

REINTEGRATION AND RESPECT: THE SOCIAL CLIMATE AS THE KEY TO MODERNISING THE CZECH PRISON SERVICE

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Abstract

The staffing situation in the Prison Service of the Czech Republic is a long-standing problem that fundamentally affects both the internal running of prisons and their ability to fulfil their security, rehabilitation and inclusive functions. The lack of qualified staff, high staff turnover and inadequate financial remuneration lead to the destabilisation of the working environment and reduce the effectiveness of the service. This paper focuses on the social climate in prisons, which plays a key role not only in the professional lives of employees and officers but also in the process of reintegrating prisoners. Particular attention is paid to the need to reflect the principles of social inclusion and diversity, which should be an integral part of the professional culture of the Prison Service. Staff must be prepared to work with diverse groups of prisoners, including those from different cultural, social or health backgrounds. The aim of the paper is to highlight the need for systemic changes that would lead to stabilising the personnel situation, strengthening staff competencies in the area of inclusion and creating a supportive environment for all actors in the prison system.

Keywords: Prison Staff, Social Climate, Inclusion and Diversity, Reintegration of Prisoners

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Introduction

Current criminological literature leaves no doubt that the social climate is a key variable not only for relationships within the prison environment (i.e. within the prison population, within the staff collective and between staff and prisoners), but also for the chances of later reintegration and desistance of prisoners (Crewe, 2011; Crewe *et al.*, 2014; Butler and Maruna, 2015; Auty and Liebling, 2020). It also has a significant impact on staff satisfaction with their work or service, which is reflected either in their continued employment with the Czech Prison Service or, conversely, in their departure.

The aim of our text is to describe the importance of wellbeing and social climate in the context of the current state of the Czech prison system. We also seek to analyse the Prison Service's readiness for the challenges it faces in terms of the diversity of prisoners and the requirements of their inclusion. How the Czech Prison Service responds to these challenges will have a fundamental impact on the social climate in prisons.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative secondary analysis of academic literature, aiming to link theoretical frameworks, foreign findings and empirical outputs with specific issues in the Czech prison environment. As part of this analysis, foreign impact studies, research reports and relevant Czech publications were systematically processed. The selection of sources was guided by an emphasis on the applicability of the findings to the conditions of the Czech Prison Service.

The analysis focused on key topics related to the social climate, prison staff, prisoner reintegration and the promotion of inclusion and diversity within the prison environment. Particular attention was paid to the prison system's institutional sensitivity towards vulnerable groups of prisoners, especially transgender individuals, and its ability to address their specific needs. The findings from the literature review were evaluated with regard to their practical applicability in formulating recommendations for modernising the Czech prison system.

Wellbeing and Social Climate in Prisons

Those who are not involved in the prison system would probably not associate the term wellbeing with prisons. The term "wellbeing" is understood as "a state in which we can fully develop our physical,

cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual potential in a supportive and stimulating environment and live a full and satisfying life together with others” (Partnership for Education 2030+, 2025).

The term social climate encompasses the social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a prison and how they are perceived by prisoners and prison staff (Ross *et al.*, 2008), i.e. the quality of interpersonal relationships and cooperation between people within a specific social group (Nešpor *et al.*, 2017). It is therefore the overall tone of social interaction in a particular social environment. The behaviour of prisoners and prison staff is shaped not only by the structural layout of the prison—its architectural features and day-to-day operations—but also by the prevailing attitudes, values and beliefs of both groups (Burek and Liederbach, 2021; Thaler, Barkworth and Howard, 2022).

The social climate in prisons can be understood in terms of prisoner autonomy, security and order, the availability of meaningful activities, relations between staff and prisoners, contact with the outside world and facilities/equipment, i.e. the physical environment of the prison (Van Ginneken *et al.*, 2019). According to these authors, positive individual experiences with the prison climate correlate with higher life satisfaction. Key to this is a positive perception of safety, autonomy and good relationships with fellow prisoners.

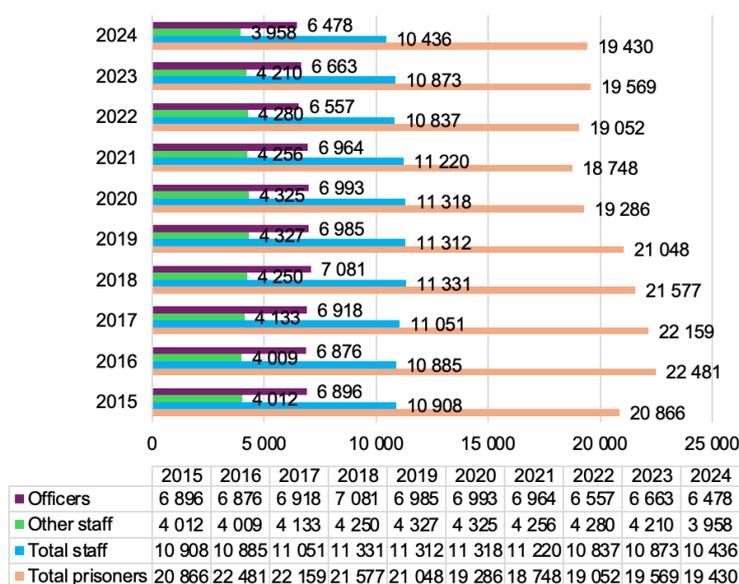
The aim of society—as expressed, among other things, in the Act on the Execution of Sentences of Imprisonment—is to influence convicts during their imprisonment in order to reduce the risk of reoffending (see Section 1(2) of Act No. 169/1999 Coll.). This is achieved primarily through treatment programmes (see Raszková *et al.*, 2025; Drápal *et al.*, 2021). However, these programmes are more effective when the prison environment is stimulating, i.e. when it promotes the wellbeing of prisoners. Under such conditions, prisoners are motivated to work on themselves and to realise their potential. A stimulating environment also reduces the consequences of prisonisation, particularly by reducing stress and enabling the development of coping strategies for imprisonment (Alves *et al.*, 2024.)

Prison Service of the Czech Republic

As noted above, the social climate in prisons and wellbeing are equally important for prison staff. The Prison Service is an armed security force operating under Act No. 555/1992 Coll., on the Prison Service and the Judicial Guard of the Czech Republic. The Prison Service performs the tasks specified by law in Section 2. In simplified terms, these are carried out by members in service—who perform mainly security functions (ensuring order, discipline, security and protection of society)—and civilian employees, who primarily ensure the rehabilitation of convicts or provide support to the sentence enforcement system.

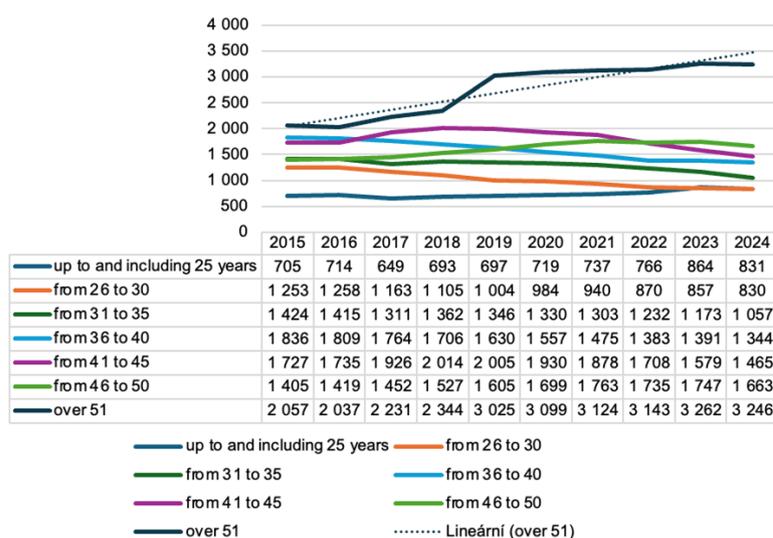
The ratio of employees to prisoners is key to the day-to-day running of a prison. The following graph illustrates changes in these numbers over the past decade.

If we look at the numerical development of these two categories, we can see in Fig. 1 that there has been a decline in both the number of staff and prisoners. The graph does not show the staffing situation as dramatic, but the reality is that as of 1 March 2025, there were 230 vacant positions for employees and 744 vacant positions for officers in the Prison Service (Information provided for 2025, 2025). In addition, it



1: Prison service personnel and prisoners in the Czech Republic from 2015 to 2024

Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Czech Republic's Prison Service for the years 2015 to 2024; own processing



2: Composition of prison service personnel by age, from 2015 to 2024

Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Czech Republic's Prison Service for the years 2015 to 2024; own processing

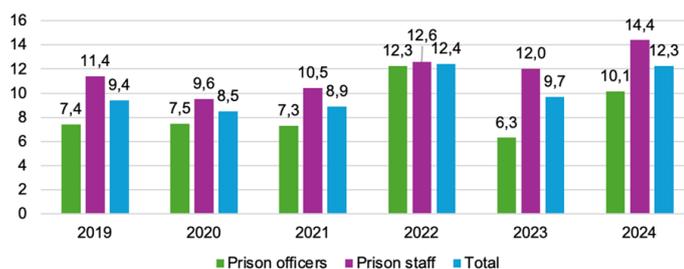
is necessary to take into account the 24-hour operation of prisons and the fact that not all job positions involve direct contact with prisoners. In recent years, the Prison Service has been focusing more on rehabilitation, which requires an individualised approach to convicts and more direct individual and group work.

The prison service also has a shortage of doctors and medical staff. (Hobzová, 2025) Insufficient capacity has also been mentioned several times recently in the media (e.g. Vaculík, 2024; ČT24, 2025 or Veselá, 2022). Although there is a significant shortage of staff, prisons must continue to operate at full capacity in order to fulfil their legal obligations. The logical consequence of this is staff overload, which increases their stress levels, affecting all aspects of prison life and manifesting itself at all levels of relationships. They work with the knowledge (and, as the following text will show, these are workers with many years of experience who are very familiar with the environment) that staff shortages ultimately pose a security risk, as extreme situations such as prisoner riots or escapes become unmanageable. At the same time, the prison environment itself is typically highly stressful (Spanoudakis *et al.*, 2024; La Vigne, 2024).

Another aspect that must be taken into account is the age composition of prison staff, both officers and employees, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

Between 2021 and 2024, there was a gradual reduction in the number of planned civil service and civilian positions, by a total of 515 (Prison Service Development Concept until 2035, 2025). Fig. 2 clearly shows an increase in the number of employees in the over-51 age category, with an increase of 1,189 people over the decade in question. On the contrary, there has been a significant decline in the 26 to 30 age group, with decreases also in the 31 to 35 and 36 to 40 age groups. This development over the last decade can clearly be described as the ageing of prison staff, the other side of which is the failure of the Prison Service's recruitment activities.

The data on the age composition of employees is also interesting in terms of the length of employment or service. "The average length of service for members is only 11 years, which indicates that many employees leave after a relatively short period of time. The average length of employment is 15 years" (Prison Service Development Concept until 2035, 2025, p. 38). The turnover of Prison Service staff, expressed as a percentage, is shown in Fig. 3.



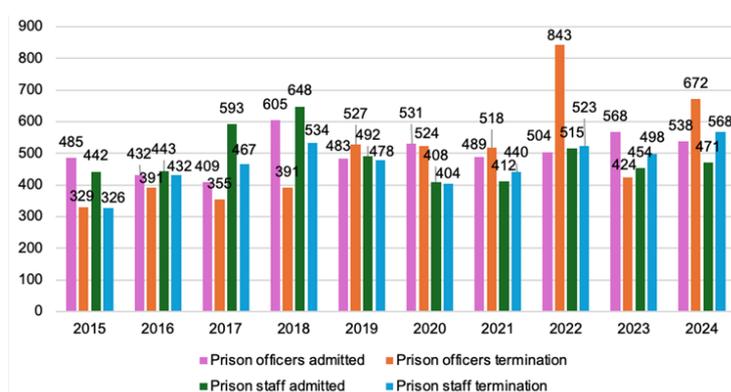
3: Prison Service staff turnover from 2019 to 2024; shown in %

Source: Concept of development of the Czech prison system until 2035 (2025); own elaboration

The highest turnover among officers in the years under review was in 2022, when it reached 12%, and the lowest was in the following year (6% in 2023). Among civilian employees, the highest turnover was in 2024 (14%) and the lowest in 2020 (almost 7%). According to the aforementioned Concept of Development of the Czech Prison System until 2035 (2025, p. 39), the main reasons for leaving are:

- demanding working conditions and psychological stress,
- insufficient financial motivation,
- limited career growth opportunities,
- physical and safety risks,
- increased neuropsychological stress on employees, leading to high stress levels, burnout and health complications,
- influence of political statements regarding amendments to Act No. 361/2003 Coll. on the service relationship of members of security forces due to systematic signals from politicians about interference with retirement benefits.

The numbers of personnel recruited and data on the termination of employment or service are shown in Fig. 4.



4: Service/employment of Prison Service staff - admitted and termination between 2015 and 2024

Source: Concept of development of the Czech prison system until 2035 (2025); own elaboration

The recruitment of new members and civilian employees takes place in waves. Until 2018, more members were recruited than left service, and this situation was repeated in 2020 and 2023. The largest number of members left in 2022 (the difference between those recruited and those who left was -339), which is also mentioned in the main reasons for leaving in the previous text. The fewest left in 2015 (329 persons), and the same year also saw the fewest terminations of employment of civilian employees (326). The number of civilian employees began to fall into negative figures (meaning that there were fewer hires than terminations) only in 2021. The largest difference was in 2024 (-97 employees). The largest number of staff members were hired in 2018 (605 persons) and the smallest in 2017. The largest number of civilian employees were hired in 2018 (648) and the smallest in 2020 (408).

The prison climate, i.e. how satisfied prison service staff are with their working/service conditions, including financial remuneration, is very important for staff retention in the prison service. The results of a survey among special educators and social workers (Raszková *et al.*, 2025) show that employees rate the response to their work from convicts better than from their superiors. They are more critical of the prison service's professional training system, career growth opportunities and financial remuneration. The working environment is also related to teamwork and the atmosphere in the workplace. Those who have been working in a given position for a medium length of time (4 to 10 years) show higher satisfaction, while those who have been working in the prison service for longer are less satisfied, as are those with the shortest work experience in the prison (Raszková *et al.*, 2025).

Staff shortages, especially in direct work with prisoners (e.g. educators, psychologists, social workers), lead to overwork for existing staff, limited capacity for individual treatment and reduced ability to respond to crisis situations. This can result in increased stress and burnout, limited availability of treatment programmes or specialised programmes for prisoners, and impaired communication between staff and prisoners. This can worsen the social climate in the prison, leading to increased conflict between prisoners themselves and between prisoners and staff. There is a disruption of the sense of security, especially in situations where sufficient supervision, control or assistance is not provided. The participation of prisoners in rehabilitation activities is also reduced, which negatively affects their motivation. In addition, there are other new challenges for the prison system.

The Challenge of Transgender Prisoners

Within the framework of our topic, it is important to point out the conservative nature of prison systems, which are often referred to as “archives” – that is, as unchanging and inflexible environments based on historically rooted ideas about the organisation of society, where cisnormativity is automatically assumed (Sanders *et al.*, 2022). In the context of the institutional setting described above, it is clear that the Czech prison system faces a fundamental task: to adapt to the demands of contemporary society, which emphasises respect for diversity and inclusion. As described, the social climate shows signs of structural rigidity, insufficient communication and low sensitivity to individual needs. It is precisely in such an environment that the limitations of the system are most evident when working with prisoners who do not fit into the usual categories – whether in terms of gender identity, cultural background or psychological profile.

For this reason, the following section focuses on the specific group of transgender persons serving prison sentences. Not only do they represent one of the most vulnerable groups within the prison population, but their presence also places entirely new demands on the system – in terms of security, respect for identity, healthcare and treatment. The selection of this group is not random; transgender persons are an indicator of the system's ability to reflect the complex reality of human identity and, at the same time, a test of its readiness for an inclusive approach. By deviating from the norms of the conservative and rigid environment of the prison “archive”, transgender persons disrupt its established order, which naturally makes them the target of negative reactions – not only from other prisoners, but also from staff. These reactions can take various forms, from mocking remarks to more serious forms of discrimination or marginalisation (Sanders *et al.*, 2022).

We currently have no information on the size of the population of people we refer to as transgender. This data is not known in either a global or Czech context. Winter (2023) states that some authors estimate that in the US, 0.6% to 1.6% of American adults identify as trans (Herman *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, no data is available on transgender prisoners. The literature provides partial information, such as that in 2018, approximately 400 transgender persons were imprisoned in Australian prisons (Bali, 2020), or that 68 transgender persons were serving prison sentences in Queensland between 2014 and 2020 (Brömdal *et al.*, 2023, in Winter, 2023).

In Czech prison practice, there is a publicly known case of a transgender person whose complaint was dealt with by the Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman, 2017). The Prison Service resolved the protection of convict X, a transgender man who was identified as a possible target of violence, by isolating him from other convicts. He spent 23 hours a day in a separate cell (in an area primarily intended for remand prisoners), where he also ate and showered. His only social contact was a female prison officer who played table tennis with him, and he occasionally spoke to the chaplain and psychologist. He was placed in a section where most of the convicts were assigned to work, and there were no obstacles to his placement in work, which was also supported by a special educator. The work assignment was in line with the principles of rehabilitation – in particular, the need for social interaction, meaningful activity and maintaining work habits. The Ombudsman proposed immediate work assignment in the presence of staff, which would minimise risks and at the same time support his integration. Otherwise, the prison only serves an isolating function of punishment, but not a corrective one (Ombudsman, 2017). Moreover, isolation has a negative effect on the convict's wellbeing and can seriously endanger his mental health.

Our text is based primarily on foreign literature and the practices described therein. Most current studies are based on the situation of transgender people in the United States, which is relatively specific in that these individuals often become the target of policies aimed at sex work, drug use and homelessness in public spaces. In this context, the argument is made that “prisons produce poverty among transgender people”, as a number of laws and administrative measures criminalise the survival and income-generating strategies of poor people (Yarbrough, 2021). Transgender people face higher levels of discrimination in employment, housing and other areas than cisgender people (Tessmer and Worthen, 2025). This drives them out of the labour market and the housing market and leads to involvement in sex work and homelessness. However, they do not form a homogeneous group, and it would be misleading to think of them as such. There is great heterogeneity within the groups of transgender women and transgender men (Lantz *et al.*, 2023).

Prostitution is not illegal in the Czech environment, so the situation of transgender persons involved in the sex trade is not punishable by law. Nevertheless, findings on the vulnerability of transgender persons and their problems in the event of imprisonment are undoubtedly relevant to Czech practice. According to Tessmer and Worthen (2025), transgender and non-binary persons are a particularly vulnerable group, and the literature refers to transphobic victimisation. Visible gender non-conformity acts as a stigma that can contribute to increased victimisation. Visibly transgender persons are more often exposed to victimisation in the form of verbal harassment, physical abuse and sexual assault. For example, 53% of trans respondents experienced verbal harassment that was considered directly related to or referred to their trans visibility (Grant *et al.*, 2011), and trans women experience high rates of sexual violence – up to 69% (Kenagy, 2005; Garofalo *et al.*, 2006; Stotzer, 2009). Forty per cent of transsexuals reported experiencing physical violence, with the average age of the first physical assault being 16 years old (Xavier *et al.*, 2007; in Tessmer and Worthen, 2025).

Yarbrough (2021) points out that simply knowing someone who has been the target of prejudice-motivated violence is associated with increased depressive symptoms in individuals. He also mentions research by Grant *et al.* (2011), which found that an alarming 41% of transgender people had attempted suicide, compared to approximately 2% of the general population (Yarbrough, 2021). The most serious manifestation of violence against transgender people is murder, but recording such cases is complicated and reliable data is lacking (there is no methodology for recording transgender people, they are entered into statistics based on their legal gender, families are ashamed of transgender members of their family and conceal the fact, etc.) (Lantz *et al.*, 2023).

Transgender people bring their vulnerability with them into the prison environment. The first problem is their placement in a male or female prison. According to Winter (2023), this is a fundamental problem because this decision can increase the risk of sexual violence, trauma, self-harm and suicide. The practice of assigning prisoners to prisons usually follows the gender assigned at birth. This approach can be criticised for prioritising general safety and the protection of society over the mental and physical health of transgender prisoners. Part of this practice involves protecting these prisoners by placing them in isolated cells, protective custody or cells with other transgender persons. However, it is not uncommon for transgender women, for example, to be housed in male prisons in cells with cisgender men (Sanders *et al.*, 2022).

The practice of isolating individuals from the rest of the prison population can cause further problems, ranging from additional stigmatisation to mental health issues resulting from a lack of social interaction (Simes *et al.*, 2022). A sense of security and the associated mental well-being are essential variables for wellbeing. Transgender persons are exposed to the reactions of the aforementioned prison archive in all areas of daily life, i.e. hygiene, sleep, eating and other activities. Shared bathrooms and toilets can be an environment full of violence and fear of violence or exposure for transgender persons. It is not uncommon for a transgender woman, for example, to accept a request for sex as a means of survival in a threatening environment, as this will provide her with protection, food or other goods. Another problem faced by transgender people in prisons is related to their transition process. This includes a wide range of issues, from access to healthcare for hormone administration to the requirement to live in their new gender role for at least a year as part of the prescribed procedure in order to be allowed to undergo gender reassignment surgery. This can be so difficult in a prison environment that they prefer to interrupt the transition process (Sanders *et al.*, 2022).

In the Czech environment, too, it is easy to imagine that the issue of access to healthcare will be a pressing one. In general, access to healthcare is the most common subject of complaints submitted by prisoners to supervising public prosecutors (Zhřivalová *et al.*, 2023, p. 79). As we have already mentioned, the Prison Service repeatedly points to a shortage of doctors and healthcare personnel in its services (Paseková, 2020).

In addition to the macro level (e.g., political rhetoric and anti-transgender legislation), the overall mood in prisons towards transgender persons is, of course, also influenced by prison staff (Lantz *et al.*, 2023). They should be trained (similar to workers in related services, whether state or non-state entities) in the vulnerability of this group of people so that they are able to address all the risks they face within their remit. The vulnerability of transgender persons is further increased by other factors such as age or disability (Messinger *et al.*, 2021).

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the issue of tokenism (Mitchell, 2020; Collica-Cox and Schulz, 2020; Ghosh and Barber, 2021) in prisons, which may also affect transgender persons. This refers to situations where a member of a particular minority (e.g., a transgender person, an ethnic minority, a person of a different religion) is formally included in the prison system or activities – for example, in treatment programmes or working groups – but their presence serves more as a symbol than as genuine inclusion. Most of the prison system remains rigid and inaccessible (“archive”). Tokenism in prisons can thus paradoxically reinforce marginalisation if it is not accompanied by real structural change, a sensitive approach and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Results

An analysis of the professional literature and secondary data from the questionnaire survey yielded several key findings:

1. The quality of the social climate in the prison environment has a direct impact on the level of cooperation between staff and prisoners, the occurrence of conflicts and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. At the same time, the social climate fundamentally shapes and forms relationships between prisoners, prisoners and staff, and staff among themselves.
2. Prison service employees perceive their relationships with prisoners (they perceive feedback on their work) more positively than with their superiors. At the same time, they are relatively critical of the professional training system, or rather its absence. It can therefore be assumed that, from their point of view, the corporate culture is failing.

3. Education is linked to preparation for the diversity of prisoners and the requirements for their inclusion. The need for education in the area of prisoner diversity and their specific needs appears all the more urgent when we focus on the average age of prison staff.
4. The isolation of vulnerable individuals can lead to further disadvantage, stigmatisation and psychological difficulties, as confirmed by foreign studies.
5. The purpose of imprisonment should be rehabilitation as the best tool for protecting society. Its effectiveness depends not only on the individual efforts of prisoners supported by rehabilitation programmes, but also on the quality of the environment in which they find themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

Staff shortages in the Czech Prison Service represent a systemic problem that has a direct impact on the quality of the social climate and wellbeing in prisons. Solving this problem requires not only an increase in capacity, but also strategic planning, support for the professional development of staff and an emphasis on interdisciplinary cooperation.

The findings presented confirm that the social climate in the prison environment is a key factor influencing not only the day-to-day running of prisons, but above all the quality of rehabilitation services, the satisfaction of prison staff, security stability and the risk of recidivism. Foreign research (e.g., Crewe *et al.*, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2023) shows that a respectful and inclusive environment leads to higher levels of cooperation, lower recidivism and greater job satisfaction among employees.

In our text, we have pointed out the staffing situation of the Czech Prison Service, which is characterised by a shortage of professional staff, guards and medical personnel. The average age of employees is rising, and the recruitment of new, young workers has been unsuccessful for a long time. At the same time, the prison environment exhibits signs of rigid structures that can reinforce prejudices against diversity and hinder the introduction of inclusive approaches.

Special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups of prisoners, for whom inappropriate practices – such as long-term isolation – can lead to further disadvantage, mental health problems and disruption of the reintegration process. Foreign approaches to working with diverse groups of prisoners are inspiring, as are forms of employee support in the areas of mental health, education and professional development.

The modernisation of the Czech prison system should therefore include not only technical and organisational changes, but above all the strengthening of the values of respect, cooperation and inclusion, which form the basis of a good social climate. These values should be an integral part of the professional culture of the Prison Service if it is to fulfil not only a security function, but also a rehabilitation and reintegration function.

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