

Feeling (Un)safe in Prison: A Comparative Analysis of England & Wales and Norway

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While there is abundant literature on prison violence, much less has been written about how safety is perceived and conceived in prison. Even less is known about how these feelings of safety and their respective predictors may vary between prison systems. This study illustrates what predicts feelings of safety and how prisoners define and experience safety in two jurisdictions, Norway and England & Wales. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, using data from surveys ($N = 984$) and interviews ($N = 199$) from a major comparative penological project. It finds that while prisoners in Norway generally reported feeling safer than prisoners in England & Wales, the quantitative predictors of safety did not vary by jurisdiction. From a qualitative perspective, however, it was observed that prisoners in England & Wales held a more limited definition of safety (bounded safety) in which they accepted a constant need for vigilance, whereas prisoners in Norway showed more trust in their environment. This finding suggests that feelings of safety in prison may be (at least partly) context-dependent, which raises important questions regarding the much-debated 'safety paradox' in prison, and forms a relevant insight for future comparative work.

KEY WORDS: prisons, Nordic exceptionalism, safety, England & Wales, Norway, mixed-methods

INTRODUCTION

There is far more said in the literature about violence in prison and its management than there is about what safety *feels like* and under what circumstances it is found (Liebling and Arnold 2004: 297, emphasis added).

There is an abundance of scholarship investigating prisoner safety through the lens of violence and victimization (Wolff and Shi 2009b; e.g. Howard *et al.* 2020). However, much less is known about how safety is perceived by prisoners, or about which factors foster and hamper their feelings of safety. Previous research has shown that people in high-violence settings can become accustomed and desensitized to violence, altering the lens through which they evaluate their safety (Kochel and Nouri 2021). The drivers of this perceived unsafety have also been found

to be dependent on the level of violence in the environment (Kochel and Nouri 2021), suggesting that perceptions of safety are context-dependent. This article provides insight into both the quantitative predictors of prisoner safety and prisoners' conceptualizations of what safety means. Such an insight into prisoner safety is relevant, both from a normative and a pragmatic standpoint. The provision of safety is one of the primary duties of any government towards its citizens, and this applies all the more in prisons, where the state has a particularly direct responsibility for ensuring that the individuals it accommodates are protected from injury and abuse. Indeed, a safe prison environment is one of the minimum requirements of imprisonment and a fundamental prisoner right (Rule 1 of the Nelson Mandela Rules; UNODC 2015). More practically, safety forms the precondition for the successful execution of any prison's rehabilitative goals (Braga *et al.* 2019), while its absence can not only generate alternative and extra-legal structures of governance (Skarbek 2020) but also undermines penal legitimacy (Liebling and Arnold 2004). Understanding experiences of safety in different prison systems is therefore a key prerequisite for improving the quality of prison life.

This article draws on data from a project that compares penal experiences in two jurisdictions: Norway and England & Wales (Crewe *et al.* 2022). The analysis therefore also provides an unusual comparative insight into definitions and predictors of safety in two different penal contexts, addressing an underlying question in the literature about whether safety might be perceived and conceptualized differently in different places. It explains that, while prisoners in Norway generally felt safer than prisoners in England & Wales, these feelings were predicted by the same factors in both jurisdictions, most prominently: the relationships with fellow prisoners and staff, perceptions of the presence and influence of drugs and being in an open versus closed prison, alongside several individual predictors. However, it also concludes that prisoners' conceptualizations of safety differed between the jurisdictions. Prisoners in England & Wales held a more limited definition of safety and accepted that vigilance was always required in order to secure it. This provides an interesting basis for reflection on Bottoms's (1999) 'safety paradox', the idea that many prisoners report feeling safe despite the ubiquity of violence, threats of violence and unrest in prison. As this paper will demonstrate, this paradox fades when safety is conceptualized much more thinly in unsafe prisons.

FEELING SAFE IN PRISON

Prisoners' feelings of safety depend on several factors, relating to prisoner characteristics, staff practices and institutional determinants. A key prisoner-level characteristic is the amount of time a person has spent in prison (both during their current sentence and in the past). Bottoms (1999) observed that feelings of unsafety were highest among newcomers in prison but faded over time, a finding echoed in recent studies (Mackenzie *et al.* 2016). One explanation for this pattern is that prisoners over time learn to avoid safety risks by adapting to prison life (Wolff and Shi 2009a). However, it could also be that experienced prisoners have learned to cope with imprisonment in ways that merely make it 'appear less dangerous' (Mackenzie *et al.* 2016: 234, emphasis added). This distinction is crucial, pointing towards the difference between an actual decrease in risk versus the mere perception of such a decrease. Maier and Ricciardelli (2018) found that prisoners' feelings of unsafety did not diminish over time, but that the meaning prisoners attached to safety changed as they moved between regimes and wings with different threat levels. This suggests that the concept of safety is fluid and context-dependent. Male and female prisoners also differ in their levels of perceived safety and fear of different things. Wolff and Shi (2009b) found that female prisoners were less afraid than men of being physically victimized by another prisoner, but were more afraid of becoming the victim of sexual assault. Importantly, mental health issues and prior victimization largely accounted for this effect: male prisoners

with serious mental health issues and a previous victimization experience generally felt less safe than non-victimized women without mental health issues (Wolff and Shi 2009b).

Second, prison staff are vital in creating safe environments, through their role in providing forms of policing and supervision and in shaping the prison's broader moral climate (Liebling and Arnold 2004; Tait 2011). The influence that prison staff can exert on feelings of safety can be captured through two dimensions: availability (presence, visibility) and involvement (attitudes and behaviours). Crewe *et al.* (2014) distinguish between these dimensions in their attempt to conceptualize different forms of staff authority and the prison regimes that result. 'Absent' prisons are places where authority is deficient, producing a permissive environment in which there is little clarity about rules and boundaries. In such circumstances, since safety is dependent on the informal governance structures provided by other prisoners (see Skarbek 2020), whether an individual feels safe is likely to depend on his or her position within the social hierarchy. 'Present' prisons, on the other hand, have a clear set of rules that are consistently applied, providing prisoners with certainty and stability. These facets should be seen in intersection with 'heavy' and 'light' staff involvement, for which 'heaviness' implies more punitive and overbearing staff attitudes, and 'lightness' a more relaxed, humane and approachable. According to this formulation, the 'the holy grail of prison management' lies at the nexus of light and present involvement, where safety—and some degree of legitimacy—is achieved without power feeling unduly oppressive (Crewe *et al.* 2014: 404). Other studies confirm that experiences of just, fair and consistent treatment, trust in staff, as well as staff availability are conducive to feelings of safety (Liebling *et al.* 2005; Tait 2011). On the other hand, officers can be feared as those who condone or allow violence (Crewe *et al.* 2014) or themselves perpetrate it against prisoners (Shih 2020).

Third, prison characteristics can influence feelings of safety. Crewe (2016) found that the heroin market in prisons in England & Wales had altered prison life significantly by providing the dynamic for debt, exploitation and victimization. This has become an even greater problem in this jurisdiction with the emergence in prisons of synthetic cannabinoids (Gooch and Treadwell 2020). However, as Mjåland (2014) demonstrates, the influence of drugs on prison climate depends on the prison and national context, with Norwegian prisoners sharing rather than trading their drugs, and this only rarely leading to violence.

Another equally context-dependent issue is the presence of prison gangs. Gang members in prison are more likely to be involved in misconduct and drug dealing, both of which can compromise their personal safety and that of others (Pyrooz *et al.* 2011). While mostly pertinent to American prison cultures, Maitra (2016) explains that prison gangs in England still cause considerable turmoil. The presence of gangs in Norwegian prisons has not been extensively researched, but one anecdotal account suggests that extremist groupings ('Muslim prison gang[s]') exist within certain prisons and are involved in the drug trade (Hansen 2018: 138).

More generally, the interpersonal relationships within a prison (or wing or unit) are relevant for determining feelings of safety. Friendships—including more instrumentally oriented 'alliances'—can help protect prisoners from assaults (Liebling and Arnold 2012: 416). These relationships are shaped by structural features of the prison, such as wing size and the degree of overcrowding, both of which have been hypothesized to be correlated negatively with prison safety (MacDonald 2018), though the empirical evidence for this pattern is mixed (Steiner and Wooldredge 2009). Alonso and Andrews (2015) found in their study of private and public prisons in England & Wales that prison size was positively related to the number of serious assaults, whereas overcrowding rates were not, though it is possible that overcrowded prisons *feel* more unsafe (see Johnsen *et al.* 2011). Additionally, the degree of security and related security measures (e.g. closed-circuit television [CCTV]) influences feelings of safety. Liebling and Arnold (2004) observed that prisoners felt safer in higher-security regimes where staff were responsive

and available. Staff attitudes play a key role in this regard since prisoners in high-security settings with more coercive staff were found to report lower feelings of safety (Ricciardelli and Sit 2015). Furthermore, the presence of CCTV has been hypothesized to improve feelings of safety among prisoners and staff. In an Australian study, Allard *et al.* (2008) found that less misconduct took place in areas with CCTV and that this effect was strongest for non-violent and unplanned assaults. Planned violent assaults, on the other hand, took place significantly more frequently in unsupervised areas.

THE SAFETY PARADOX

Despite the high prevalence in prisons of victimization, perceptions of safety among prisoners are generally rather positive (Edgar *et al.* 2003; Wolff and Shi 2009a), a phenomenon that Bottoms (1999) describes as the ‘safety paradox’. There are several explanations for this discrepancy between the risk of victimization and feelings of safety. First, prisoners might employ protective strategies that can help them in dealing with feelings of unsafety (Bottoms 1999), for example, by avoiding certain places or people or by employing pre-emptive aggression (McCorkle 1992). Another, more recent explanation for the safety paradox is the growing recognition that the concept of safety is relative (Edgar *et al.* 2003). That is, even though victimization rates in prison are relatively high, prisoners might still feel safer behind bars than in their lives outside, which may be characterized by violence, abuse and addiction (Bradley and Davino 2002).

Bottoms’s safety paradox demonstrates the complexity of feeling safe in contexts where violence and unrest are commonplace. Yet it casts doubt over the ability of research to capture subjective safety, as these feelings are tainted by the narratives and protective strategies that are employed to deal with unsafety. Importantly, Bottoms based his idea of a safety paradox on quantitative data. Recent scholarship has largely followed this path (Edgar *et al.* 2003; Wolff and Shi 2009a), limiting insight into the ambiguous nature of safety within prisons. Research to date has also done relatively little to contextualize perceptions of safety in the prison context or, in the words of Liebling (2004), to investigate what safety *feels like*. Recent research from Maier and Ricciardelli (2018) provides a first insight into the qualitative nature of the safety paradox. The authors found that prisoners did not feel safer as their sentence progressed (as Bottoms suggests), but rather that the meaning they attributed to safety changed as they moved from high- to low-security units. They therefore question the paradoxical nature of Bottoms’s observation: prisoners do not *feel* safe so much as redefine what it means to feel safe. This article aims to advance this form of analysis even further, by exploring feelings of safety and the related paradox in the context of a comparative research project in Norway and England & Wales, to see whether differences in definition arise in this context, too. In doing so, it builds on the scholarship on Nordic penal exceptionalism.

NORDIC PENAL EXCEPTIONALISM

The idea that punishment in the Nordic nations is milder and more humane than punishment elsewhere is the core claim of what is known as the ‘Nordic exceptionalism thesis’ (Pratt 2008a; 2008b). Pratt (2008b) asserts that these differences are rooted in the history and social democratic fabric of these respective countries, characterized by a focus on welfare and equality (see also Cavadino and Dignan 2006). However, this conceptualization has been scrutinized by multiple scholars who argue that the framing of punishment in Nordic countries as mild underestimates the extent to which the experience of imprisonment is still painful (Scharff Smith and Ugelvik 2017; Crewe *et al.* 2022).

In their analysis of the Nordic exceptionalism thesis, [Crewe et al. \(2022\)](#) find that while ‘there is little doubt that the typical experience of imprisonment is more humane and less damaging in Norway than in England and Wales’, these differences are partly grounded in the fact that most prisoners in Norway spend some or all of their sentence in an open prison ([Crewe et al. 2022: 17](#)). When comparing closed prisons in Norway and England & Wales, experiences of inhumanity and punitiveness were more similar (see also [Johnsen and Granheim 2011](#)). In this respect, researchers should be careful not to overstate the differences between experiences in the Norwegian and English penal contexts. However, [Crewe et al. \(2022\)](#) also suggest that quantitative comparison might, for various reasons, understate significant differences in the nature of imprisonment in these two jurisdictions, including in relation to matters such as safety, which do not feature significantly in Pratt’s analysis, but are central in [Skarbek’s \(2020\)](#) comparative analysis of prison order. Indeed, in his analysis, Norway is presented as the archetype of good—that is, protective—official governance. Perhaps most saliently, [Pratt’s \(2008a; 2008b; 2022\)](#) account of Nordic exceptionalism has been criticized for being based on limited fieldwork (‘prison tourism’; [Crewe et al. 2022: 4](#)). The extensive, multi-methods research of the current study provides an opportunity to empirically assess claims about Nordic exceptionalism, specifically regarding feelings of safety, which [Crewe et al. \(2022\)](#) found to be considerably higher in Norway than England & Wales, without elaborating further on what determined such feelings.

METHODOLOGY

COMPEN research programme

The current study relies on secondary data analysis of interview and survey data from the Comparative Penology (COMPEN) research programme. This five-year research project aimed to empirically explore the Nordic exceptionalism thesis by comparing the experiences of imprisonment across two jurisdictions with different penal philosophies and political economies. The survey and the interview design were informed by an existing conceptual framework, designed to describe and compare the texture of imprisonment, organized around the concepts of ‘depth, weight, tightness and breadth’ ([Crewe 2015: 50](#)). The survey was administered to people serving sentences in open and closed establishments for men and for women. In all six prisons in Norway and eight prisons in England & Wales, efforts were undertaken to draw a representative sample in each jurisdiction, by systematically sampling prisoners from each relevant unit. The total quantitative sample comprised 984 respondents, 725 from England & Wales and 259 from Norway.

The qualitative analysis draws on the interview data coded under the node ‘safety’, based on fully transcribed interviews, coded using NVivo software. Specifically, it included 190 interview excerpts from male prisoners and 46 excerpts from female prisoners. This data came from 199 unique individuals, 67 from Norway and 132 from England & Wales, mainly serving sentences of under two years, selected for interview within a longitudinal research design, based on the length of time since their entry into prison or prior to their release (see [Schliehe et al. 2022](#) for further detail).

The analysis had two main aims. First, it sought to determine whether the same factors were relevant in predicting feelings of safety in both jurisdictions. In doing so, it was driven by the idea that—as others have previously suggested (e.g. [Kochel and Nouri 2021](#))—safety might be context-dependent. Nevertheless, the choice was made not to formulate concrete hypotheses on the expected effects and differences on each variable, due to the absence of previous studies providing quantitative substance for this effect as a whole. The subsequent qualitative analyses served to illustrate and illuminate the patterns found in the quantitative analysis, revealing the specific ways in which prisoners in both jurisdictions described various elements of their feelings of safety and the institutional contexts in which these were shaped.

Quantitative analysis

Since the survey was not originally designed to capture experiences of safety specifically, for this analysis, two new scales were constructed: ‘safety’ and ‘relationships with prisoners’. Based on the literature and the face validity of the survey items, a selection was made for each scale. These hypotheses were tested using exploratory factor analysis in SPSS (see [Table A1](#)). Reliability was judged based on the scales’ Cronbach’s alphas. The main construct, safety, was operationalized as the mean of the scored answers to three statements, which capture mostly fear, threats and physical safety (e.g. ‘Generally I fear for my physical safety’). The relationship with prisoners dimension comprised four items (e.g. ‘Prisoners stand up for each other in this prison’). Additionally, the original scale ‘relational weight’ was used to compute scores on the relationships between prisoners and staff (e.g. ‘Staff here treat prisoners fairly’) ([Crewe et al. 2022](#)).

Furthermore, several individual-level characteristics were added: sex (male/female), incarceration history (first sentence or not) and time spent in the current prison (up to 4 months; between 4 months and a year; between 1 and 3 years; more than 3 years). Since the time spent in prison is closely related to the type of establishment in which prisoners are held in Norway (short sentences tend to be served in open prisons, whereas longer sentences are more often served at least partly in closed prisons) ([Mjåland et al. 2021](#)), a variable on the type of prison (open or closed) was included. Since prisoner data leads to non-independent observations, multilevel linear regressions were performed in Stata (version 18).

Qualitative analysis

An abductive thematic analysis was used to make sense of shared conceptualizations of safety across the dataset (see also [Evans et al. 2014](#)). The analysis was performed iteratively, as the first exploratory reading of the qualitative data (as well as the literature) informed the selection of quantitative variables and the quantitative findings gave further direction to the second round of coding (see also [O’Cathain et al. 2010](#)). Respondents talked about safety on different occasions, primarily when prompted on the matter (‘How safe do you feel in here?’), but the topic was also interwoven within their narratives on issues of trust, their first days in prison and the ways they related to other prisoners and staff. Prisoners also highlighted different aspects of safety, with some discussing how they attempted to achieve it and others talking about how it felt when safety was absent or present and how the behaviours of others—both staff members and fellow prisoners—impacted these feelings.

Limitations and the challenges of doing comparative research

The secondary nature of the analysis had certain drawbacks. For example, the survey was not designed to measure feelings of safety or the quality of interpersonal relationships, which complicated the scale construction and compromised internal reliability scores. The qualitative data nevertheless often formed a helpful source of triangulation in this regard. Similarly, the interviews were not conducted with questions about safety in mind, which meant that certain statements by prisoners who said that they felt safe were not followed up on. Statements of those who felt unsafe were also more often prompted further by the interviewer compared to those who felt safe. This reflects a common focus on the absence of safety rather than its presence ([Hollnagel 2014](#)).

Comparative, mixed-methods penological research presents further challenges. Much work in comparative penology has an implicit Anglocentric assumption, in which the relative punitiveness of Anglophone countries becomes apparent when contrasted with the ‘exceptional’ Scandinavian model ([Brangan 2020](#)). The work of comparative penologists is also complicated by the fact that prisoners themselves are not making cross-national comparisons, so much as comparing their current experiences of imprisonment with benchmarks provided by other

social and institutional experiences or prior assumptions about what prison life might be like (see also Sexton 2015; Crewe *et al.* 2022). Issues regarding differences in language and terminology also complicate attempts to make strong claims about the comparability of cross-national data, though, in this case, this was mitigated by the linguistic competence of two members of the research team (see Crewe *et al.* 2022).

A further impediment to comparison lies in differences between the two penal jurisdictions in terms of prison size, sentence length and carceral conditions. Accordingly, rather than try to match non-comparable institutional forms, the study aimed to compare ‘the *typical* experiences of particular prisoner groups’ (Mjåland *et al.* 2021: 8, emphasis in original). Comparisons were therefore made between prisons that were ‘typical’ in each jurisdiction, and between the kinds of institutional trajectories that would be representative for both.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

On a population level, there were several differences between the samples of the two jurisdictions: the Norwegian sample included comparatively fewer women and more prisoners in open establishments (Table 1). Yet, the samples did not differ on the proportion of prisoners with an incarceration history and the distribution of their time served in prison. Importantly, however, prisoners in Norway and England & Wales differed significantly on their experiences of prison life. At the univariate level, prisoners in Norway on average felt safer than prisoners in England & Wales, were more positive about their relationships with fellow prisoners and staff and thought drugs caused fewer issues.

One of the main questions raised in this paper is whether the same variables predict feelings of safety in different jurisdictions and whether the effects of the independent variables on safety are dependent on jurisdiction. For this purpose, a multilevel model was fitted using Stata. The model included three levels: the individual level, wing level and prison level. Random effect models showed that a significant portion of the variance in safety scores could be attributed to differences at the wing and prison levels. Overall, 16.5 per cent (intraclass correlation [ICC]: 0.165) of the variance in safety scores could be attributed to differences between wings within prisons, and 15.2 per cent (ICC: 0.152) of the variance to differences between prisons. Individual-level predictors were subsequently added to the model, applying maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). The initial model included interaction terms between jurisdiction and each of the independent variables, to determine whether the effects statistically differed by jurisdiction. However, adding these interaction terms did not significantly improve the model fit.¹ This finding demonstrates that contrary to Kochel and Nouri’s (2021) idea, the effects of our predictor variables on safety were not context-dependent. It also implies that a single model could be used to explain feelings of safety in both jurisdictions, although jurisdiction was still controlled for as a fixed effect.

The model in Table 2 shows that, for both England & Wales and Norway, feelings of safety were strongly and positively related to having positive relationships with prisoners and staff, meaning that those who had better relationships with prisoners and staff also reported feeling safer than those with less positive relationships. Perceiving drugs to cause issues in prison had a negative influence on prisoners’ safety in both jurisdictions. Additionally, being in an open

1 There was one significant individual interaction effect, namely time in prison >3 years. However, when this term was added to the final model, it was not a significant predictor, nor did it significantly improve model fit. Since there was also no theoretical basis for including only this interaction term, it was left out of the final model.

Table 1. Descriptive and comparative scores ($N = 984$)

Variable	Min	Max	Norway ($N = 259$)		England & Wales ($N = 725$)		t	χ^2
			M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%		
Feelings of safety	1	5	3.86 (0.86)		3.35 (0.93)		7.64***	
Age ^a	18	84	37.68 (11.87)		37.90 (12.47)		-0.25	
Sex (1 = male)				88.8		73.5		25.60***
First incarceration				52.9		54.2		0.13
Time spent in the current prison								3.53
Up to 4 months				46.3		40.6		
Between 4 months and a year				30.9		33.1		
Between 1 and 3 years				17.0		21.1		
More than 3 years				5.8		5.2		
Closed vs. open prison (1 = open)				47.9		9.4		180.08***
Relational weight	1	5	3.38 (0.83)		2.97 (0.86)		6.60***	
Relationships with other prisoners	1	5	3.06 (0.72)		2.72 (0.73)		6.51***	
Drug problems in prison	1	5	2.53 (1.14)		3.85 (1.07)		-16.29***	

^aAge was not normally distributed, but medians did also not differ significantly ($Med(England\&Wales) = 35$, $Med(Norway) = 36$).

*** $p < 0.001$.

establishment was related to higher scores on safety. Follow-up analyses showed that prisoners in open prisons reported drugs causing fewer issues and that these prisoners had better relationships with other prisoners and staff compared to those in closed establishments. It is interesting to note, additionally, that the fixed effect for jurisdiction was not significant once all other fixed effects were entered into the model. In other words, the differences in safety scores between jurisdictions observed initially were largely (though not completely) accounted for by differences in other variables.

There were also several notable individual predictors. In both jurisdictions, (the natural log of) age was negatively related to feelings of safety. Concretely, we observed that younger prisoners (<30 years old) tended to feel safer than older prisoners (>50 years old).² This is inconsistent with the pattern discussed earlier that younger prisoners would feel most unsafe but would learn to feel safe (or redefine what that means) over time. However, other scholars have observed that when age comes with functional impairment, this can be related to lower scores on safety (Trotter and Baidawi 2015). In other words, it is possible that age interacts with factors like physical vulnerability, though these are not included in the current study. As for the effect of sex, female prisoners in this study felt

² Note that in the model, the natural log of age is used since age was not normally distributed, but a categorical interpretation was deemed more meaningful here.

Table 2. Multivariate model for safety for England & Wales and Norway ($N = 984$)

Variable	<i>b</i>	95% CI	
Feelings of safety			
Age (ln)	-0.19*	[-0.35; -0.03]	
Sex (1 = male)	-0.18	[-0.43; 0.07]	
First sentence	0.13*	[0.03; 0.23]	
Time spent in prison (ref: <4 months)			
Between 4 months and a year	0.01	[-0.11; 0.12]	
Between 1 and 3 years	0.02	[-0.12; 0.16]	
More than 3 years	-0.25*	[-0.48; -0.01]	
Closed vs. open prison (1 = open)	0.37**	[0.16; 0.58]	
Relational weight	0.25***	[0.18; 0.31]	
Relationships with other prisoners	0.31***	[0.23; 0.38]	
Drug problems in prison	-0.10***	[-0.15; -0.05]	
Jurisdiction (1 = England & Wales)	-0.05	[-0.29; 0.18]	
Constant	2.93***	[2.27; 3.60]	
No. of prisons			14
No. of wings			105

* $p < 0.05$;** $p < 0.01$;*** $p < 0.001$.

significantly safer compared to male prisoners. Previous research in American prisons also established this pattern, though Wolff and Shi (2009c) remarked it was possible that these prisoners feared different things. Bradley and Davino (2002) have also remarked that, for incarcerated women, the high prevalence of childhood and adult trauma results in many women concluding that—at least in relative terms—‘prison is the safest place [they’ve] ever been’ (p. 351; see also Bucerius *et al.* 2021).³ Furthermore, prisoners with an incarceration history also reported feeling less safe compared to those imprisoned for the first time and prisoners who had spent more than 3 years in prison⁴ also felt less safe than those who had spent a shorter time (<4 months) behind bars. This not only contrasts with prior research (e.g. Wolff and Shi 2009a) but—as described in more detail below—does not correspond with the narratives of the prisoners interviewed in Norway as part of this study.

UNDERSTANDING PRISONERS’ FEELINGS OF SAFETY

The following section aims to further illustrate some of the patterns discussed above. While the quantitative results showed that safety was predicted by positive staff–prisoner and inter-prisoner relationships in both jurisdictions, the qualitative analysis demonstrated that the nature of these relationships was fundamentally different and that prisoners in the two jurisdictions held different definitions of safety.

3 While the current study provides limited insight (including from its qualitative strand) regarding how and why perceptions of safety between female and male prisoners differ, this finding demonstrates that the nature of safety in female establishments may indeed differ from male establishments. This is a fruitful and important avenue for future research.

4 Note that this concerned a relatively small group of prisoners (15 prisoners in Norway and 32 in England & Wales).

Staff–prisoner relationships in England & Wales and Norway

The differences between staff–prisoner relationships in England & Wales and in Norway were most apparent when it came to the degree of trust that prisoners had in staff, that is, whether they thought (and assumed) staff would and could protect them from harm. In Norway, prisoners were generally positive about the relationships they maintained with staff. Most prisoners in Norway believed that staff were responsive, and several said that their concerns about safety were resolved by staff quickly. For example:

I went up to the officers and asked, I said I didn't know what to do, there are people who are after me and I don't feel safe, what can we do. I was able to talk to the head of staff and he said that we could ask Halden, see if they have room there (...). So then I came here.

Same day?

Same day. (...) I really felt both seen and heard. (Jesper, Norway)

Importantly, whenever staff failed to act upon prisoners' concerns in Norway, this created great disappointment, indicating that—unlike in England & Wales, as discussed below—prisoners in Norway had an *assumption of care*, that is, they could take for granted that staff would respond to their concerns. As Sigve said: 'I feel they should be obliged to respond every time'. Relatedly, prisoners in Norway tended to think that security measures (e.g. searches, risk assessments and CCTV) were there for their protection, expressing a form of faith in the protective function of official practices and surveillance:

I would've been a bit more worried if there hadn't been any surveillance. (...) It's for my own safety and security as well, that they [staff] have a certain control. (Øyvind, Norway)

Prisoners in Norway also expressed faith that drug searches would be performed, and transgressions would be punished. As one prisoner mentioned: 'it takes a lot for trouble to happen here. (...) If you punch a wall; it's enough for you to get transferred' (Dag, Norway). This expectation of certain, swift and relatively severe punishment fostered feelings of safety. Using [Crewe et al.'s \(2014\)](#) framework, staff behaviour in Norwegian prisons could be classified as 'light-present', meaning that staff members were available, responsive and willing to use their authority, yet also co-operative and relaxed.

In England & Wales, while there were also prisoners who believed that staff did a good job protecting them from harm (see also [Crewe et al. 2014](#)), the vast majority believed that staff would not or could not do so:

I felt unsafe when I was with that cellmate because it was a smoker and a non-smoker. (...) The guy was aggressive to me. I told one of them [an officer] I thought I was cool with, I went to him and said, 'This guy is coming across as aggressive. I'm not looking forward to going back in there.' He just pushed me back in there and shut the door. I'm saying to him, 'I feel like I'm going to get beat up.' I actually said that. He said, 'don't worry about it.' (Nathan, E&W)

Part of the explanation for low levels of trust in staff in England & Wales was understaffing: incidents could develop quickly and prisoners believed that thin staffing levels meant that officers were incapable of acting in time to prevent serious consequences (see also [Bottoms 1999](#)):

It will take a man about literally three seconds to stab a person. It's going to take officers five seconds to get to you. (Dylan, E&W)

A minority of prisoners even claimed that certain officers permitted themselves to commit violence. Blake (E&W) recalled an incident in which '[t]he officer opened the door and saw what was going on [a fight], [and] just closed it up... "I'll be back in five minutes". Didn't raise an alarm nothing'. Similarly, Floyd (E&W) had witnessed a stabbing and said that 'the officers were the ones that planned it'. While it is impossible to ascertain the veracity of such accusations, it demonstrates that trust in staff was low, and it is notable that prisoners in Norway did not make such claims. In many prisons in England & Wales, staff authority was 'absent', meaning that staff under-used their authority and failed to punish misconduct (Crewe *et al.* 2014). This created uncertainty—a feeling that anything might happen. In this respect, prisoners' view of staff in England & Wales contrasted with the assumption of care expressed by prisoners in Norway. As Rory (E&W) remarked:

I don't feel cared for, but *I don't expect to be cared for*, to be honest. (emphasis added)

This lack of trust in staff also meant that when prisoners felt threatened or unsafe, they tended to rely on self-protection rather than on being protected by the authorities. For example, Adrian (E&W) mentioned that he '[didn't] feel unsafe from anyone' because he could 'look after [him] self' and he 'wouldn't think twice about hitting someone if they came to attack [him]': This tactic of self-protection was applied in England & Wales much more frequently than in Norway, where prisoners more often felt that staff could be relied upon to secure their safety and where tensions generally did not escalate because staff members were swift to intervene:

I haven't seen them [staff] allowing an inmate to get up the nose of another inmate. So when they find out what is happening they will act to try to separate the matter as quickly as possible so it doesn't escalate much. (Nicolas, Norway)

Prisoners in England & Wales also did not believe that security measures could fill gaps in surveillance. Interviewees stated that there were not enough cameras, and plenty of blind spots, which created opportunities for violence: 'I've been on [this wing] long enough that I know where every single blind spot is, from those cameras. So I know exactly where to go if somebody wants to have a fight with me' (Ava, E&W). This also helps to explain why Allard *et al.* (2008) found that only unplanned attacks were curbed by surveillance, as those who were intentional about their violent attacks knew how to avoid being caught on camera.

Inter-prisoner relationships in England & Wales and Norway

The differences in staff–prisoner relationships in England & Wales and Norway respectively had important ramifications for inter-prisoner relationships in the two jurisdictions. In England & Wales, prisoners had very little trust in their fellow prisoners compared to prisoners in Norway, who could at least trust that others would not physically hurt them (and if they attempted to do so, would be prevented by prison staff).

Prisoners in both jurisdictions also talked about different safety risks when evaluating their personal safety. Prisoners in Norway made very little reference to the risk of physical harm in general, to drug issues or to the presence of gangs, all of which were common themes in England & Wales. Many prisoners in this jurisdiction described life behind bars as tense, an environment in which even 'looking at someone the wrong way' could catalyse a fight (Hunter, E&W). This was detrimental to feelings of safety (Liebling and Arnold 2004): 'You don't feel safe from the prisoners or the screws, because you don't know who to trust'

(Harrison, E&W). Prisoners in England & Wales also remarked that violence was embedded in the mundane life of the prison:

You always know that violence is evident. (Kwame)

I have probably seen a couple of fights, but nothing special. (Roman)

It's prison, it is a violent place full of violent people. (Hunter)

The result was a form of hypervigilance, of always having to 'expect the unexpected' (George, E&W). Relatedly, a much-applied protective strategy in England & Wales was to keep to oneself and avoid interactions that were potentially risky. As Amos (E&W) described: 'If you don't really speak to anyone, you stay in your circle and you do what you're meant to do, bang up on time, move...you have no problems.' However, even prisoners who actively attempted to avoid trouble felt fearful, especially when they felt staff could not be relied on for protection. The absence of effective staff power created a vacuum that was filled by prisoners, producing an environment of uncertainty and insecurity (see [Crewe et al. 2014](#)). Gary (E&W) concluded:

Safety is whatever you make it. If you don't get into strife with anyone, then you're alright, but this is an open place. Someone can come in if they need to. Nothing is stopping them.

In Norway, prisoners were also hesitant to put their faith in other prisoners, for example, because others could not be relied upon as truthful ('Everything you hear in prison seems to be just lies. Nobody seems to tell the truth', Aagot, Norway) or because they were deemed mentally unstable ('There's one of them which I think I trust a little bit, but there are several of them that drift in and out of psychosis', Oscar, Norway). However, the fact that prisoners generally took for granted that fellow prisoners would not hurt them evidenced a basic feeling of trust. For example, Gerard (Norway) explained that he did not trust anyone but continued by saying: 'I mean, I can trust that I won't be stabbed and things like that'. Part of this trust in prisoners also stemmed from the faith in staff and formal procedures: 'I know, at least, that there's nobody who wants to stab me, and I assume they have a good risk assessment on those who are here' (Idar, Norway).

One reason for these differences in prison climate was that prison wings in Norway are generally smaller compared to England & Wales, making it easier for prisoners to familiarize themselves with their peers. Many prisoners interviewed in prisons in Norway recalled feeling most unsafe at the beginning of their sentence, but quickly becoming less fearful after they had met the prisoners and staff on their wing:

I was a little uncertain at first then, like the first two days. But when I had met all the officers and inmates (...) I felt safe very quickly, because they (...) took initiative and wanted me in the community. (Haakon, Norway)

[Johnsen et al. \(2011\)](#) argue that smaller prisons feel safer because it is easier than in larger establishments to develop trusting staff-prisoner relationships. In England & Wales, where prison wings are generally larger, not knowing fellow prisoners fostered distrust:

[I'm] still a little bit on edge because I don't really know everyone, but some people...I don't know, they might be all right, because I don't know them I don't know whether to trust them or not. (Oliver, E&W)

You don't know who's going to cover you, rob your cell while you're off. (Jackson, E&W)

The much greater presence of drugs and gangs in prisons in England & Wales compared to Norway was also relevant to feelings of safety. One prisoner from England & Wales described the prison as a ‘Tesco’s for drugs’ (Taariq). The main problem caused by drugs regarding safety was debt, in that prisoners unable to repay what they owed were at risk of assault by their creditors (Crewe 2016; Gooch and Treadwell 2020):

A lot of the time when people owe money, that’s when people end up getting hurt because they haven’t paid their money for their drugs. (Hunter, E&W)

While staying out of drug-related business (and other risky activities) was therefore frequently mentioned as a primary protective strategy, prisoners in England & Wales also explained that drugs changed the atmosphere in prison for everyone, regardless of their involvement in the informal economy:

I stayed away from all of the big triggers like drugs, drink, getting into debt and thieving off people which are the biggest conduits of violence in prison. But you still have to be very careful about the way you talk to people. (Melvin, E&W)

In Norway, drugs were a much less common theme and generated concern less because of the financial tensions they produced than due to the direct effects that prisoners thought that drugs had on others’ behaviour. Kasper described finding it ‘frightening’ to hear that some prisoners abused drugs and alcohol. Similarly, Raynor stated the drugs in prison were ‘not good at all, with regard to people’s behaviour and things like that.’ Here, we see a contrast between the anxiety produced in Norway by specific drug-addicted individuals, versus the widespread informal drug economy in England & Wales which tainted inter-prisoner relationships more generally.

Several prisoners from England & Wales mentioned their fear of gangs. Ayo (E&W) testified that he had been stabbed by gang members because of ‘prison politics’, that is, for not ‘respect[ing] the big man on the wing’. Another interviewee also described ‘almost getting killed’ because of ‘gang beef’ (Harley, E&W). Since gangs were strongly location-based, prisoners from certain areas were often ‘automatically’ expected to become members (Taariq, E&W), yet this did not mean that non-gang members were left untouched by gang dynamics: ‘I’m not involved in gangs. I’m not from around this area and I *still* don’t feel safe in this prison’ (Declan, E&W, emphasis added). In the Norwegian sample, only one interviewee mentioned being fearful of gangs, but this initial anxiety was quickly relieved after he became familiar with the environment and learned that prison staff would protect him.

A safety paradox?

In short, prisoners in Norway and England & Wales thought rather differently about their relationships with other prisoners and staff and referred to different safety risks when talking about their safety. This has important implications for the resulting underlying meaning of safety in both jurisdictions. Bottoms (1999) has argued in his ‘safety paradox’ that many prisoners feel safe despite the risky nature of day-to-day prison life. This idea applies only weakly to the Norwegian context, where violence was not a significant issue. Few prisoners in Norway had witnessed a fight in prison, instead recalling little more than verbal arguments and ‘some talk behind people’s backs’ (Rasmus, Norway). Dag (Norway) described his prison as ‘a summer camp for adults’, saying that ‘[i]t’s a safe place to be’.

In England & Wales, the paradox seemed more fitting, though only at first glance. As demonstrated above, violence was accepted as a normal and routine element of everyday life. Still, several interviewees said that they did not feel *unsafe*. With this, they did not mean that prison

was a safe environment but—in line with Bottoms’ argument—that ways could be found (often through behavioural adaptation) to enhance feelings of safety:

Yeah I feel safe, yeah, I’m all right. No sorry, I don’t... I actually feel safe, but you’re not safe in prison, like prison in general. (Louie, E&W)

You said earlier it [prison] can be a dangerous place.

Yeah, it can be, (...) but I just keep myself to myself and keep my head down. (Lucas, E&W)

Yet, while Bottoms suggests that prisoners ‘over time (...) gradually work out ways of coping with this strange social world’ and manage to feel safe within it, he did not inquire into the nature of that resulting safety (p. 270). Importantly, as scholars have previously remarked, safety is a relative term (Edgar *et al.* 2003). Being locked up can be a refuge from a volatile life on the streets for some prisoners, and prisoners also judge their safety in relation to this benchmark (Crewe and Ievins 2019):

Prison is quite scary. There have been knives. Oil, they can throw on you. They can throw hot water on you. [But] It’s not that I feel unsafe. I feel safe from the nutters outside. (Harris, E&W)

At the same time, however, regular exposure to violence and unrest also tends to alter the lens through which people evaluate their safety (Kochel and Nouri 2021). In this study, narratives of hypervigilance testify to the fact that the achieved feeling of safety for prisoners in England & Wales was thin. Despite taking precautions, many prisoners in this jurisdiction remained fearful given the ease and arbitrariness with which violence was used. Liebling’s (2004) definition of safety helps us understand this dynamic. Liebling argues that safety entails ‘a feeling of security or protection from harm, threat or danger and of physical and psychological trust in the environment’ (p. 302). In other words, safety has two core elements: (1) feeling protected from danger and (2) having trust in the environment. In the case of England & Wales, while some prisoners managed to protect themselves from danger, an absence of trust in the environment meant that those who reported feeling safe simultaneously accepted the need for perpetual watchfulness:

I do [feel safe] but you still have to watch your back no matter what prison you’re in, no matter how many people you know (...), because all it takes is like for someone to pick up a pool cue and hit me over the back of the head with it. (Jeff, E&W)

I’ve never felt any threats, I always feel safe.

But at the same time you said you are always a bit guarded... always a bit watchful?

Yeah of course. Yeah. It seems peaceful, seems placid... It is... It can still turn on a penny. (Kirk, E&W)

This paradoxical relationship between vigilance and safety found in England & Wales can be described as *bounded safety*. It represents a thinner, more limited form of safety in which prisoners feel confident of their physical safety yet ever-vigilant given their limited trust in their environment. As Mo (E&W) put it: ‘I’m safe, but I’m careful’. Maier and Ricciardelli (2018) describe a similar pattern in their qualitative study of prisons in Canada, where they observed that prisoners were in a state of ‘ontological insecurity’, that is, the feeling that ‘violence could be actualized at any point (...) even in the absence of actual physical victimization’ (p. 235; see also Giddens 1991).

Hence, while [Bottoms \(1999\)](#) argued that many prisoners felt safe inside ostensibly dangerous prisons, he did not explore *what it meant* to feel safe in such an environment, and how that meaning is shaped by circumstances that prisoners find themselves in. This study shows that while prisoners in England & Wales may have described feeling safe, they simultaneously reported a form of ever-present watchfulness that arguably worked to the detriment of that very safety. As [Hutta \(2009\)](#) also acknowledges, safety is more than the ‘absence of fear’ (p. 251); importantly, it holds a dimension of what he calls *Geborgenheit*—‘a sense of being nested and being well’ (p. 256). This latter element of safety was largely lacking in the accounts of prisoners in England & Wales, despite the negation of fear. Therefore, the paradox may hold only partially when it is considered that those who perceive violence as a normal element of the institutional context have a more limited definition of safety.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the main underlying questions raised in this paper was: is prisoner (un)safety a universal concept and experience? The quantitative analysis demonstrated that, while prisoners in Norway generally felt substantially safer than prisoners in England & Wales, the predictors operated in similar ways across jurisdictions. Hence, it could be concluded that both in relatively safe (Norway) and less safe (England & Wales) prison settings, the same factors mattered (even though prisoners in both jurisdictions reported different experiences with regard to those factors, e.g. prisoners in Norway generally reported having more positive relationships with staff).

However, prisoners’ narratives demonstrated that their conceptualizations of safety differed. Prisoners in England & Wales held a more limited definition of safety (*bounded safety*) and accepted that vigilance was necessary in order to secure this feeling of not being at risk. In Norway, conversely, where staff could be relied on for protection and there was relatively little violence, prisoners’ implicit definition of safety seemed more in line with that of [Liebling and Arnold \(2004\)](#). This is especially relevant with regard to [Bottoms’ \(1999\)](#) safety paradox. This insight is crucial for comparative penologists, as it shows that safety can be conceptualized differently in one prison system compared to another. Future studies performing quantitative, comparative penology are therefore advised to carefully consider whether respondents in the respective comparands may hold different definitions of the construct of study.

Finally, the fact that prisoners in Norway felt safer than prisoners in England & Wales corresponds with the Nordic exceptionalism thesis (see [Pratt 2008a; 2022; Pratt and Eriksson 2013](#)), as do some of the explanations we have presented here, that is, prisons that are relatively small and well-staffed (see also [Liebling 2008; Johnsen and Granheim 2011](#)). Indeed, our results correspond with and empirically advance Skarbek’s argument that prisons in Norway demonstrate good official governance, emphasizing how prisoners there placed considerable faith in the authorities to protect them and did not perceive other prisoners to be a significant threat to their safety, in part because their penal environments were not dominated by the under-regulated and violent *sub rosa* economies present in England & Wales. Given the centrality of safety as an objective of both prison systems, one of the contributions of our analysis is to highlight the much greater success of Norway in achieving this goal.

Yet, it is also important to note that ‘exceptionalism’ is a relative concept, implying ‘normality’ elsewhere (see [Brangan 2020](#)). Some prisoners in England & Wales did feel safe or protected by staff, but the extent to which most did not should not be regarded as normal if this means sanitizing practices that should be criticized for failing to meet legitimate expectations about safe confinement. Likewise, not all prisoners in Norway expressed feelings of safety, reminding us of the importance of not conflating the relative and absolute safety of prisons in Norway ([Crewe et al. 2022](#)).

APPENDIX A: SCALE CONSTRUCTION

Table A1. Dimensions of factors for safety and relationships with prisoners

Factors/items	England & Wales		Norway	
	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Safety		0.71		0.75
I feel safe from being injured, bullied or threatened by other prisoners here	0.711		0.760	
Generally, I fear for my physical safety	0.826		0.821	
Feeling worried about your personal safety ^a	0.841		0.858	
Relationships with prisoners		0.60		0.59
Prisoners stand up for each other in this prison	0.534		0.647	
I can trust most prisoners in this prison	0.691		0.757	
Not feeling able to completely trust anyone in prison ^a	0.754		0.712	
Getting annoyed or irritated with other prisoners ^a	0.682		0.584	

^aA combined score on the problem statements: 'how often do you experience this problem?' and 'how easy is it to deal with this problem?'

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