

Access to Activities in Belgian Prisons: Addressing The Needs of Incarcerated People Through Participatory Action Research

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Participation in prison activities significantly normalises the detention period.¹ Work for example provides daily structure, meaningful engagement, and the opportunity to earn money.² Education can lead to diplomas and has the potential to empower individuals.³ There is a high demand for sports activities among incarcerated people, as they enhance physical and mental well-being.⁴ Mental health services in prison can offer a chance for many incarcerated people, who may have never received psychological help before, to identify and manage their mental health issues.⁵ Additionally, the library provides access to important information and books and could serve as a valuable source of distraction.⁶ Meaningful engagement in these activities can be a crucial need for incarcerated people. In its absence, people may perceive their detention period as wasted time, posing a significant threat to their mental well-being and hampering their chances for reintegration.⁷

Barriers to Accessing the Offer of Activities in Prisons and Beyond

Research shows that incarcerated people face various barriers to participating in these activities. Several studies suggest that internal motivation among persons is often high but does not necessarily result in increased participation.⁸ The Belgian study of Hellemans et al. showed that the lack of knowledge about the (registration for) activity offerings is particularly problematic.⁹ In their study, 30 per cent of the surveyed incarcerated people reported not being aware of the offerings, and approximately one fifth did not know who to approach to enroll in activities. In addition to barriers related to information (flows), research highlights a strong security-oriented mindset of prison staff, limited language skills among incarcerated people, overlap between activities, limited offerings, and a lack of available staff leading to demotivation among incarcerated people to participate in activities.¹⁰

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1. Halimi, M., Brosens, D., De Donder, L., & Engels, N. (2017). Learning during imprisonment: Prisoners' motives to educational participation within a remand prison in Belgium. *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974), 68(1), 3-31.
 2. Naessens, L. (2020). Addressing the needs of people in prison: The case of prison work. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(6), 933-944.
 3. Baranger, J., Rousseau, D., Mastroilli, M. E., & Matesanz, J. (2018). Doing Time Wisely: The Social and Personal Benefits of Higher Education in Prison. *The Prison Journal*, 98(4), 490-513.
 4. Meek, R., & Ramsbotham, L. (2013). *Sport in prison: Exploring the role of physical activity in correctional settings*. Routledge.
 5. Forrester, A., Till, A., Simpson, A., & Shaw, J. (2018). Mental illness and the provision of mental health services in prisons. *British Medical Bulletin*, 127(1), 101-109.
 6. Garner, J. (2020). Almost like Freedom: Prison Libraries and Reading as Facilitators of Escape. *The Library Quarterly*, 90(1), 5-19.
 7. De Vos, H. (2023). From Killing Time to Using Time: Normalizing the Time-Use in Prison. In *Beyond Scandinavian Exceptionalism: Normalization, Imprisonment and Society* (pp. 247-301). Springer International Publishing.
 8. Bosma, A., Kunst, M., Reef, J., Dirkzwager, A., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2016). Prison-Based Rehabilitation: Predictors of Offender Treatment Participation and Treatment Completion. *Crime & Delinquency*, 62(8), 1095-1120.
 9. Hellemans, A., Aertsen, I., & Goethals, J. (2008). *Externe evaluatie strategisch plan hulp- en dienstverlening aan gedetineerden*. Eindrapport.
 10. Kaiser, K. A., Keena, L., Piquero, A. R., & Howley, C. (2021). Barriers to inmate program participation in a private southern US prison. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 44(2), 165-179.

These barriers are not only recognised in prison studies. Ample research shows how vulnerable groups in society experience a variety of barriers hampering their participation. Looking at access to justice and welfare services, Cappelletti et al.¹¹ discussed economic, geographic, and psychological barriers to justice. These can be complemented by political, cognitive, and bureaucratic obstacles (focused on procedures, rules, and hierarchy).¹² When translated to the prison environment, the institutional and organisational needs of the prison system (e.g. bureaucracy) often conflict with the needs and rights of incarcerated people.¹³ Moreover, deficiencies in knowledge, information, insights, and skills among persons also contribute to more inequality in access.¹⁴ These findings are similarly important for prison researchers trying to understand these barriers.

A welfare state like Belgium, where the government wields significant influence over wealth distribution, aims primarily to address the exclusion of citizens by providing access to assistance and support for those needing it, inside and outside prison.¹⁵ It is common for individuals who conform to the rules and expectations of the welfare state to be recognised as 'responsible' and receive the benefits that come with it. Individuals who do not meet these expectations, lose benefits and are often deprived of their rights.¹⁶ This can also be applied to the prison population, with Kaiser et al. suggesting that incarcerated people with more self-control, fewer fears, less anger, and depression (and therefore conforming to expectations) experience fewer barriers in accessing activities and services.¹⁷ Prisons are designed for young, healthy men. This is institutional thoughtlessness, with little consideration given to the needs and sensitivities

of minority groups and especially vulnerable individuals.¹⁸

Digital tools are currently often put forward as the solution to overcome all kinds of barriers, however, research shows that it does not always facilitate access to justice, as intended.¹⁹ Less digitally literate citizens find the government less accessible and struggle to access relevant information, making obtaining the rights and benefits prescribed by legislation more difficult. This digital divide results in digital exclusion and new social divisions.²⁰ The approach to contacting people must align with the client's needs,²¹ which is this article's main focus.

Belgian Prison Context

This article focuses on the barriers to activities in two newly built Belgian prisons: Haren (2022) and Dendermonde (2023). These new prisons intend to improve material conditions and diminish overcrowding. Numerous old Belgian prisons face hygiene issues due to outdated infrastructure and unsanitary and degrading environments. Furthermore, there is a notable shortage of personnel, particularly among prison officers, resulting in regular prison officers' strikes, and exacerbating persistent problems of overcrowding.

The prisons of Haren and Dendermonde are, to Belgian standards, big prisons (1190 places in Haren and 444 in Dendermonde), function in public-private partnerships, and are located away from urban areas. The prison of Dendermonde is built according to the classical star-shaped architecture, while Haren is constructed in a campus-style design with smaller units. With the opening of both prisons, a system of job

Meaningful
engagement in
these activities can
be a crucial need
for incarcerated
people.

11. Cappelletti, M., Garth, B., Weisner, J., & Koch, K. F. (1978). *Access to Justice*, 4 Bände. Mailand: Giuffrè Editore, Alphen aan den Rijn, Sijthoff/Noordhoff.
12. Storgaard, A., Johansson, S., & Åström, K. (2023). Introduction. Access to justice from a multidisciplinary and socio-legal perspective: Barriers and facilitators. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 13(4), 1198-1208.
13. Chantraine, G. & Kaminski, D. (2008). *Rights in prison: Institutional police, juridical activism, democratic struggles*. Champ pénal, Séminaire Innovations Pénales.
14. See footnote 12.
15. Bauman, Z. (2003). *Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts* (Reprint). Polity.
16. Nielsen, S. P. P. & Hammerslev, O. (2018). Gadejuristen [The Street Lawyers]: Offering Legal Aid to Socially Marginalised People. In O. Halvorsen Rønning & O. Hammerslev (Red.), *Outsourcing Legal Aid in the Nordic Welfare States* (pp. 169-191). Springer International Publishing.
17. Kaiser, K. A., Piquero, A., Keena, L., & Howley, C. (2024). Assessing the Institutional Barriers and Individual Motivational Factors to Participation in Prison-Based Programs. *Crime & Delinquency*, 70(3), 870-893.
18. Dodd, S., Doyle, C., Dickinson, H., Buick, F., & Yates, S. (2024). The forgotten prisoners: Exploring the impact of imprisonment on people with disability in Australia. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 24(2), 395-412.
19. Kristiansen, B. L. (2023). Welcome to McDenmark. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 13(4), 1281-1297.
20. Faye Jacobsen, A. (2017). Digital Kommunikation i kommunerne. *The Danish Institute for Human Rights*.
21. See footnote 16.

differentiation between detention supervisors and security assistants is introduced among prison officers. Detention supervisors provide support to incarcerated people by being their first point of contact on the landings and making any referrals based on the specific needs of the incarcerated people they are working with. Security assistants are solely responsible for static security and the operation of the security systems. Also, different forms of digitalisation, such as a badge system to move independently within the prison at certain times, and an in-cell digital service platform that allows communication with internal services and provides information on the prison regime, are used in the new prisons. Both prisons function with open and semi-open regimes alongside closed regimes. The prison of Haren detains both men and women, persons in pre-trial detention, and convicted persons, while Dendermonde houses only male convicted and remanded persons.

Regarding the offer of activities it is important to know that the Belgian prison system is operated by staff under the responsibility of two different Governments.²² On the one hand, prison officers and other penitentiary staff work under the responsibility of the Federal Government and its Ministry of Justice. On the other hand, aid and service providers in prison work under the hierarchy of the Flemish, French, and German-speaking Communities, providing aid and services in their 'language' region. These services are organised according to an import model, which implies that the same activities and services in society should be offered in prison. This is also known as a collective form of normalisation,²³ most famously implemented in Norwegian prisons. As stated in the Federal Belgian Prison Act,²⁴ and the Flemish Decree on the organisation of aid and services for incarcerated people,²⁵ normalisation of the prison

regime is a leading principle, meaning that life in prison should closely resemble positive general standards of life in the outside world. Accordingly, incarcerated people should have access to the same services that are also available in society, which is converted into the import model.²⁶

An important note here is that these services, in theory, do not explicitly have to focus on reintegration or reduce recidivism but that they first and foremost ensure people's rights to have access to state aid and (support) services. A tangible example of how this import model is implemented in Flanders is that schools and teachers, operating outside the prison, must provide (a part of) their services within the correctional system and provide the same teachers, diplomas, and certifications as on the outside.²⁷ Aid and service providers of the Communities develop their range of activities in six different life domains, namely (1) well-being, (2) sports, (3) culture, (4) education, (5) employment, and (6) mental health.²⁸

The complex institutional organisation implies that aid and service providers often depend on an agreement with the prison governor to allow activities to proceed, and on the 'goodwill' of prison officers to get incarcerated people to their activities. Considering the regular strikes of prison officers due to the pressure of prison overcrowding and a staff shortage, this can be a real challenge and can hamper participation in activities in prison. Strikes we observe are not an uncommon occurrence in Belgian prisons, including national, local, and regional strikes. However, a comprehensive annual overview is not available. It is important to distinguish between the number of strike days and the number of strikes, as some strikes extend beyond 24 hours. Nevertheless, some figures can be found in the Central Supervisory Board for the Prison System's Annual Report,²⁹ and

Ample research shows how vulnerable groups in society experience a variety of barriers hampering their participation.

22. Snacken, S. (2007). Penal policy and practice in Belgium. *Crime and Justice*, 36(1), 127-215.

23. Snacken, S. (2002). Normalisation en prison: concept et défis. In O. De Schutter & D. Kaminski (eds.), *L'institution du droit pénitentiaire*. Enjeux de la reconnaissance de droits aux détenus (pp. 133-152). Paris/Brussels: Librairie Générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence et Bruylant.

24. Federal Belgian Prison Act (2005). *Basic Law on Prison Administration and the Legal Status of Incarcerated People*. Consulted on 17th April 2024, from https://etaamb.openjustice.be/nl/wet-van-12-januari-2005_n2005009033.html.

25. Flemish Government (2013). *Decree regarding the organization of assistance and services for incarcerated people*. <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1022861¶m=inhoud&ref=search&AVIDS=>

26. Snacken, S. & Kennes, P. (2017). De interne rechtspositie van gedetineerden. In K. Beyens & S. Snacken (Eds.), *Straffen een penologisch perspectief* (pp. 425-475). Maklu.

27. Vanhouche, A.S. (2022). Penal Policies in Belgium. In A.S. Vanhouche, *Prison Food* (pp. 35-59). Springer International Publishing.

28. Flemish Government (2024). Aid and services to incarcerated people. Consulted on 17th April 2024, from <https://www.vlaanderen.be/agentschap-justitie-en-handhaving/justitie/coördinatie-hulp-en-dienstverlening-aan-gedetineerden-en-geïnterneerden/hulp-en-dienstverlening-aan-gedetineerden>.

29. Central Supervisory Council for the Prison System (2023). *CTRG - Publications*. Central Supervisory Council for the Prison System. Consulted on June 7, 2024, from <https://citr.be/publications/>.

written questions to the Senate.³⁰ These statistics do not account for protest movements, emotional strikes, or other spontaneous work stoppages since these are not officially recorded. For instance, in 2019 (before Covid), there were 64 strikes. During the Covid period in prisons (2020 to 2022), there were between 21 and 32 strikes. In 2023, the number stands at 18. In 2024, the number of strike days will be significantly higher since there was a month-long strike in April that occurred across various prisons. These numbers indicate that strikes in Belgian prisons are an additional barrier to the offer and participation in activities.

Aid and service providers are not bound by the Federal Government and the Ministry of Justice. Therefore, they do not have to report to them and operate under professional secrecy. This distinction between the Federal Government and the Communities, each with their roles, provides particular benefits and challenges to implement services from a welfare perspective in a (static) security-focused prison environment. Considering the move to the new prisons, aid, and service providers have raised questions about the impact of the introduction of detention supervisors and the digital platform on the organisation of aid and services, and on certain activities. They also felt the need to fully grasp the struggle and needs of incarcerated people in these new prisons.

Therefore, policy coordinators of the Flemish Community and researchers of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel set up a Participatory Action Research, initiated using project funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, to identify these

needs and set up actions. Based on Participatory Action Research, which was conducted in the prisons of Haren and Dendermonde, this article describes the barriers and needs of incarcerated people regarding the access to and nature of activities in prison.

**Participatory Action Research Methodology:
Cooperation and Co-Design**

In 2023, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was initiated to identify the needs of various stakeholders in the prisons of Haren and Dendermonde. This broad approach was chosen because PAR typically develops and formulates research questions in collaboration with the people involved. However, due to delays in the construction and opening of the prisons, the digital platform was not initiated yet, and not all activities had been fully implemented at the time of the research. This initial starting phase should be taken into account in the interpretation of the data.

Our participatory approach involved close collaboration between researchers from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and incarcerated people, aid and service providers from different Communities, policy coordinators from the Flemish Community, detention supervisors, and prison governors to shape the research, enhance insights, and achieve multidisciplinary knowledge. This involved composing a project group comprising various stakeholders who convened every month, bringing together perspectives from both prisons and a variety of experts, to reflect on the subsequent steps in the (research) process.

Figure 1. *Different steps of Participatory Action Research in Haren and Dendermonde*



30. Belgian Senate (2013). *Written question no. 5-9951*. Consulted on June 7, 2024, from <https://www.senate.be/www/?MIval=/Vragen/SVPrint&LEG=5&NR=9951&LANG=nl>.

The first step we took with the project group, and with the incarcerated people from Haren, Dendermonde, and other Belgian prisons, was to create a questionnaire to be administered to the incarcerated population of Haren and Dendermonde. The questionnaire was inspired by prior (strength-based) needs and requirements research, as well as the Prison Climate Questionnaire, which is a validated questionnaire measuring different aspects of the prison climate as explained by Bosma et al.³¹ Based on the input of the project group and other incarcerated people, sensitive questions were rephrased, unclear terms were adjusted to prison jargon (e.g. the term 'detention supervisor' was changed to 'chief'), and the questionnaire was shortened collaboratively. Subsequently, researchers, prison governor(s), prison staff, and incarcerated people convened to discuss the method of the questionnaires. Various strategies, such as explaining the research at cell doors, downstairs on the landings or units or in groups in a classroom, were implemented to motivate incarcerated people as much as possible to complete the questionnaire. Each incarcerated person had the opportunity to participate in the questionnaire after receiving an explanation about the research. Incarcerated project group members encouraged fellow incarcerated people to participate in the research and fill out the questionnaire in their cells.

To ensure that researchers could remain available for further questions from incarcerated people, we set up a toll-free telephone number and returned multiple times to the prisons to answer questions. At the time of the study, calls to this number were made up to 3 times a week. A year later (June 2024), calls are still received biweekly. This provides greater proximity and accessibility to the research. Subsequently, multiple collection moments were scheduled to provide individuals with various opportunities to participate. Questionnaires were also filled out with the assistance of the researchers in case individuals indicated difficulties in reading or writing. In Haren, the response rate was 47.6 per cent (156 respondents of the 358 incarcerated people during the time of data collection), and in Dendermonde 48.3 per cent (200

respondents of the 414 incarcerated people during the time of data collection).

The second step involved conducting interviews with incarcerated people and aid and service providers. The topics covered during the interviews were discussed beforehand with the project group. To recruit respondents, all incarcerated people were asked to fill out a form during the distribution of the questionnaires to indicate whether they wished to participate in an additional interview. It was also possible for people to refuse participation in the questionnaire but still be willing to take part in an interview. To ensure diversity in our sample of incarcerated respondents, we conducted interviews with a range of individuals in both Haren and Dendermonde. In Haren, we interviewed 10 convicted

men: 5 Dutch speakers and 5 French speakers, as well as a mix of 5 convicted and accused women: 1 English speaker, 1 Dutch speaker, and 3 French speakers. In Dendermonde, we interviewed 16 incarcerated men, consisting of 13 Dutch speakers and 3 French speakers, including both convicted men and those on remand. We also interviewed 18 staff members from the aid and service providers of the Flemish and French Communities in Haren. In Dendermonde, we interviewed 15 employees of the Flemish Community, including four detention supervisors tasked with supporting activities. In total 64 interviews were conducted. The interviews with the aid and service providers extend the

scope of this article and will not be further discussed.

By employing various data collection methods (e.g. close collaboration with stakeholders through the project group, intense presence in both prisons, and participation in activities, questionnaires, and interviews), efforts were made to mitigate language and mental barriers as much as possible and to detect the needs of our stakeholders as broadly as possible. It should be mentioned that, particularly in the Brussels prison of Haren, the language diversity of the population is very high, creating additional barriers to reaching out.

During the data collection, we also began analysing the data in the software programs SPSS (questionnaires) and MAXQDA (interviews) and sharing our reflections with the project group. This meant that

We observe that the traditional methods of communication (e.g. flyers and written report notes) do not effectively reach the target group.

31. Bosma, A. Q., van Ginneken, E., Palmen, H., Pasma, A. J., Beijersbergen, K. A., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2020). A new instrument to measure prison climate: The psychometric quality of the prison climate questionnaire. *The Prison Journal*, 100(3), 355-380.

the project group was closely involved in analysing and reflecting on the results, which maximally incorporated the perceptions of the (incarcerated) respondents. While our analysis did not focus on how these perceptions differ between the intentions of the staff and the experiences of incarcerated people, we noticed that the (negative) experiences of incarcerated people sometimes starkly differed from the positive intentions employees have.

Between October and December 2023, we organised two brainstorming sessions per prison to prioritise the needs identified in the research. These brainstorming sessions were open to all interested stakeholders and were not limited to the project group participants. In each session, there were typically around 20 to 25 attendees, primarily consisting of aid and service providers, followed by incarcerated people, researchers from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and detention supervisors. The results section will focus on the needs deemed the most urgent by the attendees.

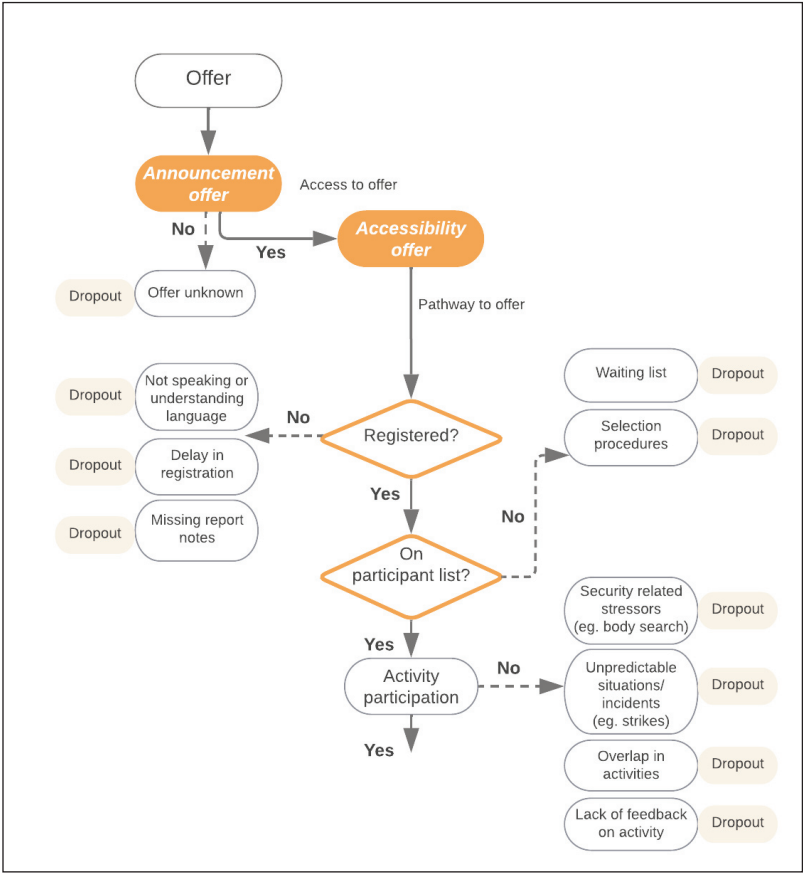
Information and Communication Needs
for Equal Access

The need for enhanced information and communication about available activities and the broader prison regime was very prominent. Communication is broadly understood here, encompassing the messages exchanged between stakeholders and the (in)ability to communicate and consequently express one’s own needs. At the time of the fieldwork, communication was still conducted through flyers and written report notes, as in many other Belgian prisons. As the digital communication platform had not yet been launched, this kind of communication could not be included in the research.

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Figure 2 illustrates where these needs regarding communication about the offered activities lie.³² It draws the communication path of the offered activities and shows the numerous potential dropouts.

Figure 2. Communication path of the offered activities (Termote, et al., 2024)



32. Termote, E., De Boe, L., Vanhouche, A.S., Beyens, K., Jans, A., & Meeus, E. (2024). Noden inzake het activiteitenaanbod in de nieuwe gevangenis van Haren en Dendermonde: Kinderziektes of oude kwalen? *Fatik*, 41(182), 7-25.

Announcement Offer

The data show that many incarcerated people are not aware of the available activities and that current communication methods are not adequate to reach the

individuals. Also (but not exclusively), non-native speakers who do not speak Dutch, French, or English (the three common languages of the personnel), and persons who are not proficient in reading and/or writing are easily left out.

Table 1. Percentage of incarcerated people indicating whether they do or do not agree with a statement about knowledge of activities in Haren (N = 108) and Dendermonde (N = 148).

Statement: I know which activities are taking place.	Completely not true	Not true	Sometimes	Agree	Completely agree
Haren	18.5 per cent	17.6 per cent	35.2 per cent	16.7 per cent	12 per cent
Dendermonde	10.8 per cent	10.1 per cent	36.5 per cent	31.8 per cent	10.8 per cent

In Haren, only 28.7 per cent and in Dendermonde 42.6 per cent of the incarcerated respondents (completely) agree that they know which activities are taking place. A substantial group of respondents in both prisons indicate that they are ‘sometimes’ aware of the activities (35.2 per cent in Haren and 36.5 per

cent in Dendermonde). It is striking that 63.7 per cent (agree or completely agree) of the incarcerated respondents in Dendermonde indicate that the information received in prison primarily comes from fellow incarcerated people. In Haren, this percentage is even higher (72.2 per cent).

Table 2. Percentage of incarcerated people who indicate whether or not they agree with a statement about receiving information via other incarcerated people in Haren (N = 122) and Dendermonde (N = 149).

Statement: The information I receive about the prison primarily comes from fellow detainees.	Completely not true	Not true	Sometimes	Agree	Completely agree
Haren	6.6 per cent	4.9 per cent	16.4 per cent	36.1 per cent	36.1 per cent
Dendermonde	6 per cent	8.1 per cent	22.1 per cent	29.5 per cent	34.2 per cent

This leads to inequalities in the flow of information about the offer and creates a Matthew effect, namely that when incarcerated people have some knowledge about the offer, they often participate more in the activities and thus become further informed about other activities. Those who do not receive the information consequently have fewer opportunities to participate in the activities.

Our respondents further link these barriers to the need for more low-threshold and outreach work by aid and service providers. Incarcerated respondents expect a more proactive attitude from aid and service providers and a greater presence on the units in Haren or prison wings in Dendermonde, aiming to inform incarcerated people more orally and informally about their offer.

Knowledge About the Offer, But Not Registered

Additionally, we observe that being aware of the offer, and being motivated to participate, does not equate to being able to participate effectively in an

activity. Even when the intrinsic motivation of people in detention is high, they encounter institutional barriers. Before one can participate effectively, there are still several steps to take: registering, being placed on the participant list, and moving from the cell to the location where the activity occurs.

Some incarcerated people already encounter barriers in the first step, namely registration. The method used in Belgian prisons entails that persons (should) receive a flyer about a particular activity and can register by submitting a completed report note. This method already expects a proactive attitude from individuals and assumes that the incarcerated people (can) take the first step towards the offer. Furthermore, 29.1 per cent of individuals in detention from Haren indicate they only sometimes know how to register, and 17.3 per cent indicate they do not know how to do this at all. In Dendermonde, a quarter of respondents (24.8 per cent) indicate they ‘sometimes’ know how to register, while 12.8 per cent indicate they do not know how to do this at all.

Some respondents indicated that they filled out the report note too late. Often they only become aware of the offer through fellow incarcerated people, when an activity has already started and registrations are already closed (due to the limited number of available places for certain activities). Sometimes registration deadlines may also change, causing one to miss a deadline out of habit:

'A good system, not really (...) Like for example the fitness, then you had to hand it [the report note] in on Friday. Friday morning, okay, and then you do that, and then suddenly it changed, and it's Thursday morning that you have to hand it in. In other words, ah, it's too late. You have to wait another week.'
(respondent 6, Dendermonde)

Finally, some respondents expressed doubts about whether the report note reached the right persons (e.g. through the detention supervisor in the unit or wing to the aid and service providers). Also report notes went missing, as sometimes people did not receive any information after handing in notes.

Registered, But Not On the Participant List

For the activities provided by the Communities (e.g. Flemish Government), a list is compiled of incarcerated people who may participate, sometimes based on selection interviews. The list is then dispensed to prison staff. At this stage, consideration is also given to which individuals in detention may or may not participate (e.g. persons who are not allowed to come into contact with each other), sometimes resulting in an additional selection process. In this case, a 'waiting list,' is created in case certain individuals from the initial list no longer wish, are able or allowed to participate, which can create a kind of cascading system. The unpredictability of potentially ending up on a waiting list also discourages some respondents from participating at a later time or from re-registering for another activity in the future. Moreover, for many activities, there are insufficient places.

Incarcerated people also describe access to certain activities as unpredictable because they perceive the selection procedures as unfair, including placement on a waiting list or participant list. For example, some may get work assignments faster than others who have

been on the waiting list longer, and, according to some of our respondents, it's often the same persons who end up on participant lists for activities. There's also a perception that behaving 'well' during an activity, which means actively participating and not being distracted by other things, leads to being selected for the next activity more easily. Additionally, the ability to participate more frequently and quickly may also depend on whether incarcerated people cancel previous activities.

On the Participant List, But Not Participating

Several stressors or unpredictable circumstances further contribute to dropout even when persons are already on the participant list. One of the reasons for dropping out among incarcerated people is linked to

security-related stressors during the movement to an activity. Specifically in Dendermonde, our respondents indicate that various security checks are applied, leading to frustrations. For instance, persons may undergo body searches in front of their cell and must pass through several metal detectors before being allowed to attend an activity. Moreover, these security checks consume a lot of time, sometimes causing individuals to arrive late at an activity. It is also common that persons do not get through the metal detector due to certain clothing, which prevents them from attending

the activity.

Another security-related stressor is associated with the badge system. Regarding the transfer to an activity, we observed that in Haren, at the time of the study, a digital badge was already being used by incarcerated people to move independently from their cells to an activity. However, this badge system can be problematic since persons still need to wait for approval to open the doors after badging. Often, individuals have to wait unknowingly for a long time behind a door before they can proceed, leading to frustrations. Consequently, to avoid conflicts with detention supervisors, some persons decide not to participate in an activity.

'And then you're constantly wondering: What is it now? What's going to happen now? Is it [the activity] going to take place or not? That's constantly on your mind, so I said: I don't want those worries anymore. I'm quitting the whole thing.' (respondent 6, Dendermonde)

Several stressors or unpredictable circumstances further contribute to dropout even when persons are already on the participant list.

Next to security-related stressors, some unpredictable situations ultimately prevent people from participating in an activity. For instance, incarcerated people in both prisons sometimes encounter issues with the summoning system. Again, the summoning process may sometimes proceed

differently, and it occasionally happens that individuals are forgotten to be called out of their cells. This leads to confusion and stress, causing people to drop out. Furthermore, this may result in a delayed start of the activity, leading to a shortened duration.

Table 3. *Percentage of incarcerated people indicating whether or not they agree with a statement about the summoning to activities by prison staff (officers) in Haren (N = 124) and Dendermonde (N = 148).*

Statement: <i>The officers summon me to go to activities.</i>	Completely not true	Not true	Sometimes	Agree	Completely agree
Haren	14.5 per cent	4.8 per cent	37.1 per cent	33.1 per cent	10.5 per cent
Dendermonde	7.4 per cent	8.8 per cent	33.1 per cent	34.5 per cent	16.2 per cent

Approximately one-third of the incarcerated people in Dendermonde indicate ‘sometimes’ being called out for activities by the detention supervisor. Similarly, in Haren, most people respond ‘sometimes’ to this statement, highlighting the unpredictability of the summoning system. An additional issue regarding the summoning system reported in both Haren and Dendermonde is the incorrect information sometimes provided about the activity for which persons are being called out of their cells. This often leads to confusion about which activity they should attend, resulting in refusal.

Unpredictability also arises from prison staff strikes. This unexpectedly cancels activities, leading to frustrations. In this light, incarcerated people deem it crucial that strikes and their impact on activities be clearly communicated to them, as exemplified by the following respondent:

‘(...) That one day when they announced it (a strike) nicely, that there’s no visit that day, except conjugal visit, and that there are no activities and such. So mentally, it was just so nice because you can prepare yourself for it (...). I knew that day was going to be a strike so I could already imagine in my head, today I have to spend more time in my cell, so that’s not a problem, you know?’ (respondent 4, Dendermonde)

Furthermore, we observe that the accessibility of the offer may be hindered by overlapping activities. Due to a lack of communication and feedback regarding the cancellation or continuation of an activity, individuals sometimes attend one activity while also being expected at another. Additionally, moments such as receiving visitors or being called for a meeting with a lawyer inhibit participation in activities. This overlap subsequently leads to other problems, as individuals

must justify their absence from an activity with a valid reason. Failure to do so results in being removed from the participant list after several occurrences. Respondents feel powerless about this, as they do not choose the overlap and are not always able to communicate why they cannot participate.

In response to the statement from the questionnaire, ‘I cannot participate in all the activities I want because they take place at the same time’, 53 per cent of respondents from Haren agree. In Dendermonde, 39.5 per cent indicate they cannot participate in activities due to overlap. In both prisons, incarcerated people mention that when activities overlap, work takes priority due to the financial compensation, because they want to minimise financial dependence on family or friends. Furthermore, incarcerated people often prefer time in the courtyard over other activities because it is one of the few opportunities to spend time outdoors.

‘Having to choose between walking or an activity. None of us really like that. We’re locked up 22 hours out of 24. We have 2 hours for a walk and if you get something extra, they take it away, like sports or fitness, like all activities... They even want to prevent you from going for a walk when you have visitors.’ (respondent 8, Dendermonde)

Conclusion

The Belgian prison system grapples with a complex state structure where different governments collaborate, each with their responsibilities: the Federal Government is responsible for the organisation of detention, while the Communities are responsible for aid and service provision. The aim of the Communities, as described in their Strategic Plan, is to provide a high-

quality offer across its six domains: well-being, sports, culture, education, employment, and mental health.³³

Our study focused on the experiences of incarcerated people regarding these activities and the needs they identify. We found that several barriers impede access to these activities. Aid and service providers operate in an import model, wherein services offered by society are brought into the prison system. However, it is crucial to note that access to justice, legal aid, and welfare services is unequal both outside and inside the prison system.

Research indicates that free citizens encounter various obstacles when trying to access aid and services to which they are entitled.³⁴ When these services are introduced into the prison system, the existing obstacles persist, and an additional layer of vulnerability is created due to the constrained, closed, and security-dominated environment of the total institution. Here people cannot easily request additional low-threshold support (e.g. from relatives or other outreach services). Consequently, the aforementioned obstacles are at least as significant within the prison context and, in some cases, even more prevalent.

At the time of the research, the available activities were announced through flyers and report notes. However, by 2024, both prisons had implemented a digital platform. This platform aims to facilitate faster communication and provides more opportunities for direct feedback, which can be very beneficial. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the downside of this digital communication method, as not everyone possesses the same level of digital skills. Digital communication does not necessarily lead to equal access and may create additional barriers through overly quick and uniform communication that is not sufficiently tailored to the diverse prison population. To avoid exacerbating the digital divide, Kristiansen emphasises the importance of recognising these barriers.³⁵ Ritzer even argues to always ask for and choose personal service when possible rather than solely offering digital options.³⁶

Furthermore, the results indicate that much of the knowledge about the activities is shared informally among incarcerated people. On the one hand, this can be seen as a significant strength, providing a valuable source of knowledge that fills gaps and demonstrates solidarity and helpfulness. On the other hand, it should be noted that the responsibility for providing access to these offerings should not (primarily) rely on incarcerated people. This practice reinforces inequalities in access to the offer because incarcerated people with more social contacts and who already participate in activities gain greater access to the offerings. Therefore, the knowledge that incarcerated people already possess and share should also be supported by professionals. As discussed during our brainstorming sessions, this can involve providing information from one incarcerated person to another in a readily accessible manner, regardless of their offences, personal situation, or social contacts. It was also mentioned that this information should be provided throughout the entire period of detention, and not just at the beginning of the sentence.

The current communication methods used in prisons may thus be considered inadequate. As highlighted by Kristiansen's research, digitalisation isn't the ultimate solution to previous obstacles.³⁷ Instead, as underscored during the brainstorming sessions, a variety of methods should be employed to address barriers and tackle inequality and inaccessibility of aid and services.³⁸ Also, Brosens et al. previously demonstrated the importance of utilising multiple communication channels, including written communication, visual materials, and (in)formal verbal communication.³⁹

If we genuinely aim to achieve the prescribed legal framework,⁴⁰ we need to explore alternatives that are easily accessible. A broader, multidisciplinary perspective on access to aid and services could help find new approaches, eliminate inequalities,⁴¹ and strengthen accessibility.

We extend our thanks to Elias Woodbridge for his feedback on spelling and grammar.

33. See footnote 28.

34. See footnotes 11, 19, and 20.

35. See footnote 19.

36. Ritzer, G. (2013). *The McDonaldization of Society: 20th Anniversary edition*. Sage.

37. See footnote 19.

38. See footnote 16.

39. Brosens, D., De Donder, L., & Verté, D. (2013). *Hulp- en dienstverlening gevangenis Antwerpen: Een onderzoek naar de behoeften van gedetineerden*. Digitale Drukkerij BZ-AFM.

40. See footnote 24.

41. See footnote 11.