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Digital Advocacy Behind Bars: Social Workers' Perspective on Digital Inclusion and Reintegration in Lithuania

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Abstract

This article examines social workers' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of the role of digital advocacy in the rehabilitation and reintegration process of incarcerated people. The current study, located in Lithuania, is based on three focus group discussions with 15 social workers working at local prisons and NGOs. The research reveals that people in prison experience limited access to digital technologies, including the internet, mobile phones, and even TV, due to strict institutional regulations. Social workers reflect on the needs of people in prison for digital literacy, self-efficacy, and advocacy to counteract stigma and to promote a more nuanced understanding of incarceration. Public prejudices and media stigmatisation reinforce social exclusion, while proactive digital advocacy could contribute to the humanization process and community acceptance of individuals with justice system involvement. Based on the social workers' voices, this article addresses digital advocacy and digital literacy as a shifting paradigm in prison-based social work, which requires the balancing of digital provisions and risk management on the individual, professional, and institutional levels.

Keywords

digital advocacy; digital and social inclusion; incarceration; prison; prison social workers; rehabilitation; reintegration

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1. Introduction

Digital inclusion challenges the historically and culturally ingrained approach to punishment, when prisons were understood as places and mechanisms of isolation with restrictions of freedom and communication with the outside world. Digital exclusion, including restrictions on the use of mobile phones and the internet, reflects the logic of deprivation and disconnection from society (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). At the same time, digital inclusion represents an emerging dimension of rehabilitation and reintegration in the prison system, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own lives and facilitating their participation in society, which is increasingly becoming mediatised and digitalized (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022). Prisons are now considered to be more open and humane institutions, with rehabilitation and reintegration as goals of incarceration, seeking to provide those incarcerated with access to social, educational, and healthcare services. For people in prison, access to these services implies access to technologies and digital skills (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Juvonen et al., 2026). Reforming the prison system also requires the engagement of new professionals—social workers, psychological counsellors, and other support staff—collaborating with other organisations to promote reintegration and challenge negative societal attitudes toward people in prison. In the process of enhancing digital inclusion and promoting the openness of prisons to the outside world, genuine integration cannot be achieved without addressing the social stigma and limited opportunities to participate in public discourse. Advocacy, including its digital forms, becomes an important aspect of reintegration, alongside the digital skills and access to technology of people in prison.

The aim of this article is to explore the new opportunities and challenges of digitalisation in the Lithuanian prison system from the perspective of prison social workers. The research questions include an inquiry into how social workers experience and understand digital inclusion, and the role of digital advocacy in introducing a rehabilitation- and reintegration-oriented approach in prison.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Inclusion as a Part of Rehabilitation and Reintegration

In modern society, digital inclusion provides access to important public services and is related to employment, becoming a means of social and economic participation. In this context, digital transformation in the penal system has become part of European penal reforms, emphasising the principles of normalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration, human rights and dignity (Coyle et al., 2020; Van Zyl Smit & Snacken, 2009). These developments include digital skills training and the promotion of digital agency, digital confidence, and self-efficacy among people in prison (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). However, the introduction of digital technologies in prisons remains uneven in different countries. For example, in some European prison systems, such as those in Finland, Belgium, and Norway, digital technologies have been introduced as part of initiatives to promote rehabilitation and reintegration (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021).

The ideas of rehabilitation and reintegration have influenced European prison policy and national reforms, including the 2021 Lithuanian prison reform concept. At the same time, another strand of thought—critical prison studies—provides additional tenets of prison reform besides humanisation. Within the principles of responsibilisation, self-regulation and soft power reshape control without reducing it (Crewe, 2015),

transforming prisons into disciplinary sites of surveillance, observation and supervision. Thus, the humanistic approach provides the normative basis for contemporary prison reforms in Europe and Lithuania. At the same time, critical prison studies allow us to understand how these changes are implemented in practice.

Digital inclusion in prisons ensures access to public institutions and their digital services, thereby realising digital e-government and digital citizenship. These services include education and online learning, job searches and interactions with employers, and rehabilitation programs (e.g., digital therapies and digital peer support groups for treating mental disorders and substance abuse). Other important interactions include communication with families, leisure activities and opportunities for self-development (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). Beyens and Geerts (2026) found that digitalisation in the form of "smart" prisons and digital platforms improves prison management and increases the autonomy of incarcerated people by introducing two-way communication between staff and the people in prison, as well as access to prison services (libraries, canteens, television, games, and learning through Moodle), giving incarcerated people the opportunity to engage in self-management of their own day-to-day lives. Digital social work in prisons has become an important area of professional intervention, as digitalisation improves access to resources and services and promotes communication within collaborative networks (Juvonen et al., 2026).

2.1.1. Digital Advocacy as a New Role of Social Workers in Prisons

The transition of the prison system toward rehabilitation and reintegration underscores the important role of social workers, who provide services related to education, employment, healthcare, psychological and emotional support, helping people in prison prepare for their release and maintain relationships with their families, employers, and the wider community (Juvonen et al., 2026; Norvell, 2025; Planka et al., 2024; Stárek & Víšek, 2022). Among the numerous services provided by social workers to individuals before their release is addressing problems that hinder social reintegration, such as unemployment, debt, substance abuse, inadequate housing, etc. Solving these problems requires mediation and cooperation with other institutions, such as municipalities, employment agencies, and rehabilitation centres. However, social workers face challenges in providing successful social integration services due to the stigma surrounding people in prison and the discrimination from employers and the public (Maziliauskienė, 2025; Replevičiūtė, 2025). While the prison system is undergoing the process of digitalisation, the role of social workers includes supporting people in prison in accessing digital services and fostering digital skills (Juvonen et al., 2026).

Digitalisation of the prison system intersects with digital advocacy. Advocacy seeks to support disadvantaged groups in expressing their interests, influencing policies and politics, and promoting social or political change and collective action (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2017). In the context of digitalisation, new opportunities for political influence emerge through action on the internet and social media (Johansson & Scaramuzzino, 2019), advocacy 2.0 (Obar et al., 2012) and web-supported activism (Neumayer & Svensson, 2016). In prisons, digital advocacy would involve helping the people in the prison to access and use services (education, healthcare, employment, etc.) and communicate with external institutions and communities. In the process of promoting digital participation and diminishing public stigma, social workers become mediators and advocacy agents. The introduction of digital technologies in prisons challenges the traditional approach that incarceration involves the disconnection between prison and society, and the deprivation of freedom, including that of communication. "The interactivity and 'freedom' offered by the internet," say Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016), "conflicts with commonplace ideas about incarceration being a time of isolation, solitude and penitence, as well as retribution, material hardship and suffering" (p. 537).

Digital inclusion implies a cultural shift toward care (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021). It is important to consider the role of technology in prison, how open they are to the outside world, and the extent to which people in prison are isolated and disconnected from it (Beyens & Geerts, 2026; Crewe, 2015). The depth of imprisonment determines how the prison system allows contact with the outside world through visits and phone calls, and access to media, technology, and information (Crewe, 2015). Within the humanistic approach to prison reform, digital technologies can provide new services for people in prison—they can order food, medication, as well as books through digital kiosks. In this way, prisons can contribute to enhancing self-regulation and empowerment of incarcerated people. However, introducing digital technologies in prison can create challenges by reducing face-to-face interactions between staff and people in prison, thus raising concerns about privacy and surveillance.

2.1.2. The Challenges of Digital Inclusion for Incarcerated People

As some authors have noted, digital transformation is often hindered by organizational cultures and existing institutional practices. It may also be limited by prison infrastructure and architectural design, which may not permit the installation of internet cables, computer networks, and other electronic devices (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). Järveläinen and Rantanen (2021) argue that, in Finland, limited access to computers and the internet, poor digital skills, and the absence of online banking IDs present challenges and create barriers to digital inclusion when accessing public services. Simultaneously, digital arrangements in prison settings and the introduction of technologies could be seen as a Foucauldian "panopticon": new means for control, monitoring, and surveillance that allow prison staff to trace the activities of incarcerated people (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2023). The staff may also become subject to monitoring.

ICT access can be used as a "soft power" by granting rewards and applying punishment (Knight, 2017). When discussing the role of digital technologies in prisons, Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) highlight that prison officer gatekeepers use the access of incarcerated people to ICT as a form of "soft" power, employing a "carrot-and-stick" approach to control by granting or limiting access to certain technologies (e.g., in-cell television). Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) stress that incarcerated people who lack digital skills and the self-efficacy to navigate digital systems experience digital inequalities and exclusion. Denying incarcerated people access to online media leads to their social isolation, turning them into "the most impoverished groups in the digital age" (p. 534). Different types of prisons demonstrate different approaches to the use of digital technologies. In more restrictive prison regimes, access to technologies is more controlled. In contrast, open-type prisons, which provide facilities for education, recreation and rehabilitation services, often provide greater access to digital technologies. "The use of digital media has thus led to a redefinition of the nature of "imprisonment" and the prison classification system" (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016, p. 541). It is important to consider the role of technology in prisons in relation to how open they are to the outside world and the extent to which incarcerated people are isolated and disconnected from it.

2.2. Digital Inclusion in the Context of the Lithuanian Prison Reform

2.2.1. Prison Reform: Introducing Rehabilitation and Reintegration Approaches

Prison reform in Lithuania has included a transition from a high-security punitive system inherited from the Soviet period to a rehabilitation- and reintegration-oriented approach, by implementing European standards.

The reform is based on the principles of dynamic security and greater attention to the individual needs of people in prison. As the Lithuanian reform aims to reduce the prison population, rehabilitation of people in prison is promoted by implementing the Social Skills Development Programme (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016). As part of this reform, the open prison system is strengthened, including halfway houses, which could contribute to the process of reintegration. As presented in the 2024 SPACE I report (Aebi & Cocco, 2025), Lithuania is among the countries in the EU with the highest imprisonment rate—152.6 incarcerated people per 100,000 inhabitants or more than 1.5 times higher than the European median of 97.0 (p. 37). Ongoing Lithuanian penal system reform (Kalėjimų departamentas, 2021) seeks to address historically inherited pervasive issues from the Soviet era (Vaičiūnienė & Tereškinas, 2017). Reforms in post-Soviet countries are steps towards diminishing the power of criminal subcultures, reducing violence among incarcerated people, and increasing the chances for resocialization (Pallot & Zeveleva, 2023). The CPT report (Council of Europe, 2024) underlines inadequate infrastructure, unsafe and undignified living conditions, outdated and costly security systems, and non-digitalised management processes. The concept of Lithuanian prison reform (Kalėjimų departamentas, 2021) highlights the importance of the re-socialisation of people in prison and involves the introduction and enhancement of social work services, psychological counselling, employment opportunities, medical treatment, and other measures. To achieve these goals, investment has been planned in training, professional development, and motivation of prison employees, as well as in promoting cooperation with external organizations—non-governmental organizations and volunteers.

Social workers help to integrate people in prison upon release by preparing personal documents, providing psychosocial support, assisting with housing, and helping to reestablish contact with family members. The Lithuanian prison reform concept seeks to strengthen the social skills of people in prison by fostering communication and contact with relatives by, for example, facilitating phone calls and reducing restrictions on visits with children and families. Since 2014, Lithuania has been implementing the dynamic security model, adopted from Norway. This model emphasises that security is based not only on physical and technical measures, but also on positive interaction and relationships built on trust and mutual respect between correctional facility staff and people in prison.

2.2.2. Digitalisation in Different Prison Regimes

The 2021 Prison Reform Implementation Plan (Kalėjimų departamentas, 2021) encourages the wider use of information technology in the reintegration process, including the planned provision of computerised remote workstations for people in prison and staff. Need-centred analysis for remote services (psychological, social, and legal support) for people in prison is planned, and recommendations for expansion have been made. Electronic case files are to be introduced for working with people in prison individually, including an individual social rehabilitation plan and logbooks. The digitalisation of management and administration processes has been promoted. However, this does not necessarily have a positive impact on incarcerated people since it does not always enhance their digital skills or improve their access to public services (education, employment, etc.) and their digital participation in society.

Another important pillar of prison reform (Kalėjimų departamentas, 2021) has been the strengthening and expansion of the open prison model with low-security incarceration regimes. These forms include “closed,” “semi-open,” and “open” prisons as well as “halfway houses.” Different forms represent a system in which people in prison can gradually gain more freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and self-governance by

transitioning from a stricter to a more lenient regime. The system moves from the overt forms of coercion and control found in semi-open prisons to the more subtle forms of "soft power" found in open prisons, like applying incentives and rewards. In closed and semi-open prisons, people in prison are not allowed to use phones or the internet freely. Access to technologies (phones and the internet) depends on the category of incarceration, ranging from limited phone calls and internet access to unrestricted phone calls and more lenient internet use. In closed prisons, the number of phone calls permitted per week is limited. Online meetings with family, however, are permitted. Access to the internet is limited for people in prison, who can only access websites of specific institutions via a "limited access internet," including educational establishments and public service agencies. This list of approved websites is centrally managed.

In Lithuania, open-type correctional facilities are divided into open prisons and halfway houses. In open prisons, freedom is realised through giving incarcerated people more trust and increasing their opportunities to move around, communicate with the outside world (including relatives and family), access social services, and use digital tools (phones, internet). Work and studies are considered not only a privilege, but a requirement, since they are seen as a prerequisite for effective rehabilitation and reintegration. In open prisons, incarcerated people are permitted to use phones and access the internet.

2.2.3. Halfway Houses and Digital Participation

In Lithuania, halfway houses have been promoted as a distinct and most liberal form of open prison, where incarcerated people are intensively prepared for conditional release and probation supervision. Since 2016, eight such establishments have been opened, and plans are in place to further expand the system, enabling people in prison to serve out the remainder of their sentences there (Gerybaitė, 2025). The expansion of halfway houses is also taking place in cooperation with the Nordic countries—a project funded by the Kingdom of Norway is being implemented by the Lithuanian Prison Service. Residents of a halfway house spend most of their time in the local community, going to work or school, and participating in social programmes, including volunteering, which is promoted by the prison reform concept. People serving prison sentences in halfway houses are only required to return to the facility in the evenings. They can also use a phone, access the internet, have free access to money, possess valuable items, and communicate freely. Their freedom of movement is not greatly restricted: Residents of halfway houses have the right to leave the prison grounds without an escort to attend work, education, medical treatment, or for social integration purposes. Halfway houses are typically located within a community and provide community-based care. The main staff working with residents of halfway houses are social workers.

At the same time, it could be noted that the prison system in Lithuania is becoming more open not only in the physical sense, with people in prison having more opportunities to go outside, but also in a social sense, with greater exposure to society (transparency, openness, public opinion, and the media; see Maziliauskienė, 2025). Involvement of communities, strengthening trust between communities and prison institutions, and transparent communication about processes in the prison are part of the open prison concept. However, despite new developments, both the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and the Ombudsman of the Republic of Lithuania report that the reform of the prison system has not yet been implemented to the required level and is not progressing quickly enough, as some fundamental issues prevail. There are still many issues—a lack of adequate and qualified staff (unattractive working conditions, lack of necessary training, poor motivation), limited opportunities for people in prison to obtain an education, and the

insufficient employment of incarcerated people compared to other EU countries. As Maziliauskienė (2025) notes, in practice, there are still situations where correctional facilities do not provide adequate conditions for distance learning at institutions of higher education. Higher education in prisons remains the exception, with the main focus on general and vocational education. The Lithuanian Prison Service has expressed an intention to expand "limited access internet" in an attempt to address the issue of people in prison enrolling in online education programmes (Lietuvos kalėjimų tarnyba, 2025). Negative public attitudes toward people in prison hinder prison reform. As Maziliauskienė (2025) observes, negative, discriminatory, and stigmatising attitudes toward people in prison, as well as fear and mistrust of formerly incarcerated people, still prevail in Lithuania, impeding the reintegration of incarcerated people into society. The media plays a significant role in perpetuating negative images of people in prison (Maziliauskienė, 2025). In this context, digital advocacy is extremely important. Mediators, such as social workers, play a key role in negotiating interests between transforming prisons, local communities, and the wider society. Their role in the social integration of people in prison would include facilitating communication and digital forms of representation and interaction, and providing assistance in challenging public attitudes.

3. Methods

To examine how social workers navigate the ongoing shift in the Lithuanian penitentiary sector, we conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with 15 social workers (13 females and two males), with five participants in each group. The purposive sampling strategy was applied, inviting practitioners working in different prison regimes, such as semi-open and open prisons, as well as halfway houses. Group sizes were determined by the number of employees available at the establishments during the research period. Participation was voluntary, and those social workers who expressed a willingness to take part provided written consent. The focus groups were conducted in Lithuanian. Quotes selected for the article text were translated into English, seeking to preserve the initial meaning.

We adopted a case vignette methodological approach (Martin et al., 2025; Törrönen, 2018). Case vignettes present realistic and plausible stories which are "discursive constructions that evoke and materialise the phenomenon under study, placing it in concrete contexts and enabling the researcher to explore participants' views, feelings, experiences, interpretative resources, norms and voices that relate to or arise from the situations" (Törrönen, 2018, p. 277). In our research, we presented a case vignette depicting a social worker employed in an open prison facing resistance from the local community regarding the presence of incarcerated people in the area. The vignette describes the dilemma: Should the social worker advise people in prison to spend time and go shopping in other areas to avoid tensions in the community, or should the social worker engage in dialogue with the local residents by organising events and public discussions, and encouraging people in prison to participate in local activities and volunteering? The case was accompanied by questions for research participants about their emotions, ethical principles, and the roles and responsibilities of social workers. Despite the limitations of using case vignettes to investigate actual behaviour, as they may elicit socially desirable responses, case vignettes were employed as an elicitation tool in focus groups, moving from initial discussions on the case to sharing professional experiences, emotions, and reflections in other contexts. The themes of digital inclusion and advocacy emerged during the interviews when the research participants discussed the roles of social workers, rehabilitation practices, and relationships in the community. We used MAXQDA and applied thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial coding framework was developed by drawing on the theoretical concepts: structural

change from (digital) deprivation to (digital) inclusion, and a changing approach to agency, from (digital) punishment to (digital) advocacy. During coding, through an iterative, reflexive process, new codes and themes emerged, and the coding framework was redefined using an inductive approach. To enhance the credibility of the empirical analysis, the authors discussed the initial codes and themes discerned by the author responsible for coding. The themes were then collaboratively revised, drawing on the authors' expertise in qualitative methods, theoretical analysis and practical work in the prison system.

4. Results

First, by approaching our data through the lens of a punitive, high-security penal system versus a rehabilitation- and reintegration-oriented system, we were able to inductively spot the main systemic and agency-related tensions mounting when implementing the transformative change in the Lithuanian prisons: punishment vs. rehabilitation; prohibition vs. self-responsibility; isolation vs. socialization; rejection vs. human connection and care (see Figure 1). We further present our data based on the different regimes in the Lithuanian system—semi-open, open, halfway house—questioning the inclusion of people in prison and the state of digital empowerment: (digital) exclusion vs. inclusion; (digital) punishment vs. advocacy.

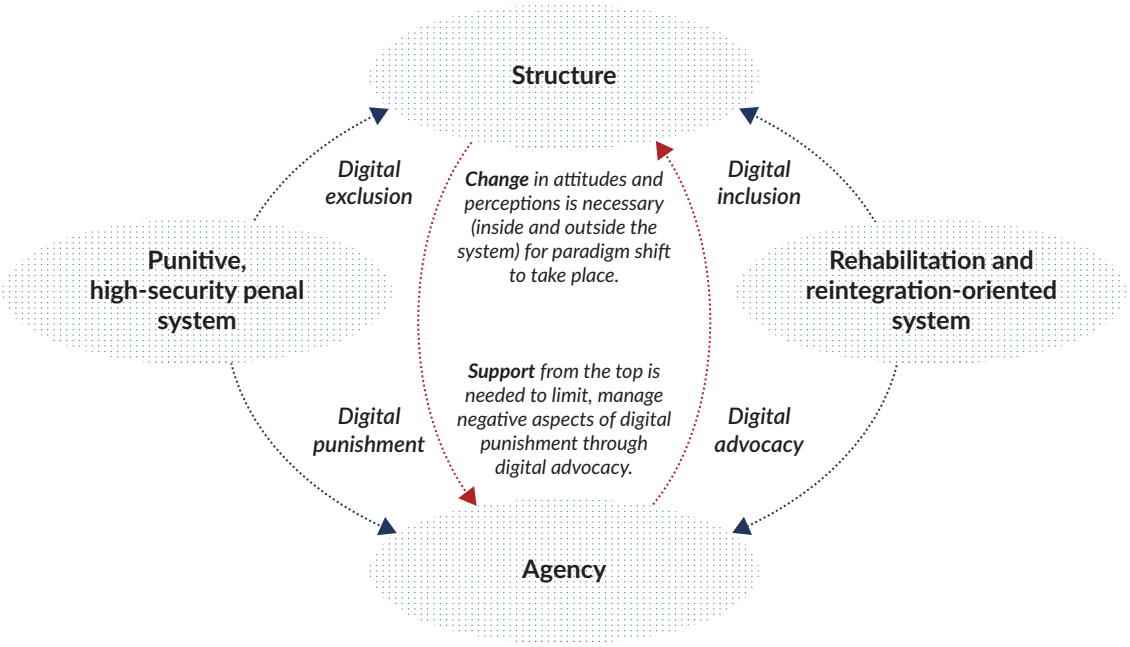


Figure 1. Digitalization in penitentiary sector: perceptional change and systemic support.

Second, to analyse how (and if) the digital transformations are unfolding in systemic structures, we question the prisons' digital strategies, which basically determine the level of access to technologies people in prison (or, in some cases, prison workers) have: digital exclusion vs. digital inclusion. Based on the testimonies of our research participants, we question the actual (a) access to public digital services by, for example, providing citizens technological gateways and platforms to access institutions, education and online learning, rehabilitation programs, or for job searching purposes or entertainment; as well as (b) digital literacy and education opportunities, achieved by supporting the self-management of people in prison and promoting their responsibilities. Third, to address the necessary shift in agency, we track the possibilities of digital advocacy to challenge digital punishment culture.

In the Lithuanian prison system, rehabilitation is the overarching aim in all prison regimes and forms (semi-open; open; halfway houses). At the same time, opportunities for reintegration are provided differently in various prison regimes, expanding more within open prison regimes by promoting communication with the outside world. Accordingly, digital inclusion levels vary across different imprisonment regimes, ranging from digital deprivation and limited participation in the semi-open regime to greater digital participation in the open regime and digital empowerment in halfway houses as the least restrictive form of imprisonment (Figure 2).

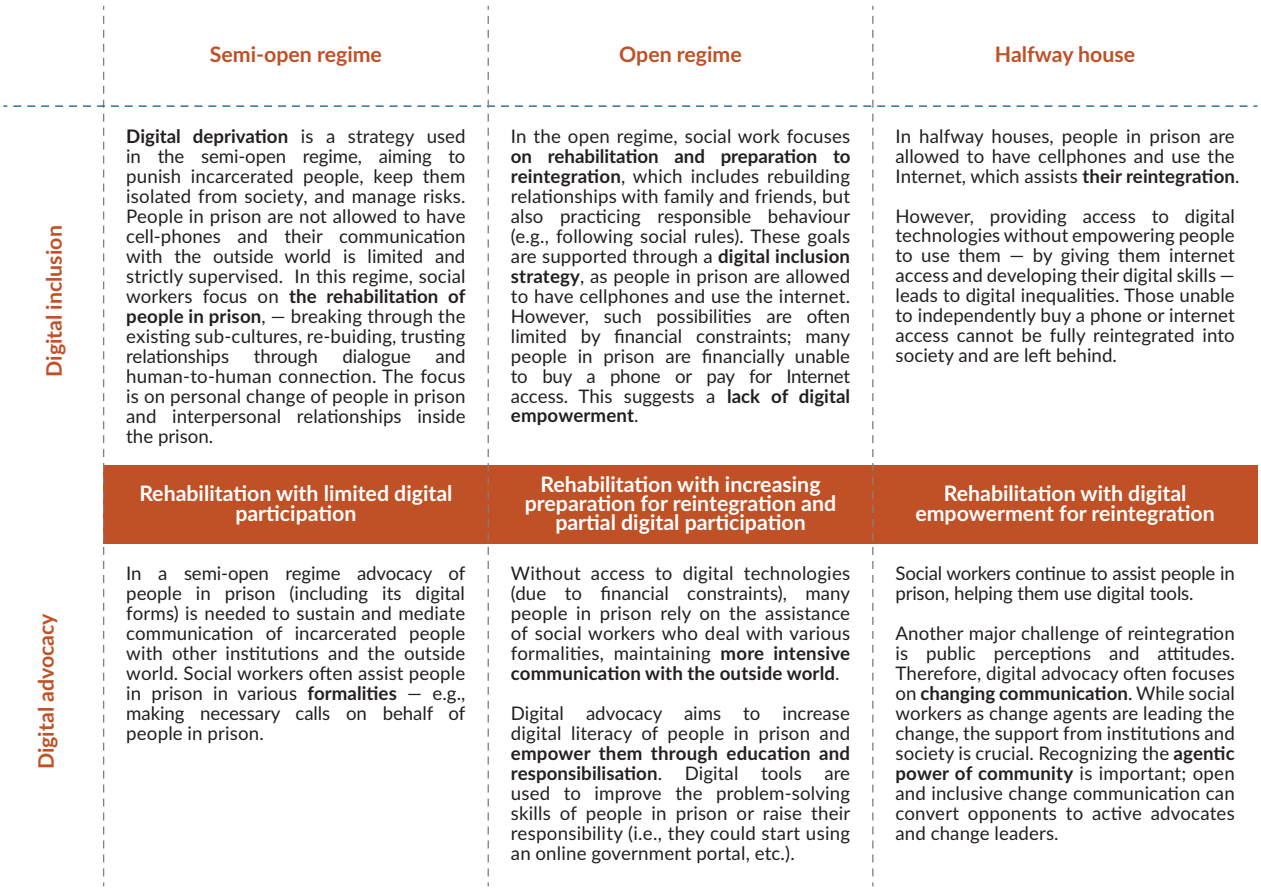


Figure 2. The logic of the three-stage system of the Lithuanian penitentiary sector: social workers' perspective.

4.1. Semi-Open Regime: Digital Deprivation

Prison social workers function as case managers, counsellors, and mediators between people in prison and society, focusing on behavioural change and practical needs. A goal of facilitating rehabilitation comes with at least two major challenging objectives: Social workers, being relatively new actors in the system (this position was introduced in 2021), must establish their authority and, at the same time, bring change. One of the first challenges social workers face in a semi-open regime is confronting existing prison sub-cultures and their informal hierarchies, with the division of incarcerated people into "castes," which is still evident both in relationships among people in prison and in the ways prison officers treat them. "Unwritten rules" shaping relationships inside penitentiary institutions often interfere with the core ideas of a prison oriented toward rehabilitation. But respondents also witness change brought by new generations of prison workers as well as people in prison and supported through more humane and inclusive approaches to incarceration.

Respondents share their experiences and explain how relationships and general culture inside the institution can be changed through social events and initiatives:

> They [incarcerated people of "higher castes"] have "unwritten" rules that certain inmates [from "lower castes"] can't sit at the same table as them….But if we have a family event—these rules are forgotten, and they eat cake together; they sit at the same table. It shows that they can share. (FGD 3, position of the quote in the MAXQDA transcript [Pos.] 110)

Family events are beneficial for many reasons—they (re)shape relationships inside the prison, change how the prison is seen by close family members, and increase the motivation of incarcerated people for change:

> Family events are especially popular. Inmates are waiting for them; they try hard for their families to organize a nice event. (FGD 3, Pos. 100–101)

> Even the toughest ones seem like different people when they meet their families, loved ones, their kids. They leave their masks aside and turn into different people—understanding, loving. (FGD 3, Pos. 103)

In a semi-open regime, communication of incarcerated people with the outside world is strictly limited. Phone calls via landline are supervised and ownership of personal mobile phones is not allowed—according to the official data of the Lithuanian Prison Service, 2367 mobile phones were confiscated from incarcerated people in 2025. Modems and other technological devices are also subject to confiscation. Such a strategy serves as a punishment and as a prevention to reduce risks to society, like possible phone scams from prisons. On the other hand, our research participants emphasize that it very much disempowers people in prison and limits their right to advocate for themselves. For instance, when paying their debts, incarcerated people often must communicate with responsible enforcement officers, but calling institutions from paid landline phones often ends in no answer. Social workers often assist people in prison to connect by calling from their work phones:

> Usually, officers [external bailiff clerks working on handling debts of incarcerated people] are very respectful and open to communication if we [social workers] call…sometimes it's hard to believe that they could ignore prisoners' phone calls…our mediation often helps. (FGD 3, Pos. 30)

Besides digital exclusion, the semi-open regime has other restrictions. Social workers often struggle to balance the punishment and rehabilitation approaches, while also establishing their authority and gaining trust from both prison staff and people in prison. On one hand, the organizational culture is still largely defined by hierarchical divides and the power of "uniforms." New approaches and innovative solutions related to humanization and rehabilitation are often met with scepticism and resistance. On the other hand, people in prison often do not understand and are uncertain about the new role of social workers—what are they aiming for? What is the point of talking to them? Do they have authority? But despite all these challenges, research participants witness change. The system is opening up to social workers and is starting to embrace and value their presence:

> The way they [prison staff] communicate with us today is proof of change. I believe social workers are becoming an irreplaceable part of the system: There is no way today's system could function without them. (FGD 3, Pos. 26–27)

While the success of shifting paradigms greatly depends on social workers, they often struggle with huge workloads, lack of human resources, and burnout. Our respondents testify that one social worker sometimes has 200 or even 400 clients—such numbers make humane and meaningful communication impossible:

> We as social workers dream of working with fewer individuals and providing high-quality, targeted assistance….I used to work previously at [a semi-open prison], where a single social worker was responsible for four hundred people. Four hundred inmates. (FGD 3, Pos. 74)

Social workers often act as mediators (between people in prison and the outside); they advocate and keep incarcerated people's voices heard (including online). The authority of social workers comes not only from their knowledge, but through humanistic and inclusive practices:

> We are helpers and enablers. We do not judge or punish; we do not wag fingers, like contact officers do. We are someone they [incarcerated people] trust, they come to us with their problems, they come to us to talk, share their stories, rejoice, and grieve. We have already established that connection. (FGD 3, Pos. 12)

As change agents, who keep the system shifting from punishment towards rehabilitation, social workers ground their authority in trusting relationships.

4.2. Open Regime: Digital Participation

Open regime prisons in Lithuania represent a more advanced level of rehabilitation. At this stage, social work focuses on reintegration, which includes not only rebuilding relationships with family and friends, but also the responsible behaviour of people in prison and preparing them for independent life after release. The problematic issues related to lack of responsibility or motivation are rather successfully targeted by the changing system—good behaviour is rewarded, and it motivates: People in prison get extra hours of freedom if they participate in certain activities, or they can be transferred to an open regime or a halfway house when/if conditions are met:

> All of them want to be free. Those long-term prisoners also want to be transferred to a halfway house to continue serving their sentences. They want to work, they want to live, they want to start a family, they want to enjoy what we have—freedom….There are really a lot of things in the changing system that encourage a convict to strive for change, motivate them to give up committing those crimes. (FGD 3, Pos. 59–61)

The bigger question, however, is often about readiness to adapt to society and the ability to cope with what is about to come: "They are eager to go back to freedom or be transferred to a halfway house, but they often are not ready to confront the public—which is ready to eat them alive" (FGD 3, Pos. 8). Research participants agree that digital empowerment is an important part of preparation for reintegration in this stage and can contribute to maintaining closer ties with family and friends, learning about changing conditions in the country and world; digital tools could also be used to improve problem-solving, coping skills or raise responsibility of people in prison. But, although incarcerated people in open regimes are allowed to have mobile phones and use the internet, many of them are financially unable to purchase them.

4.3. Halfway Houses: Digital Empowerment

The opening of the first halfway house in 2016 marks an important shift in Lithuania's penitentiary system. Today the country operates nine such institutions in different locations, which brings incarcerated people closer to their local communities, supports their rehabilitation, and prepares them for successful reintegration. In halfway houses, people in prison get individual consultations and other personalized help from social workers and other specialists. They have (or are looking for) jobs, they dress as locals, and their daily routines look very similar to those of anyone living in freedom. Just like in the open regime, they are allowed to have mobile phones and internet access.

While the new system provides incarcerated people with conditions enabling rehabilitation and necessary resources to support their reintegration (e.g., knowledge and authority of social workers), there are many challenges incarcerated people must overcome. Finding a job (which is one of the preconditions to stay in a halfway house) is one of the biggest. Business owners often reject such candidates, even if they have necessary qualifications and experience:

> An inmate under our supervision was a good cook, experienced, and educated. When a new diner opened in the town, our client called them for a job interview….He wanted to show his abilities, so he worked for free for a few days, and he was chosen—they offered him a job. However, the moment they heard about his situation, they cancelled the offer. (FGD 2, Pos. 23)

As demonstrated in this example, although paradigm shift is evident in structural elements through changing laws, rules, routines, and practices, many challenges are related to public perceptions and attitudes towards people in prison. When new strategies aimed at supporting rehabilitation and reintegration are introduced without changes in communication, they may have adverse effects. For instance, electronic tracking devices (ankle monitors), which can be considered a tool for rehabilitation and reintegration, can in fact increase exclusion not only for the incarcerated people but for their families, spouses, and children:

> In summer, when it is hot, and inmates usually do physical work outside, it becomes unbearable to wear jeans or long pants, but they still do, to hide the tracking device and to avoid condemnation from the locals….They feel even worse when spending time outside with family, spouses, or kids, who also get certain "treatment" from the public: It's trauma for the whole family. (FGD 2, Pos. 17)

Social workers who participated in our research argue that inclusive practices (e.g., bringing people in prison closer to the communities, having them work) must be applied together with building public awareness and changing communication. Research participants emphasize that when people (the broader public) do not know, they feel scared, resist, and fight the change. They cannot understand why incarcerated people are accommodated in their neighbourhoods. For instance, in 2024, when a halfway house was opened in a residential area in Lithuania, it was met with fierce opposition from locals:

> I have worked here [a community-based halfway house in one of the municipalities] since the first day. I witnessed the resistance from the community; it was fierce. It came from all sides—the community, the media….There was a lot of resistance and hostility. (FGD 2, Pos. 32)

Local community resistance, which started before the opening of this halfway house in 2024, later grew into regular protests and demonstrations. Local families were especially concerned about the halfway house's proximity to the kindergarten; they articulated fears over the safety of their children and (possibly) increasing crime rates. People were also frustrated about the lack of transparency and required to be included in decision-making processes. These tensions were greatly amplified through sustained media coverage emphasizing the conflict and legitimized by political leaders, criticizing responsible authorities for failing to address and include local voices. This is an example of the "Not in My Backyard" backlash in Lithuania, illustrating how important it is to communicate the change and prepare the public before the actual change is brought:

> In reality, sometimes we need to fear the local community, not the convicts. Residents [of the community] would climb over the fences, throw eggs at inmates, and call them [offensive] names. I think the community wanted answers and dialogue, but there was no communication from responsible institutions; their strategy was avoidance. And because of that, there was a big outburst of resistance and fear. (FGD 3, Pos. 4)

Despite sincere attempts and efforts to change and reintegrate, people in prison often experience contempt and rejection from locals, who refuse their help. Such perceptions and attitudes are often amplified through digital media and sometimes grow into digital punishment, directed at both the incarcerated people and their advocates (social workers). For instance, local community members opposing the opening of the halfway house were actively communicating on Facebook, where they shared news and attitudes. Later, social workers learned from community members that some of the messages sounded like this:

> Be careful, they [people in prison] are coming, they are bringing their stuff. Whatever it is, we don't need anything from these prisoners! (Prison Focus Group 2 Transcript, Pos. 18)

> Many people do not understand why we are advocating for them [incarcerated people]. Often it feels like we are the criminals ourselves, it's like we must share the punishment. (FGD No. 2, Pos. 76)

Advocating for people in prison and their rights is also a risky choice for political actors, sometimes leading to political suicide.

> I discussed with a representative of the Seimas [Lithuanian Parliament] about supporting convicts and improving their living conditions. But this is not a popular topic; it is a dangerous topic. Voters do not support it. Voters do not need it. And if a candidate articulates such ideas in public, they risk their political career. (FGD No. 3, Pos. 67)

Time, care, and proactive communication are crucial to mitigate public resistance and prepare local communities for the change. Transparency, openness, and honesty are the best strategies to counter public fear, stigma, and stereotypes. Social workers in halfway houses see this as one of the goals of the system:

> People have lots of questions: Why did they open this prison in their small town? Why does this prison have no fences or bars? Why do inmates walk freely?...More time and communication are needed for people to understand how everything is happening and what the system is aiming for. (FGD 2, Pos. 30)

Respondents also share that real-life engagement-based initiatives like family and community events, volunteering at animal shelters, nursing homes, and helping locals in their everyday lives are also very important, as they show people in prison in different, more humanistic ways—"they are just people, like us" (FGD 2, Pos. 100). Informing society and treating citizens as partners is important, not only for the success of reintegration but it also might help find new advocates and active agents to assist through the reintegration processes, e.g., business owners sharing their positive experiences, communities providing support and openness for a dialogue:

> There are local communities, who could find ways to support someone through their reintegration process. (FGD 3, Pos. 11)

> I can see changing views….When I talk to business owners, they even say that inmates work much better than others and they ask me to send them more such workers. (FGD 1, Pos. 29)

Participants agree that digital tools, like social media, can assist in changing public perceptions, but it often means the risk of being misunderstood, rejected, or even attacked online. Research participants emphasize that changing communication should not be left to social workers alone; instead, it needs to be integrated into systemic change and implemented through systemic means—social media campaigns, institutional communication—and implemented by responsible institutions (e.g., Lithuanian Prison Service).

The research findings show that the three prison regimes represent different levels of digital inclusion (see Figure 2 above). Digital deprivation in semi-open prisons takes the form of limited access to technologies during the rehabilitation process. In open-type prisons, digital participation is encouraged, seeking to promote greater reintegration, and, in halfway houses, digital empowerment represents the greatest level of digital inclusion, although some constraints remain due to a lack of digital skills and resources.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The multilevel regime system introduced in the Lithuanian penitentiary sector as part of prison reform supports a shift from a punitive to a rehabilitation-oriented model of imprisonment. At the same time, less restrictive regimes promote greater opportunities for the reintegration of incarcerated individuals. In the semi-open regime, rehabilitation takes place under restrictive conditions. Contact with the outside world is limited, and digital deprivation is used as a punishment and a way to minimise possible risks to society. However, at a certain point of incarceration (after serving a significant part of the sentence and approaching the release date, or demonstrating good behaviour), people in prison within this regime are transferred to a more lenient open prison. Meanwhile, in an open regime, incarcerated people have access to the internet and are allowed to have mobile phones (as part of a digital inclusion strategy). However, due to a lack of digital skills or financial resources, they depend heavily on assistance and support from social workers, which complicates and slows down their preparation for reintegration. Halfway houses offer a lenient mode of incarceration and provide the greatest opportunity for digital inclusion, with access to mobile phones and the internet. However, digital empowerment can be limited as many people in prison lack the necessary skills and/or access to digital technology. Apparently, without a proper digital inclusion strategy and design, reintegration can remain challenging.

The testimonies of our study participants indicate three main outcomes. Firstly, change cannot be successful if implemented only on a structural level. A lack of change in communication and public awareness building leads to public resistance, which undermines the success of systemic change. Secondly, social workers as change agents cannot be expected to take responsibility for everything (change management, change communication, etc.) while establishing their own authority, dealing with a huge workload, and struggling with burnout. Institutional support mechanisms and political will for change are crucial. Thirdly, digital communication technologies are an essential part of rehabilitation and (re)integration, but proper digital strategies are necessary to ensure digital inclusion and empowerment of people in prison (through digital education or access), and to manage public perception and awareness (reducing digital punishment through digital advocacy). Furthermore, different institutional regimes require adjusted digital strategies and technology design.

The research demonstrates how contested the Lithuanian penal system reform is, with particular national and institutional features shaping the specific hybrid forms referred to by Pallot and Zeveleva (2023). This hybridity encompasses the emerging practices of the European model with the aims of rehabilitation and open prisons, as well as the legacy of the Soviet-era penal regime (Vaičiūnienė & Tereškinas, 2017). The legacy includes, besides other things, a lack of respect for the dignity of people in prison by staff, and stigmatization by the wider public. The study shows the slow pace of digitalisation and digital inclusion in the prison design. Some elements of digitalisation occur in an attempt to digitise administrative work and case management. However, people in prison have limited or no access to technologies and digital services (education, healthcare, social services, and employment). These findings reveal the pattern of digital exclusion described by Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) and Järveläinen and Rantanen (2021). The three-level regime system (semi-open, open, and halfway houses) reflects a gradual transition from isolation to social integration. In the Lithuanian case, this incorporates the process of moving from digital exclusion to limited forms of digital participation; however, it does not reach the level of digital inclusion. The study unveiled challenges arising from the profound stigma faced by people in prison, as well as strong negative attitudes toward incarcerated people. Interviews with prison social workers illuminated contradictions in the digitalization process related to stigma. As highlighted earlier, the social dimension of prison openness involves transparency, accountability, and the communication processes through which prisons open up to the public, informing society and, at the same time, urging them to engage in the rehabilitation and reintegration process of incarcerated people.

The research revealed that current prison reform is constrained by conflicts and resistance from local communities. Besides long-standing historical and cultural factors, this is the result of insufficient communication efforts by prison institutions to change public attitudes. The potential of active communication strategies, including digital advocacy, cooperation with media and journalists, and active negotiations with local communities, has not been realised. The research findings reveal the ambivalent role of digital technologies and practices in prison. Electronic tagging tools, such as ankle monitoring devices, created to facilitate more lenient forms of incarceration, expose people in prison to social stigma. This suggests that the use of technologies cannot be separated from the principles of digital inclusion and advocacy. The role of digital advocacy is important yet underestimated by prison authorities, the media, journalists, and social advocacy groups. Public prejudices, hostility, and resistance among local communities against the establishment of halfway houses in their neighbourhoods show the need for advocacy and communication around the reintegration of people in prison. This could be actively promoted by institutions (prison administration, NGOs, policymakers). While social workers are willing to facilitate communication

among prisons, institutions, local communities, and wider society, it is clear that digital advocacy cannot be achieved without institutional support and the commitment of the justice system, nor without more inclusive stakeholder engagement as part of a whole-of-society approach. The limitations of this study, which is based on the analysis of social workers' perspectives and delves into the specific context of prison reform in Lithuania, can be addressed by conducting further studies that incorporate the self-advocacy strategies of incarcerated people. These studies could also consider social rehabilitation, reintegration, and digital transformation from the perspectives of people in prison. Furthermore, research could be conducted on the potential contributions of other social actors, groups and institutions, and comparative research could be conducted across different contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data from this research are not publicly available due to the confidential and sensitive nature of the research.

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