by their desire for their perspectives to be conveyed to decision-makers. Prison B access followed from an invitation extended through the network established in Prison A, alongside contacts established at a conference convened by KF where preliminary findings from this research were presented. The process was not without complications. During the final phase of data collection, a senior KF representative emailed the authors and the dean of our university, requesting that informal contact with prison staff cease and a debrief on informants' details and interview responses. This request was declined as it would constitute a breach of confidentiality. The representative subsequently informed us that all research must follow a top-down

approval, and that future proposals would be considered only if oriented towards implementation of novel technologies in open prisons instead of investigating current technologies across facilities. This instance occurred simultaneously with continuous expressions of willingness to participate by prison staff members, but contact was terminated in anticipation of potential predicaments for the employees. This encounter is reported not as a grievance but as contextually relevant, as institutional resistance to independent research access is itself data about the conditions under which digital inclusion is negotiated. Given this encounter and the general sensitivity of conducting research in carceral environments, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations throughout the study. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Identifying information was removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis. These measures were particularly important given the unequal power relations inherent in prison settings and the potential risks associated with participation.

3.2. Participants, Methods, and Data Processing

The dataset comprises semi-structured interviews with nine residents, two formerly incarcerated individuals, four prison teachers, two prison guards, one senior developer of each prison's digital platform, three workmasters (i.e., welders, carpenters, painters, chefs), and one board member of an NGO supporting reintegration and a formerly incarcerated individual himself—totaling 22 interviews, spanning 30 min. to one hour each. Additionally, fieldnotes from approximately 25 hours of on-site observations and notes from an unrecorded interview with an informant (who did not wish to be recorded) from an NGO that supports families of residents. All participants provided informed consent and are anonymized as follows: residents 1–9 as R1-R9; formerly incarcerated individuals as FR1 and FR2; prison teachers as PT1–PT4; guards as G1 and G2; platform developer as D; workmasters as WM1–WM3; and the two NGO members as NGO1 and NGO2. All informants were males except for two teachers, one NGO representative, and one prison guard. Upon consulting the teachers and guards, we were allowed to use a Dictaphone for recording the participants, who were all informed about the recording and consented beforehand. All interviews were conducted in English and fully transcribed. The residents' level of English ranged from advanced to fluent; therefore, no misconceptions occurred. The research follows the guidelines of RUC's Research Ethics Committee and is part of a broader PhD project approved by Roskilde University. The analysis was conducted collaboratively, where the two authors coded the transcripts independently and thematically categorized the data, after cross-verifying them with the audio interview files. Finally, the authors jointly agreed on the three themes analyzed in the following section concerning digital inclusion and the overall conditions of imprisonment across three facility types: remand (pre-trial), closed, and open.

4. Findings

4.1. Remand Facilities: Digital Desert and Negative Security Dominance

Interviews with current and former residents alike have made clear how strenuous everyday life feels in a remand facility. Digital access is not just restricted; it is absent. Certain residents have access to an in-cell TV (a "privilege" that could be revoked in case of misbehaving), sometimes shared with another cellmate, the only available digital affordance—referring to the action possibilities enabled by digital technologies and infrastructures available to residents. Regarding communicative infrastructure, participants described it as a regression to a pre-digital era:

> The way they make you speak with people there is in letters. We're talking high-end technology, better than smoke signals [laughs]. (FR1)

The absence of digital tools in pre-trial facilities serves the purpose of preventing the residents from communicating with parties that could affect the outcome of their case. Letters undergo scrutiny before sending and, for months, the only in-person communication allowed is supervised 1-hour visits twice a month with family members or with an attorney (FR1, FR2). However, this ostensibly justified condition seems more punitive than precautionary when put into perspective with the overall remand prison context. Residents in pre-trial facilities are allowed one hour of yard time per day, have scarce working opportunities, and most facilities have no in-cell toilet—instead, they must complete their personal hygienic routines by 5 pm, while both FR1 and FR2 mentioned that a one-size-fits-all diet of 1,500 calories per day is standardized.

The SKnet intranet platform existed in remand facilities in 2014 (PT4), where residents could access educational material but also world news added by prison teachers. It is now implemented only in closed state prisons with far fewer features available (PT1, PT3, D). Conditions in remand prisons were described as extremely tough (R1 and R2; FR1 and FR2), while FR1 even characterized them as "some of the worst in the West." The time one serves there is also considerably long, with one participant waiting for two years for trial (R7), and another staying in remand for seven months despite turning himself in and agreeing to plead guilty (R1).

The negative security logic is explicit and unmediated in pre-trial facilities. Because danger prevention is organized categorically rather than individually, digital deprivation is not assessed based on the actual risk of each detainee. Residents with minor charges and those whose digital access genuinely poses an evidentiary threat are all governed by the same collective digital exclusion, leaving no leeway for positive security through reward-based trust. Traces of ostensibly positive security configuration could be identified in certain permissions granted for toilet use after 5 pm or preferences towards residents for work opportunities, both contingent on the residents' behavior (FR1, FR2, R1)—but these are concessions based on acquiescence, not privileges based on trust. When residents wish to make a request or ask for help, they often need to press a button that notifies the guards who eventually decide whether to grant the request based on the urgency of the need, the frequency of the button use, or previous interactions with the residents (FR1, FR2):

> In ten months, only two times have I rung the bell after five. And you have to THINK. You have to think about what you're going to say….As soon as they open the door, you be like: "Sir, I'm sorry, I ate something expired, and it's bothering me." You have to say something like that, man. (FR1)

> Either you want to go to the bathroom, take a shower, ask for some help, whatever occurs…sometimes you have to wait for a long time, which is very humiliating. (FR2)

Outside the element of trust (which is hardly evident in these examples), positive security is co-constructed through participation and agency, aspects entirely absent from remand conventions, where residents are stripped of their autonomy over elementary everyday life. The strong reliance on negative security changes drastically after transferring to a closed state prison.

4.2. Closed Prisons: Limited and Outdated Digital Environments

The transition from a remand facility to a closed prison represents the first movement up the carceral digital ladder. Here, the facilities are equipped with computers providing access to the SKnet intranet platform, mainly for educational purposes—an acknowledgment that digital inclusion is a legitimate component of sentence management. However, this implementation was driven not by deliberate digital participation policy but by necessity to comply with European standards. In 2018, all digital access in closed and remand facilities was terminated after a security breach incident where a resident in the closed Prison B uploaded radical content via a PlayStation console (D, PT1). The SKnet was restored in 2021 following pressure from the European Committee for Prevention of Torture and Degrading Treatment (European Committee, 2020).

The platform provides access to selected offline resources: legal information, news on prison rules, a library of study material, and courses up to BSc education level. Realistically, however, the level of education one can receive while in prison is up to high school level, akin to the one achievable without digital tools. Residents pursuing university-level courses must remotely submit homework to professors who do not know that the student is incarcerated (R2). The combination of insufficient study material (R2, PT1), slow platform performance (R2, PT1), limited computer time, difficulty ensuring furlough for classes requiring mandatory attendance (R4), and the fact that professors assess residents' assignments strictly as non-incarcerated students makes pursuing higher education during custody extremely difficult.

Despite the SKnet including features for remote courses, these—alongside the news feature—are non-functional without internet connection. The positive/negative security tension takes a more complex form in this context, precisely because the institution formally acknowledges both imperatives. The SKnet exists because prison services recognize that digital provision is part of the rehabilitation process and a means to acquire digital literacy. With the platform as a tool implemented to satisfy these needs, a clash of positive and negative security values occurs. The security breach of 2018 led to a 3-year shutdown and reinstatement with nominal educational value, illustrating the hierarchy when positive and negative security imperatives conflict directly: a nearly absolute turn to negative security that collectively affects the residents, eliminating both potential danger and potential flourishing. In the closed prisons, however, there is leeway for positive security through institutional factors.

One such factor is the role of prison teachers, who actively build trust relationships with residents and have shown perseverance in their efforts by undertaking substantially more tasks than they officially have to. In practice, this is shown by providing additional educational material for the students' BSc assignments, converting digital material from the universities to SKnet-compatible formats (a process taking 2–3 hours), and offering encouragement and visible progress plans:

> Something like NemID, e-Boks [digital citizen information portals in Denmark]; why should we set them outside when the whole purpose of what we do here is to make it possible for them to get out and be functional? That's not what prisons are doing, and that's what we should be doing….You get a lot more people wanting to go to school, because they see possibilities [if online access was granted]…this way they can see the progress in their lives. That, in my opinion, works. (PT1)

However, this attitude is not the same towards everyone. The teachers acknowledge the dangers of open online access (PT1) and selectively strive to help students who have earned their trust, but stick to strictly formal interactions with students who try to abuse it, while also explaining that disciplinary action will be taken in cases of misconduct (PT1, PT3). This approach hinges on decisions based on internal knowledge of the context, and stems from personal understandings that result in more balanced practices of negative and positive security with far fewer compromising factors since it combines trust and/or force where appropriate.

Another factor that illustrates positive security values in practice comes from the compartmentalization of sections in Prison A, which comprises wings of maximum security, general population, rehabilitation, and separate sections for specific gang members to prevent gangs from fighting each other (R1, R2, PT1, NGO1). In the rehabilitation wing—where residents are treated for substance abuse—positive security finds its fullest application. To our surprise, we saw the guards very close to the shared kitchen used by residents that was fully equipped with kitchenware and knives, a space where they sometimes have dinner with the residents (G1, G2). When asked whether she was concerned about working in close proximity with them and about the knives in the common kitchen unit, the guard replied:

> I have a "dynamics safety"—if there's a new inmate here, I'm 100% sure that those residents will have my back if he tries to do anything to me. (G1).

The guards further explained that they always receive new residents with both a smile and a warning against misbehavior, explaining the duality of their role:

> One is controlling and the other is supportive and resocialization, and they know it. (G2)

This example reveals the willingness to develop a protective community through relational investment. The safety of the guards is premised here on trust that is produced, not by instruments of force, but by reciprocal respect, while, simultaneously, force is resorted to when necessary.

In Prison B, the idea of security through trust is visible in the school section—a dedicated space for residents who have shown genuine desire to learn a craft or complete their education, handpicked and taught by teachers and workmasters (PT4). There, students take courses in welding, carpentry, painting, gardening, cooking, or completing their high school education and, in rare cases, continue pursuing higher education (R7–R9, PT4). The painting instructor explained that there is a maximum of three students per lecture for both safety reasons (no cameras in the school section making it difficult to anticipate and suppress violent incidents) and pedagogical reasons:

> You need to have a form of respect in human…you need to find out what kind of person you have in front of you, and how the person learns…in the learning process it is very important to have a close connection between the teacher and the learner….I have lots of time to sit and talk to them. (WM1)

The comments of the residents have also revealed the reciprocal nature of their interactions with teachers and other students, remarking that it is a privilege for them to be in the school section (R7–R9) and that their greatest fear when they are released is the condition of being completely, overwhelmingly free again (R9). These instances reflect Schuilenburg and van Steden's (2014) discourse of security by virtue of human

connection. The school section represents a community of like-minded students who support and encourage each other in struggles and successes that they can all relate to (R9). They also reported that being removed from the general population section allows them to create more meaningful relationships with the prison staff, without this appearing suspicious to other residents (R7–R9). In this context, not only is security established through trust relationships, but it also guarantees its preservation collectively. Naturally, boredom, lack of motivation, and repetitive routines inevitably cause restlessness at times (WM2, WM3), but combining negative security, that takes the form of dividing students per class in small numbers and of disinterest to misbehave due to unwillingness to return to the general population, and of positive security, that takes the form of solidarity and trust, neutralizes any substantial harm towards staff or fellow residents.

However, even though closed prisons seem to display a better balance between positive and negative security practices than pre-trial facilities, digital inclusion is still significantly absent from the everyday life of residents until they transfer to an open facility, where they get unlimited access to digital affordances.

4.3. Open Facilities: Opening the Digital Gate

The open facilities represent the furthest point of the digital carceral ladder, and the institutional milieu where positive security is fully realized. Residents serve the last 3 to 9 months of their sentences in open facilities with fewer guards, more lenient furlough, reduced containment architecture, and digital access equivalent to that of free citizens. This way, residents have ample opportunities to utilize digital affordances for more contact with their families and educational/working environments attendance (R1, R3–R5, R9, PT1).

Across interviews, all participants who had served time in open prisons highlighted the ease of pursuing education, as they had full internet access through communal computer rooms and, in some cases, even PCs in their own cells, allowing them to complete BSc-level courses in natural sciences (R4), finance (R2), electrician apprenticeships (R3), and even medicine (R9). Additionally, the relationships with the guards appeared to be more collegial, and sometimes even friendly, even though there are no specific sections. Specifically, FR2 recounts an example in which he was caught smoking inside the facility that illustrates the nature of his relationship with the guards:

> They would take the cigarette and toss it in the sink and be like: "Come on, you're putting me in a very stupid situation." I really respected that, you know, because instead of charging people for smoking or whatever, he was like: "Come on, I'm on duty today. Let's make it work." (FR2)

This example captures how positive security operates in open prison relationships. Instead of taking immediate disciplinary action for a minor misdemeanor, the guard appealed to the resident's moral sense of responsibility, treating him as an equal. This attitude stems from a mutual understanding that rehabilitation is their common goal, leading the guard to overlook an incident that could otherwise cause a significant setback for the resident, trusting that he would not repeat it. These relationships facilitate reintegration practices by emphasizing trust and autonomy, allowing residents to network outside the facility during working or school hours (FR2, R4), form friendships with like-minded residents (FR2), and maintain easier contact with family and friends through their personal smartphone (R3, R4, R9, FR2).

However, the reduction of negative security in open facilities does not remove all constraints. In comparison to the highly monitored environment of closed facilities, open prisons can create more visible and consequential power dynamics due to hierarchies among imprisoned individuals (R3, R5, R6, R9, FR2, NGO1). NGO1, formerly incarcerated and now the director of an NGO that helps incarcerated individuals with reintegration, describes "strong" residents in open prisons as "kings [who] decide who does what…they are violent, threatening inmates, forcing others to smuggle drugs." Other residents (R3, R4) also mentioned that they were sent back to closed facilities when they were caught with substances that were "planted" among their belongings. FR2 described the power dynamics in closed prisons as more diffuse and attenuated because each unit contains only seven to 12 residents. In the open facility where he served his sentence, he described instances in which both he and other residents were provoked or hazed until they became part of a larger group of residents (FR2). The implication of substantially loosening negative security from one step of the carceral ladder to the next appears to be the enabling of coercive behaviors that carry over to the open prisons from the hierarchical structures molded in the closed prisons.

Another interesting finding comes from social workers at NGO2 who help incarcerated individuals stay in touch with their families. The restoration of full digital access in the open prisons has sometimes resulted in tensions within families (NGO2). After a long period of rationed contact with their loved ones (R1, R3–R7, R9), fathers and husbands in the open prisons are suddenly able to communicate without time restrictions. Structured contact that had become part of a family's everyday rhythm over months or years can be disrupted by constant video calls that feel overwhelming for some recipients (NGO2). Residents repeatedly described their families (R1, R3–R7, R9) as the cornerstone of their motivation for rehabilitation, yet this sudden increase in communication sometimes created pressure when family members began to feel overwhelmed. The prevalence of positive security—based on autonomy, trust, and suddenly unlimited digital access—after years of living in carceral environments dominated by negative security, arguably leads residents to compensate for the time lost during remand and imprisonment in closed facilities. Despite both the figurative and literal openness of open prisons, challenges persist because of the institutional imbalance between positive and negative security practices and the unequal permissions governing digital access across different prison types.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The three stages of the Danish carceral ladder reveal an institutional approach with a coherent internal logic, but also a temporal structure that provides intermittent digital solutions to problems that are constant across residents' sentences. The ladder-like approach increases digital provision as a resident moves from one facility to another, but what the findings show is that this progression arrives too late and is mostly inadequate as it is compressed into the final months of residents' sentences after years of digital exclusion. What Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) describe as economic, social, and personal dimensions in their model of digital inclusion are severely impacted by the lack of digital life in the first two stages of the Danish carceral ladder, where contact with families is scarce but vital, and where their education and skill acquisition are postponed, sometimes for years. This also affects their ability to make a living upon release, since former residents in Denmark need to pay for the expenses of all the trials that determined their sentence (NGO1).

Initially, digital inclusion appears to be lacking proper implementation due to the lack of a framework that would allow the values of positive and negative security to be examined analytically against current

practices within the institutional context of the KF. But the KF has already acknowledged and implemented the importance of such a framework within the organization, the so-called *dynamic* (positive) and *static* (negative) security. This pair of concepts is not identical to positive and negative security, since they lack the conceptual underpinnings that would make them analytically useful, but they are structurally analogous. Static security operates within the same categorical, threat-suppressing logic that characterizes negative security, "security from" (Hoogensen Gjørv, 2012), based on fear; dynamic security operates within the enabling logic of positive security, "security to" (Hoogensen Gjørv, 2012), based on trust. These values are visible in the mission statements of the KF where normalization (i.e., that prison conditions should resemble the conditions present in free society as much as possible) is emphasized to the point that it does not pose a threat to society, prison workers, and residents themselves (Kriminalforsorgen, 1998), and digitization of carceral facilities is expressed as a necessary step (Kriminalforsorgen, 2023). However, the biggest part of one's sentence relates to a substantial absence of digital inclusion, dictated by the categorical, threat-suppressing logic of negative security. Put differently, *the* SKnet represents a static security solution to a fundamentally positive security problem: an offline, dated platform, sporadically accessed but designed to reflect the acknowledgment that digital inclusion matters. In practice, it materializes the fact that digital inclusion matters only if even the slightest potential of positive security is eliminated. Not only is this evident in the content of the platform, but also in the institutional context in which it was established. The 3-year shutdown after the security incident of 2018, and its reluctant reinstatement in 2021, exemplify how negative/static security asserts its position when in direct conflict with positive security. Therefore, it is not the acknowledgement of a positive and negative security framework that is mainly missing from institutional policies, but rather the decontextualization of the decision-making process.

The experiences of residents across facilities showcase a gradual increase in positive security approaches, but not in institutional practices around digital inclusion. Digital inclusion in remand facilities is essentially absent, while the ostensibly gradual progression of digital inclusion in closed facilities through the SKnet is admittedly trivial. The prison teachers have mentioned that the digitization of closed and remand facilities has been part of their agenda for a long time (PT1, PT3), but despite the requests made in periodic KF conferences across Denmark, substantial changes have not yet materialized (PT1, PT3). Conversely, the open facilities feature an abrupt shift towards unlimited technological access that can become overwhelming (NGO2). Findings from our interviews show that the regulatory body within KF that is responsible for critical decisions consists of representatives who are not regularly present in the everyday application of the current institutional practices within carceral facilities (R3–R5, R9, PT1, NGO1). Arguably, this leads to a decision-making process from a largely decontextualized standpoint that, in turn, entails a technological determinism that policymakers are advised to avoid (Knight et al., 2024). In the context of closed facilities, the mere existence of a digital platform does not constitute the achievement of digital inclusion, while in the context of open prisons, abrupt and unlimited digital access does not result in seamless digital integration.

The findings of the present endeavor and of current literature suggest a need for contextually driven policies that balance positive and negative security practices throughout the carceral life of sentenced individuals. This does not constitute a call to eliminate security measures; it calls for policies that allow digital provision through both dimensions at every carceral stage instead of overemphasizing one of the two types of security in every step of the digital carceral ladder, as real-life examples have highlighted the importance and feasibility of such policies (Becker-Pestka, 2022; McDougall et al., 2017). In practice, this requires an institutional digital strategy that differentiates individual risk from collective punishment, something that static security is structurally

incapable of producing. Moreover, dynamic security is a concept that could be applicable not only in facilities, where relationships between staff and residents can enable security through trust, but also within the ranks of KF themselves, where trust in the judgement of the staff who experience the prison environment regularly can lead to more context-based decisions, promoting both positive and negative security practices. Despite the findings of this study suggesting various shortcomings in the current state of residents' digital inclusion and security configuration of the Danish prison system, the KF already possesses the institutional and conceptual tools to achieve a more moderate balance between security and reformation; a balance that matters inside KF's prison walls as much as it matters inside KF's conference halls.

This is particularly relevant given contemporary concerns surrounding social media, algorithmic amplification, online exploitation, and digital addiction, where exclusion from some forms of digital participation may be protective. Our argument is neither for unrestricted digital access, nor is it techno-optimist. Rather, it is for graduated, supported digital participation, premised on the recognition that exclusion produces passivity while inclusion, when scaffolded appropriately, can produce critical digital agency. In sum, we argue for context-sensitive forms of digital participation that support rehabilitation while recognizing that different digital environments carry different risks.

While dominant framings of prison digitalization tend to position security and digital access as inherently in tension, the findings of this study problematize that assumption. Across all three facility types, security was not only achieved through restriction. Rather, it was actively produced through trust, in the relationships between teachers and residents in the school sections, in the relational dynamics of the rehabilitation wing, and in the collegial interactions between guards and residents in the open prisons. These instances suggest that trust is not simply a byproduct of positive security conditions but a mechanism through which security is constructed and sustained. For criminology, this has a broader implication. Namely, the fear/trust dichotomy that underpins the positive/negative security framework is not merely descriptive of two institutional orientations, but evaluative, as it asks whether the security arrangements in place are oriented towards the suppression of danger or towards the conditions under which people do not become dangerous. Digital participation, understood through this lens, is not a concession made despite security concerns, but a domain in which security can be actively produced through graduated responsibility, relational investment, and trust.

Digital participation should therefore be understood as a central component of contemporary resettlement. In a society as thoroughly digitized as Denmark, release without adequate digital preparation is not a neutral condition but a structural disadvantage compounded onto the existing vulnerabilities that many residents carried before incarceration. The ladder-like approach currently in place delays digital preparation to the final months of a sentence, by which point the cumulative deficit in digital skills and social connectivity is substantial. Effective resettlement therefore requires that digital participation be treated not as a reward for progression through the carceral system, but as a consistent feature of it.

Despite the fruitful insights provided by our informants (to whom we are *very* grateful), certain limitations need to be acknowledged. Much of the empirical work was conducted in two closed facilities, and while interviews provide information about open and remand prisons from people who have experienced their realities, the sample is not representative of the full range of Danish carceral institutions. Additionally, the participants were predominantly adult males, leaving the experiences of women, delinquents, and residents with psychiatric

diagnoses unaddressed. Moreover, the study does not include perspectives from family members of residents, whose experience may vary significantly. Finally, the imposition of access constraints by the KF barred the possibility of interviewing management-level staff of the Directorate, meaning that the reasoning behind the decision-making of security policies is not fully illuminated.

Nonetheless, the Danish case illustrates broader challenges for prison systems internationally. These tensions reflect broader transformations across criminal justice systems, where digital technologies simultaneously create new opportunities for rehabilitation, new mechanisms of surveillance, and new forms of inequality. Rather than framing digital access as a binary choice between security and inclusion, prison authorities may benefit from designing graduated forms of digital participation that combine risk management with opportunities for learning, communication, and preparation for release. Such an approach would not simply modernize prison infrastructures but strengthen the continuity between imprisonment and life after release, positioning digital participation as an integral component of contemporary resettlement rather than a privilege reserved for the final stages of incarceration.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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