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Empirical research on the impact and experience of open prisons: state of the field and future directions

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Introduction

The term ‘open prison’ can be used to mean different things depending on the jurisdiction or institution, but generally refers to a prison into which residents are not fully or always locked.¹ Relative to their ‘closed’ counterparts, open prisons generally afford detainees a greater connection to the outside world, often through access to family and day release for employment, volunteering and education. As such, progressive prison reformers and scholars often tout the potential benefits of open conditions for the wellbeing and reintegration of people in custody² — relative, at least, to the generally deleterious effect of entirely closed regimes.³ Yet, compared with research on closed prisons, there remains only a modest quantity of empirical work on open prisons, even considering the low proportion of incarcerated people in open prisons in most countries.⁴ Similarly, few studies attend to the experience of staffing open prisons, despite a burgeoning literature on prison officers.⁵ There must be further research on the impact and experiences of living or working in open prisons to enhance our understanding of different prison regimes and inform penal policy.

In preparation for such a project in Ireland, we identified and reviewed published empirical studies that present primary data and speak to the dynamics,

experience or impact of open prisons. Recent research suggests that the quality of prison life affects desistance and other outcomes.⁶ Our forthcoming study is concerned with whether and why the open prison experience differs from that in a closed institution. As such, this review focuses on empirical, academic research that explores resident and staff experiences of open prisons, especially those using primary data to build theory.⁷ Despite its limited scope and quantity, this literature indicates many themes that are ripe for further exploration through empirical research in open prisons. This is important, given the simultaneous public health, moral, social and economic imperatives to rethink the usage, functions, governance and conditions of imprisonment and other penal sanctions.

The first three sections of this article focus on themes emerging from the literature. Firstly, it discusses the benefits and challenges for residents associated with the greater autonomy provided in open prisons. Secondly, it outlines quantitative and qualitative efforts to examine the impact of open conditions on residents, noting that methodologically rigorous approaches are needed to draw generalisable conclusions. Thirdly, it considers findings on the cultures and relationships in open prisons. The final section proposes several themes and methodologies for future study, concluding that there is a pressing need for a range of stakeholders to collaborate on exploring the impact and experience of living and working in open prison conditions.

1. Mastrobuoni, G. and Terlizzese, D. (2014). EIEF Working Paper 13/14, Rehabilitating Rehabilitation: Prison Conditions and Recidivism. Retrieved from http://www.eief.it/files/2014/11/wp-13-rehabilitating-rehabilitation_prison-conditions-and-recidivism.pdf
2. See, for example, Irish Penal Reform Trust (2017). Open Prisons. Retrieved from <https://www.iprt.ie/reintegration-of-offenders/open-prisons/>
3. Cullen, F., Jonson, C., and Nagin, D. (2011). Prisons do not reduce recidivism: the high cost of ignoring science, *The Prison Journal*, 91(3), 48-65.
4. Pakes, F. (2020). Old-fashioned Nordic penal exceptionalism: the case of Iceland’s open prisons, *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 21(2), 113-128.
5. Garrihy, J. (2020). ‘There are fourteen grey areas’: ‘Jailing’, professionalism and legitimacy in prison officers’ occupational cultures, *Irish Probation Journal*, 17, 128-150.
6. Auty, K. and Liebling, A. (2020). Exploring the Relationship between Prison Social Climate and Reoffending in *Justice Quarterly*, 37(2), 358-381.
7. Bodies of literature beyond the scope of this review include commentaries on the history and policies of open prisons, studies of the prisons or penal institutions beyond the prison estate that support independent living but are generally not defined as ‘open’, and that which focuses on absconding, day release or the pursuit of ‘normality’ in prison regimes more widely.

Notwithstanding any potential benefits relative to closed conditions, however, we must also compare open prisons with community-based sanctions to develop a fully informed penal policy.

Open prisons: the international empirical literature

Research on closed prison environments has advanced rapidly in recent years; a burgeoning literature written by people currently or formerly in custody,⁸ and the use of data produced through the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life survey,⁹ are two examples. At the same time, empirical research on the experiences of living and working in an open prison is conspicuously limited. That which has been published is generally small scale and far from comprehensively answers the range of questions one might ask relating to the impact or dynamics of open prisons.

In preparation for a study of open prisons in Ireland, we identified and reviewed eighteen directly relevant, accessible and published studies, pertaining to residents' experiences of residing under open prison conditions. This included peer-reviewed journal articles, one book (published in 1973) and several non-peer-reviewed publications, such as master's and doctoral dissertations and government reports based on primary research conducted using academic methodologies. The research included both quantitative and qualitative methods, and took place in several jurisdictions, including in England and Wales (5), Norway (3), Iceland, Finland, Brazil, Sweden, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Scotland and Australia (from which there were one publication each). These were identified through electronic searches for literature with key words, and is not exhaustive of the field. Over 80 percent of this literature was published in the last decade, and only two studies each involved female institutions, or collected data from staff. Here, we divide their findings

into three themes: the benefits and challenges relating to the freedom afforded open prisons' residents; the outcomes for people who spend time in open prisons; and the cultures and relationships in open prisons.

A taste of freedom?

*'Open prison can be seen as a secure social world in which offenders have the opportunity to develop constructive interpersonal relationships with one another, with staff, and with people from the free world. This creates a sense of acceptance in the convict's perception of the outside world and positively reshapes his self-definition.'*¹⁰

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Relative to the closed environments that most residents seemingly previously experienced, the material conditions reported in this literature — including the food, accessibility of technology and services, and the quality of the sanitation and other infrastructure — were mostly better in open prisons.¹¹ At the same time, many authors focused principally on the unique dynamics emerging from the relative autonomy afforded residents of open prisons. In

many, people in custody were permitted regularly to leave for work, education or to spend time with their family; in others, the freedom described was primarily within the confines of prison gates. Researchers and participants spoke positively of both regime types, especially in terms of the opportunities for self-sufficiency enabled therein. For the open prison residents in Iceland who played a significant, proactive role in running and maintaining their institution, for example, Parkes believed that 'some of the prison-ness of their experience is negated or reduced'.¹² This raises the possibility that semi-autonomous living may reduce the intensity and negativity of the prison experience.

8. Earle, R. (2017). *Convict Criminology: Inside and Out*, Policy Press: Cambridge; Ross, J. & Vianello, F. (Eds.) (2020). *Convict Criminology for the Future*, Routledge: Abingdon.

9. Auty and Liebling (2020) op. cit.

10. Ekunwe, I. (2007). *Gentle justice: an analysis of open prison systems in Finland. A way to the future?* Retrieved from <https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/67756>, p.143.

11. In one study (Parkes, 2020, op. cit.), for example, access to personal telephones and computers (albeit, not smart phones or social media) was 'the principle material condition that prisoners talk about in most approving terms', (p.117) allowing for access to games, extended communication with family and entrepreneurship opportunities.

12. Parkes (2020) op. cit. p.122.

At the same time, the research also found that different types of 'pains'¹³ emerged in more autonomous regimes. In Norway, Shammas described the 'pains of freedom': prisoners experience confusion, anxiety, ambiguity and relative deprivation as they have more individual responsibility than in closed prisons, and experience a 'taste of freedom' or a life 'proximate to freedom', but in a 'liminal space'.¹⁴ Other studies similarly implied that residents felt within 'touching distance' of the outside world, but ever-conscious that they were never truly free, remaining controlled through the regulations, restrictions and other measures inherent in prison regimes: rigid routines,¹⁵ counts and checks¹⁶ and, for some, ineligibility for day release.

Open prisons can create confusion by encouraging an autonomous mindset while imposing curfews, requiring urine tests and restricting possessions. Researchers found the residents and staff alike expressing ambivalence and uncertainty, especially when given conflicting instructions that left them unclear about the extent to which their institution represented freedom or containment.¹⁷ A consistent theme was that, with unlocked gates and limited staff intervention, the responsibility to remain lies with the person in custody.¹⁸ These invisible and internalised barriers, alongside the constant (implicit or explicit) threat of return to closed conditions, the difficulties in transitioning from closed to open environments, and the rehabilitative obligations and pressures to self-improve, represent subtler forms of control than exist in closed conditions, but can be experienced as even more onerous and stressful.¹⁹ In other words, the pains of open imprisonment may diverge in their character and intensity from those in closed prisons, requiring further study to establish the degree of their generalisability,

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their causes and impact, and how, if at all, they can be alleviated.

Questions remain as to the extent to which open prisons are experienced as empowering or disempowering, and as pro- or anti-therapeutic. The highly selective process of transfer to an open prison might result in the exclusion of those with the most complex needs from such institutions. For those that do move to open conditions, their experience likely depends on whether their prison has the resources to respond to their particular needs. For example, people with untreated, complex mental illnesses, foreign nationals, those who lack capacities around self-sufficiency, or even those who find it difficult to live communally and with limited privacy, will only thrive if the institution has and allocates the resources to

support them as individuals.²⁰ Indeed, mental health difficulties and illnesses are still commonplace in open prisons that often suffer the same strains on services as closed institutions.²¹ By implication, any potential benefits of open prisons over closed prisons are constrained by prevailing conditions in the wider penal system, insofar as these determine both the demographics and needs of residents, and the resources and services available.

Outcomes for residents

Given that the research distinguishes between open and closed prisons, we should examine whether outcomes for open prisons' residents differ from those for whom their only experience of prison is in a closed prison, and whether any differences relate to the conditions of imprisonment. The research on this topic is limited, and questions remain about its reliability, given its generally small scale and the lack of control groups or randomisation. Still, its findings indicate the

13. Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, Princeton University Press: Princeton.
14. Shammas, V. (2014). The pains of freedom: assessing the ambiguity of Scandinavia penal exceptionalism on Norway's prison island. *Punishment & Society*, 16(1), 104-123, p.114.
15. Osment, L. (2018). The complexity of rehabilitation in open and closed prison settings. Retrieved from: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/8948730>
16. Jones, H. and Cornes, P. (1977). *Open Prisons*, Routledge: London.
17. Jones and Cornes (1977), Osment (2018) – op. cit.
18. Shammas (2014) op. cit.
19. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Pantheon Books: New York City; Barrachina, M. (2019). Prisiones abiertas: la supervisión de la pena de prisión en semilibertad. *Revista Electrónica de Ciencia Penal y Criminología*, 21-07, 1-26; Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509-529; Parkes (2020) op. cit.
20. Parkes (2020) op. cit.
21. Baumann, M., Meyers, R., Le Bihan, E. and Houssemand, C. (2008). Mental health (GHQ12; CES-D) and attitudes towards the value of work among inmates of a semi-open prison and the long-term unemployed in Luxembourg. *BMC Public Health*, 18(8), 214-224.

potential benefits of open versus closed prisons and suggest avenues for further study.

Studies on open prisons' impact focused on a range of indicators. One Scottish, qualitative report concluded that the additional contact with the outside world and more normalised contact with family enabled by open regimes, helped ease the transition from custody to release.²² Other studies focused on prisoner wellbeing. One, taking place in England and Wales and using mixed methods, found that older prisoners were more satisfied with the quality of life in an open unit than in a closed unit;²³ one quantitative study in three Belgian prisons (including one open institution) found significantly lower levels of distress among those in the open system.²⁴ In a study of English open prisons in the 1970s, the researchers expressed surprise that the institutions closely resembled closed prisons, but concluded that factors within each prison may explain different rates of prisoner wellbeing. For example, whether residents were mostly short- or long-term, levels of staff training and sympathy, space available within each prison, coherence of rules, communication channels, atmosphere, and the presence or absence of education and other programmes, could all help explain positive and negative elements of the incarceration experience.²⁵ This implies that being 'open' is not enough to ensure a substantially better experience, in the absence of other services and features of a regime. As such, researchers should explore which elements of open prisons relate to positive experiences and how these could be replicated across open (and closed)

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Quantitative research also provided some positive results around violence, reoffending and costs. For example, one study from an Italian open prison found favourable rates of recidivism and violence, compared with closed institutions.²⁶ At a female open prison in Australia, Botello reports low rates of recidivism that compare favourably with Nordic rates, despite the limited availability of rehabilitative programmes in the open centre.²⁷ Other studies have pointed to the lower financial costs of open prisons due to lower staffing and security levels, and the benefits to local and national communities and economies of having those in custody engaged in education or employment.²⁸

Open prisons are of particular interest to scholars who hypothesise a relationship between the autonomy and normality they permit and outcomes for residents.²⁹ Yet, the methods that could reliably detect any such differences require researchers to control for several variables. One recent paper suggested that an open prison gave residents 'opportunities to change their life situation, so that they had something to look forward to after release' by providing new learning opportunities.³⁰ Yet, the author obtained these data through focus groups with 27 residents, so they cannot confirm the hypothesis that the learning opportunities provided in that prison improved reintegration. Open prisons often have strict criteria for transfer, meaning that their populations'

22. Armstrong, S. Malloch, M. Norris, P. and Nellis, M. (2011). Evaluation of the use of Home Detention Curfew and the open prison estate in Scotland, Retrieved from webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20170706155303/http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/07/08105629/1; Borg, L. (2017). Frihet under ansvar pa Gruvbergets oppna anstalt. Retrieved from diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1117935/FULLTEXT01.pdf; Osment (2018) op. cit.
23. De Motte, C. (2015). Understanding older male prisoners' satisfaction with quality of life and wellbeing. Retrieved from irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/31213/1/Claire%20de%20Motte%202015%20excl3rdpartycopyright.pdf
24. Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M. and Dezutter, J. (2017). Loss of meaning as a predictor of distress in prison. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61(3), 1441-1432.
25. Jones and Cornes (1977) op. cit.
26. Mastrobuoni and Terlizze (2014) op. cit.
27. Botello, C. (2017). Women's imprisonment and recidivism: an illustrative analysis of Boronia Women's Pre-release Centre (Western Australia) and progressive/open prison systems in Norway and Sweden. Retrieved from: <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/172/>
28. Armstrong, et al. (2011), Ekunwe (2007), Mastrobuoni and Terlizze, (2014) and Shammass (2014) – op. cit.
29. Shammass (2014) op. cit.
30. Andvig, E., Koffeld-Hamidane, S, Ausland, L. and Bengt, K. (2020). Inmates' perceptions and experiences of how they were prepared for release from a Norwegian open prison. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, Online First.

characteristics do not reflect those across the prison estate. Thus, even if statistics showed that people released from open prisons more ably reintegrated or were less likely to reoffend than those released from closed prisons (or that open prisons have lower rates of violence than in closed prisons, and so on), this could relate to population demographics, rather than the type of regime. Quantitative studies need to match and track comparable individuals when searching for relationships between open or closed regimes (or elements of the 'openness' of a regime) and outcomes for residents.

Cultures and relationships

A related difficulty in drawing conclusions from the open prisons research lies in the need to disentangle the factors that cause any observed benefits. It may be that open prisons, compared to closed prisons, are uniquely conducive to a strong performance on certain metrics. Yet, research suggests that wellbeing and outcomes vary markedly between closed prisons, depending on their social climate, legitimacy and cultures.³¹ Moreover, contact with one's family, the availability of educational programmes, and other measures of 'prison quality', help explain a high proportion of variance in the distress that people in custody experience, and may be available in open prisons or not, depending on institutional policies and practices.³² As such, it may be that any benefit of open prisons is as contingent on institutional cultures and climate, as it is on security levels.

Indeed, the literature on open prisons often points to the importance of institutional cultures and staff-prisoner relationships in explaining positive findings. For example, in one study of Dutch open prisons, Borg found that staff's humane treatment of prisoners

strengthened the rehabilitative process.³³ Similarly, a study in Norway hypothesised a link between the humaneness of treatment and the reduction in feelings of stigma.³⁴ Ekunwe studied open prisons in Finland and observed an 'atmosphere [...] of humility and dignity where inmates and guards address each other by their first name and the prison superintendents use non-military titles like governor, while prisoners may be referred to as 'clients'.³⁵ A study of a Belgian open prison found a 'more personal and therapeutic approach to its prisoners' and 'a staff that fosters personal relationships with prisoners', compared with similar, closed prisons; this, the researcher asserted, related to lower levels of stress among people in

custody.³⁶ In Leira, Norway, open conditions were underpinned by a strong and self-sustaining management philosophy — consequence pedagogy — for which staff built positive, trusting relationships with those in their care, encouraging them to self-regulate and problem solve, and consciously directing their practice towards reinforcing the philosophy. Interpersonal conflicts were understood as opportunities to learn and communicate.³⁷ In Iceland, almost all staff 'explained their approach to the job as non-hierarchical and focused on communication' rather than discipline, and 'talked about affording trust, and about seeing eye-to-eye with offenders, and

about helping'.³⁸ The author, who interviewed the staff and residents during a week in which he lived in the prison, described the atmosphere as convivial and communal, noting that officers and people in custody ate together, while staff prioritised relational work (albeit, under criticism from people in custody, whose self-sufficiency sometimes meant that they were confused about the staff role).

Questions remain as to the relationship between the cultures described above and the open prison. On one hand, the permeability of, and autonomy

...inmates and guards address each other by their first name and the prison superintendents use non-military titles like governor, while prisoners may be referred to as 'clients'

31. Auty and Liebling (2020) op. cit.
32. Liebling, A. (2011). Moral performance, inhuman and degrading treatment and prison pain. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 530-550; Day, A., Casey, S., Vess, J., and Huisy, G. (2011). Assessing the social climate of Australian prisons. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 427, 1-6.
33. Borg, (2017) op. cit.
34. Andvig, et al. (2020) op. cit.
35. Ekunwe (2011) op. cit., p.143
36. Vanhooren, et al. (2017) op. cit.
37. Steiro, T. J., Anderson, B. Olsvik, L. S. and Johansen, P. (2013). Balancing structure and learning in an open prison. *International Journal of Management, Knowledge and Learning*, 2(1), 101-121.
38. Parkes (2020) op. cit., p. 121

permitted within, open prisons could mean that their atmosphere is necessarily calmer or less adversarial. On the other hand, factors including their size (the Icelandic prison held around 20 people), location (Nordic open prisons reflected the cultural egalitarianism associated with those nations) or demographics (those in open custody were often carefully selected if deemed to be a low risk of non-compliance) may be confounding factors. It may also be that several factors, when present simultaneously, promote a positive culture.

Research on prison cultures, social climates and moral performances indicates that a range of dynamics are more or less responsible for shaping the experience and impact of imprisonment. One's experience of open prison may be contingent on one's ability to find meaning in the distress of incarceration, linked to the extent to which a regime is personalised and therapeutic, and whether one envisages a career, has contact with their family, and can see a defined purpose to their life.³⁹ Rather than only measuring the outcomes from open prisons, therefore, we might seek to identify any unique features of these institutions — or, the dimensions of 'openness' — and their relationship with the features of positive prison social climates that can manifest in any institution. Researchers and other prison stakeholders can collaborate to explore the extent to which open prison conditions are conducive to creating, facilitating or reinforcing a positive social climate, and to determine the implications for prison governance, prison services and penal policy.

The future of open prisons research

Open prisons may support wellbeing and create opportunities for reintegration, compared with closed prisons. However, further research is required to establish the extent and causes of any benefits and the nature of the challenges, and to understand any relationship between the dynamics of 'openness' and prisons cultures, social climates, desistance, family life, wellbeing, reintegration and other subjects. Likewise,

the (potentially unique) 'pains' identified require further exploration into their intensity, distribution and prevention.

The literature indicates a range of empirical questions that researchers might seek to answer and the methods best suited to doing so. Rigorous quantitative methods are of value, for example, in measuring any differences between the experiences, wellbeing and outcomes of those in closed and open prisons. Aside from their low security, the greater encouragement of outside contact and constructive staff-prisoner relationships, alongside other reintegrative services and practices, may plausibly lead to a less repressive experience for residents and to better wellbeing and outcomes during incarceration and on release. At the same time, at least some of these outcomes could relate to the population itself, and any benefits of open prisons compared to closed prisons does not mean that they are a more effective or humane penal sanction than the full community-based measures and opportunities for early release to which they must also be compared. Moreover, any benefits of open prisons, relative to closed prisons, are likely tempered by criminogenic structural conditions, such as inequitable employment and housing markets, and social conditions, such as the stigma

associated with homelessness, drug use, mental illness and, indeed, criminalisation and imprisonment in any form. Questions remain as to how open prisons can do more than closed prisons to reduce the stigma or affect the conditions and the lack of services that many people face upon release from incarceration.⁴⁰

The experience of transitioning from closed to open prisons, of residing in an open prison, or of transitioning from open institutions to release, can all be studied qualitatively. Equally, staff wellbeing, experiences and transitions can be studied using mixed methods and compared to that of staff who work in closed establishments. Ethnographic methodologies — including immersive approaches⁴¹ — are suited to a detailed analysis of prison cultures and staff-prisoner relationships, especially if triangulated through (a

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39. Vanhooren, et al. (2017) op. cit.

40. Ekunwe (2007) op. cit.

41. Such as those used by Parkes (2020) op. cit.

potentially bespoke version of) the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life survey. Questions also remain about the differences between open institutions, and if 'halfway houses' and other residential environments can be operationalised as open prisons for the purpose of their study, or otherwise studied and compared to open prisons.⁴² As mentioned above, we must compare open prisons with the entire range of sentencing options — including community interventions — rather than only with closed prisons, to understand their relative merits.

Our own research — awaiting approval from the Irish Prison Service — seeks to explore how people experience open prison conditions in Ireland. Ireland has two (male) open prisons that are relatively small in operational capacity,⁴³ holding roughly 4.3 per cent of the total prison population, as of February 2021.⁴⁴ We aim to conduct focus groups and interviews with the current, former and prospective residents of an open prison, and with its prison staff and managers, to achieve this. We will then consider whether the themes identified from these broad datasets might inform a further quantitative element, such as a bespoke 'entry and exit' survey for residents to capture any changes in their wellbeing or capacities over time. This research would help build a much-needed evidence base on the

experiences of open prison residents and staff, and potentially result in a transferrable and improvable tool that helps measure their impact.

Over several visits and conversations, we designed the methods and aims of the prospective research in collaboration with persons from the selected institution and the wider service. Further cooperation in exploring the potential for research, including visits to other sites, were postponed because of COVID-19. We remain convinced, however, that existing measures do not capture the dynamics and impact of open prisons. Reconviction rates alone do not reflect the breadth of factors that support desistance and determine wellbeing, and do not provide enough feedback to improve services. Resilience, wellbeing, agency, self-efficacy, impulsivity, the motivation to change, hope and interpersonal trust, and other dimensions are also important.⁴⁵ More than this, as policymakers increasingly recognise the futility of using punitive interventions in response to the complex social problems that contextualise crime, harm and conflict, studying open prisons can help all those with a stake in penal policies and practices to re-examine the assumptions they hold about who should be imprisoned when, under what conditions and for what purpose.

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42. Maier, K. (2020). Canada's 'open prisons': hybridisation and the role of halfway houses in penal scholarship and practice. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 59(4), 381-399; Miller, R. (2021). *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*, Little, Brown: New York City.
43. According to the Irish Prison Service website (www.irishprisons.ie), Shelton Abbey has an operational capacity of 115, while Loughan House has an operational capacity of 140; figures last checked on 10/02/2021.
44. Or, 162 persons between the two open centres out of a total prison population of 3,729 in Ireland; for full data, see https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/01-February-2021.pdf. For around 40 years, Ireland also maintained a semi-open prison – the Training Unit on the Mountjoy Campus – that closed in 2017.
45. Wong, K. (2019). If reoffending is not the only outcome, what are the alternatives? *Academic Insights* 2019/07, HM Inspectorate of Probation: Manchester; Maguire, M., Disley, E., Liddle, M., Meek, R. and Burrowes, N. (2019) *Developing a toolkit to measure intermediate outcomes to reduce reoffending from arts and mentoring interventions*. Ministry of Justice Analytical Series, HM Prison and Probation Service: London.