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EDITORIAL

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Beyond Access: Digital Inclusion, Participation, and Social Continuity Under Conditions of Punishment

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Abstract

Digital technologies increasingly mediate access to communication, education, employment, healthcare, welfare, and civic participation. For people during and after incarceration, digital inclusion has therefore become a central condition of social inclusion and social continuity. This editorial introduces our thematic issue, which examines the relationships between digital inclusion, punishment, and reintegration across diverse correctional and community settings in the United States, China, Sweden, Finland, Austria, Denmark, Italy, Lithuania, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom. The contributions demonstrate that digital inclusion is not merely a question of access, skills, or connectivity, but is fundamentally shaped by broader inequalities, institutional arrangements, and carceral logics. Collectively, the articles reveal how digital technologies can facilitate connection, learning, recovery, and participation while simultaneously reproducing exclusion, extending surveillance, and reinforcing control. They illuminate the emergence of a "punitive mesh" (Corda, 2026) that stretches across prison and community settings, as well as the "faceless harms" (Wood, 2026) produced through increasingly digital, automated, and bureaucratic forms of governance. We argue that digital inclusion should be understood as a contested process through which citizenship, belonging, and social continuity are negotiated within and beyond the carceral structures.

Keywords

digital inclusion; digital rehabilitation; faceless harms; participation; prisons; punitive mesh; reintegration; social continuity

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1. Digital Inclusion, Citizenship, and Social Continuity

Across the collection, digital inclusion emerges not simply as a matter of technological access, but as a mechanism through which individuals maintain continuity between life inside and outside correctional settings. Digital participation increasingly underpins access to family relationships, education, employment, welfare, healthcare, community support, and civic life. As digital technologies become more embedded in societies, exclusion deepens the social ruptures already associated with punishment and incarceration.

Social continuity provides a valuable lens to understand this significance. It refers to maintaining connections, identities, roles, relationships, and opportunities across imprisonment, supervision, and re-entry. From this perspective, digital technologies support continuity of citizenship, family life, education, recovery, and community participation. Where access is absent, restricted, or uneven, digital exclusion contributes to further social *dis*continuity. The challenge for correctional systems is ensuring continuity of connection, opportunity, and belonging in a digital world.

Digital inclusion during and after incarceration extends beyond technical access to fundamental questions of citizenship, participation, power, and belonging. Across diverse jurisdictions, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people encounter digital exclusion within systems of punishment that regulate participation in digital societies. Studies from the United States, China, Sweden, Lithuania, Finland, Austria, Denmark, Italy, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom reveal how digital engagement is shaped by institutional, political, cultural, and social arrangements that determine who can participate and under what conditions.

Collectively, the articles demonstrate that digital technologies are neither inherently inclusive nor exclusionary. Rather, they serve as sites where contemporary forms of punishment, rehabilitation, care, surveillance, governance, and citizenship are negotiated. Across the collection, digital technologies support opportunities for learning, recovery, family connection, community participation, and reintegration. At the same time, they can reproduce existing inequalities through institutional restrictions, surveillance, bureaucratic processes, resource limitations, and differential capacities to engage with digital systems.

The collection brings together research on Black formerly incarcerated people, justice-involved women, incarcerated fathers, Roma communities, people in community-based rehabilitation, and prison residents accessing digital health interventions and also higher education. Broadening the field beyond dominant Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic perspectives, it shows how digital participation is shaped by diverse welfare traditions, penal philosophies, governance arrangements, and lived experiences.

This thematic issue highlights how digital inclusion intersects with rights, health equity, dignity, participation, and social continuity within the “punitive mesh” (Corda, 2026), where security, surveillance, administration, and governance extend the reach of penal power. When viewed alongside contemporary discussions of faceless harms (Wood, 2026), these articles reveal how digital inequalities are (re-)produced through diffuse socio-technical systems that complicate traditional notions of accountability.

We use this collection to reflect on current knowledge regarding digital inclusion during and after incarceration across six interconnected themes: (a) digital exclusion as a collateral consequence of punishment and social marginalization; (b) tensions between inclusion and control; (c) social continuity, relationships, and human

connection; (d) staff, organizations, and institutional transformation; (e) health, recovery, and digital equity; and (f) the pluralization of knowledge within digital corrections research.

1.1. Digital Exclusion as a Collateral Consequence of Punishment and Social Marginalization

A central insight from this collection is that digital exclusion is not simply the product of inadequate access or individual skills. It is an enduring consequence of incarceration that intersects with pre-existing inequalities and continues to structure people's lives after release.

In "An Exploratory Quantitative Analysis of Black Formerly Incarcerated People's Digital Literacy," Sanders and Roddy (2026) identify digital literacy as a new "digital collateral consequence" of imprisonment among Black formerly incarcerated people in the United States. Their analysis shows that longer and more extensive incarceration histories are associated with poorer digital literacy outcomes, while age and disability affect specific dimensions of digital capability.

This argument is reinforced in "Navigating Digital Exclusion After Incarceration: The Role of Peer Support in Veteran Reentry." Venegas et al. (2026) show how digital exclusion affects formerly incarcerated veterans' ability to negotiate housing, employment, healthcare, and daily life. Importantly, their analysis identifies structural, temporal, and relational dimensions of digital exclusion, demonstrating that re-entry difficulties cannot be reduced to individual competence. Peer specialists can help veterans navigate these systems, but their support also reveals the complexity of institutional and digital barriers.

Tong et al.'s (2026) study "'We're Experiencing Digital Death': Chinese People Who Used Heroin in Community-Based Rehabilitation" demonstrates how surveillance, algorithmic categorization, institutional distrust, and systemic absence can undermine meaningful participation after incarceration. Kuran's (2026) study "'Not Charity, but a Right': Carceral Citizenship and Digital Reintegration of Roma in Türkiye" extends this critique by locating digital reintegration within the experiences of Roma people in Türkiye, for whom digital exclusion intersects with longer histories of marginalization, unequal citizenship, and institutional discrimination.

Vuilleumier and Khamsy's (2026) study "When the Carceral Web Slips: Digital Moral Labour Among Migrants in Legal Precarity" broadens this discussion by examining how individuals living with legal precarity navigate digital systems that are intended to govern, monitor, and regulate access to rights and services. Their concept of digital moral labour highlights the often-invisible work negotiating uncertainty, institutional scrutiny, and fragmented forms of inclusion. Digital participation is not always empowering; for some groups, it involves continuous efforts to navigate complex bureaucratic and socio-technical systems while managing vulnerability and insecurity.

Together, these studies position digital exclusion as both a collateral consequence of punishment and a mechanism through which wider inequalities are reproduced.

1.2. Between Inclusion and Control

Across this collection, digital technologies are introduced to support rehabilitation, education, communication, and reintegration, yet remain governed through systems organized around security, risk, and control. Digital inclusion is therefore regulated through decisions about who may access technologies, for what purposes, at what point during a sentence, and under whose supervision.

Hofinger and Pflegerl's (2026) study "Challenges and Paradoxes of Digital Rehabilitation in Prison: Lessons Learned From a Pilot Project in Austria" exposes the organizational paradox of pursuing digital rehabilitation within institutions structured around containment and security. "Digital Inclusion in Finnish Smart Prison: A Qualitative Analysis of Incarcerated Women's Experiences," by Järveläinen and Rantanen (2026), similarly shows that in-cell digital provision can improve access and interaction, while institutional restrictions and staff gatekeeping continue to define the boundaries of participation. In "Locked In, Logged Out: Digital Participation of Residents in Danish Carceral Facilities," Chatzipolakis and Boulus-Rødje (2026) highlight how digital access is organized as a gradual, ladder-like process across carceral settings, but it may arrive too late and too abruptly to prepare people meaningfully for life in a digital society.

Virgo's (2026) study "Living in Prison, Studying on Campus: Digital Challenges for Students in a UK Open Prison" adds an important educational example. Students from an open prison move between a restrictive prison information environment and a digitally intensive university campus. Intermittent access, smartphone prohibitions, time pressures, and restrictions on online participation complicate their ability to participate fully as university students. Even where physical access to education is enabled, restrictions sustain exclusion and social stigma.

1.3. Social Continuity, Relationships, and Human Connection

Digital inclusion also matters because it can help sustain continuity between life inside correctional institutions and the relationships, identities, and social roles located beyond them.

Zambon's (2026) Italian study "Between Walls and Screens: Fatherhood, Family Bonds, and Digital Inclusion in Prison" brings the relational significance of digital inclusion into focus. Video calls allow incarcerated fathers to enter family spaces, witness everyday routines, and preserve presence in their children's lives. Yet, connections remain fragile and conditional, shaped by institutional timetables, restricted resources, limited privacy, and the practical circumstances of families outside prison.

Social continuity is also visible in "From Welfare Values to Digital Governance: Developing an Inclusive Digital Strategy in Swedish Corrections" by Nordström and Knight (2026), where the "client path" and continuity across correctional and social systems become central to inclusive digital governance. This approach directs attention towards the full technology journey through custody, release, and social participation.

Venegas et al.'s veterans study adds a valuable relational dimension. Peer specialists do more than teach technical skills. They help formerly incarcerated veterans interpret systems, overcome mistrust, access services, and rebuild confidence. Peer support becomes relational digital infrastructure, connecting individuals to institutions that may otherwise remain difficult to navigate.

In addition, Virgo's study shows how students moving between prison and university must negotiate changing digital identities and information environments. Their educational participation illustrates both the possibilities and the difficulties of maintaining continuity across institutional boundaries.

1.4. Staff, Partnership, and Institutional Transformation

Digital inclusion is mediated by staff, peer specialists, educators, health practitioners, community organizations, and other professionals working across institutional boundaries.

Järveläinen and Rantanen's study positions correctional staff as both gatekeepers and facilitators of digital participation. Technology can reshape staff-resident relationships, but meaningful inclusion still requires human support and motivational interaction. Hofinger and Pflegerl's study similarly demonstrates how staff shortages, organizational culture, limited resources, and resistance can constrain even well-designed digital initiatives.

Venegal et al.'s exploration foregrounds the practical and relational work undertaken by peer specialists. Digital reintegration often depends upon trusted intermediaries who understand both the institutional landscape and the lived realities of re-entry; an important social work and implementation insight.

Seo's (2026) study "University–Community Partnerships for Advancing Digital Inclusion Among Justice-Involved Women in the US," involving justice-involved women, offers a complementary model. It demonstrates how universities, community organizations, peer mentors, and women with lived experience can collaborate to design and sustain relevant digital-skills provision. Like Virgo's education study, university staff and institutional stakeholders support students who must move between incompatible prison and university information environments.

Mažeikienė et al.'s (2026) study "Digital Advocacy Behind Bars: Social Workers' Perspective on Digital Inclusion and Reintegration in Lithuania" further provides insights into the role of social workers as advocates and intermediaries within processes of digital reintegration. Social workers actively support individuals in navigating digital systems, accessing services, and preparing for social participation beyond custody. The findings reinforce a broader theme running throughout this collection: digital inclusion is not delivered through technologies alone but through the relational and professional practices that enable people to engage with them.

1.5. Education, Health, Recovery, and Equitable Outcomes

"Digital Substance Use Therapy: Predicting Engagement and Outcomes to Enhance Health Equity in Prisons" by Elison-Davies et al. (2026) asks not only whether an intervention works, but for whom, under what delivery conditions, and with what level of practitioner support. Its UK and US comparison shows that people's psychosocial characteristics and mode of delivery shape engagement and outcomes. Equal availability of an intervention does not guarantee equitable benefit.

Virgo's study reaches a related conclusion in education. Being permitted to attend university does not itself create equal participation. Students must manage intermittent connectivity, changing digital identities, limited

time, prohibited technologies, and the sharp contrast between prison and university information environments. Education depends upon sustained digital access and institutional support, not simply permission to enroll or attend.

Venegas et al. highlight that digital exclusion affects access to healthcare as well as housing, employment, and other supports. The emphasis on peer navigation shows how health and social-service access depend on both digital capability and trusted human assistance.

Together, these articles demonstrate that digital equity must be assessed through substantive outcomes rather than formal access. The key question is whether people can derive meaningful educational, health, and rehabilitative benefits from digital provision.

1.6. Pluralizing Knowledge and Decentering Digital Corrections

The collection makes an important contribution through the diversity of its jurisdictions (United States, China, Lithuania, Finland, Austria, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Italy, Denmark, and Türkiye), populations (Black formerly incarcerated people, migrants, Roma communities, justice-involved women, incarcerated fathers, university students living in an open prison, people who have used heroin, formerly incarcerated veterans, and prison residents in digital therapy), settings ([open] prisons, universities, community rehabilitation, community organizations, health programs, welfare infrastructures, and post-release services), and methodologies.

The methodological range is exemplary of the breadth of work these scholars engage in. The issue includes quantitative analysis, qualitative interviews, ethnography, comparative analysis, participatory action research, institutional case studies, and community-engaged research. It pluralizes not only where digital corrections research is undertaken, but also whose experiences count and how knowledge is produced.

This diversity should not be reduced to a claim that digital inclusion varies by country. The significant point is that the meaning of digital inclusion is produced through particular penal traditions, welfare systems, institutional relationships, and research practices. The field must therefore resist universal models derived from a narrow group of jurisdictions or populations—what works in one context may not work in a different one.

Together, these contributions demonstrate how digital participation is negotiated within contemporary structures of punishment while simultaneously creating new opportunities for connection, rehabilitation, dignity, and inclusion.

2. What We Need to Think About Differently

Across jurisdictions, digital technologies create opportunities for rehabilitation, connection, learning, and recovery while introducing new forms of surveillance, classification, regulation, and control. Corda's (2026) concept of the "punitive mesh" illustrates how contemporary punishment extends beyond institutional walls through interconnected networks of supervision and administration, framing digital exclusion as part of a system that shapes opportunities for participation.

This perspective resonates across the collection. In the United States, incarceration histories continue to shape digital literacy and social participation post-release. In China, experiences of "digital death" reveal how algorithmic classification and institutional distrust can undermine digital citizenship. In Austria, Finland, and Denmark, efforts to expand digital access remain embedded within organizational cultures and security frameworks that simultaneously enable and constrain participation. The Turkish study further demonstrates how digital systems may reproduce wider forms of social inequality affecting Roma communities, highlighting the continuing importance of citizenship, rights, and recognition.

Taken together, these studies suggest that digital inclusion is not occurring outside contemporary penal power; it is being constructed within it. Across the collection, a persistent tension emerges between inclusion and control. Technologies introduced to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration also generate new opportunities for monitoring, categorization, and behavioral regulation.

Wood's (2026) concept of "faceless harms" helps further understand these processes. Many of the barriers documented across this issue do not result from a single decision or identifiable actor. Vuilleumier and Khamsy's (2026) discussion of digital moral labour highlights the burdens associated with digital participation are often dispersed across administrative and regulatory frameworks, and digital infrastructures, requiring individuals to undertake significant work simply to maintain access, legitimacy, and participation. Instead, they emerge through the interaction of administrative procedures, algorithmic systems, institutional practices, security arrangements, and digital infrastructures. Individuals may experience exclusion from communication, employment, education, healthcare, rehabilitation, or public services not because of a single sanction, but because multiple systems intersect to constrain participation.

The collection therefore encourages a shift in thinking. Digital inclusion is not simply the opposite of digital exclusion, nor can it be reduced to the provision of technologies. Rather, it is a contested process through which citizenship, participation, relationships, recovery, and social continuity are negotiated within increasingly digital and interconnected systems of punishment and governance. Future scholarship must consider how digital reforms may simultaneously reduce some inequalities whilst reproducing or generating others.

3. What Next? Policy and Practice Implications

The contributions in this thematic issue demonstrate that meaningful inclusion requires attention to digital capability, organizational culture, staff capacity, governance arrangements, and opportunities for participation. The challenge is not simply how to introduce technology, but how to create digitally inclusive environments that support rehabilitation, citizenship, and social continuity.

3.1. Digital Inclusion as Reintegration

Across the collection, digital participation emerges as a prerequisite for accessing employment, education, housing, welfare services, healthcare, and social relationships. Digital inclusion should be recognized not as an optional enhancement, but as a core component of contemporary rehabilitation and resettlement policy.

3.2. Balancing Inclusion and Security

The studies from Austria, Finland, and Denmark highlight the enduring tension between inclusion and security. While concerns about risk and control remain legitimate, correctional systems must critically examine whether restrictive approaches to digital access undermine the rehabilitative goals they are intended to support. The question is not whether digital participation *should* occur, but *how* it can be facilitated safely and meaningfully.

3.3. Staff Matter

Digital transformation is often discussed in relation to incarcerated people, yet the studies demonstrate the central role of staff and partner agencies in shaping digital inclusion. Successful implementation requires investment in workforce development, training, participation, and wellbeing as seen in the Austrian and Swedish contexts. Staff should be viewed as active co-producers of digital inclusion and rehabilitation.

3.4. Co-Production and Participation

The community partnership work with justice-involved women in the USA and Sweden's digital strategy development highlights the value of co-design, lived experience expertise, and collaborative approaches. Policies and services are more likely to be effective when they are developed with justice-involved people, practitioners, and communities rather than solely for them. Participation should be considered a foundational principle of digital transformation.

4. Beyond Digital Inclusion?

Finally, the collection raises a broader question about the future direction of scholarship and policy. There is a growing need to examine power, surveillance, governance, citizenship, and the unequal distribution of digital opportunities and harms through concepts such as Corda's (2026) punitive mesh, Wood's (2026) faceless harms, social continuity, and digital citizenship.

Whether this is best described as digital justice or socially just digital inclusion remains open to debate. What is clear, however, is that digital technologies are neither neutral nor uniformly experienced. Their benefits and burdens are shaped by penal cultures, welfare traditions, governance arrangements, and lived experiences.

As digital technologies become embedded within correctional systems worldwide, policy and practice must move toward a commitment to social continuity, meaningful participation, and equitable digital futures for justice-involved people and those who work alongside them.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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