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‘What’s the point of imprisoning more people if rehabilitation is no longer an option?’: Reimagining Swedish Penality in an era of Carceral Expansion

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Declaration

I, Isabelle Magnusson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Despite internal contestation, the renown of Scandinavian penal exceptionalism has earned the Swedish prison system much admiration. In contrast to its positioning as an exemplar of effective and humane rehabilitation, recent sociopolitical forces have prompted the growth of punitive approaches that present a break from previous traditions. Driven by cultural narratives and a disproportionate rise in organised crime, Sweden's evolving society appears beset by various social divisions that have fuelled a reconceptualisation of punishment. The country is undergoing a historic carceral expansion with a correctional population projected to increase severalfold. Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, this research analyses Sweden's penal trajectory using interviews with 35 Swedish Prison and Probation Service (SPPS) employees and non-affiliated community professionals. The aims are threefold: (1) to examine the perception of Sweden's punitive reorientation within the framework of social marginality and political discourse; (2) to explore the penal expansion's operational consequences for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service; and (3) to assess the carceral regime's ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda. The participants reveal a shifting penal landscape with expansive reconfigurations. An operational crisis has appeared that undermines the authority's treatment ambitions and compromises core tenets of Swedish penality. The research indicates that an ideological misalignment is emerging and underscores the demand for policy reconsiderations to prevent further erosion of Sweden's rehabilitative carceral philosophy. Ultimately, the research contributes to criminological debates about penal practices and the relationship between punishment and broader sociopolitical contexts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mention the Nordic countries to a criminologist, and a smile may be encountered as societies with low crime and prison rates, humane penal estates, and a focus on rehabilitation are commonly envisioned. Growing up in Sweden, the comfortable conditions within the country's prisons were general knowledge and seemed to shape the public's conceptualisation of incarceration. Relocating to the U.S. and studying their criminal justice system reaffirmed my ethnocentric understanding of punishment. Repeated positive commentary about Nordic penal policy encouraged the assumption that the countries were operating with superior approaches. The Nordics came to represent what effective punishment looked like, while the Anglosphere, particularly the U.S., symbolised the ineffective. With this perspective in mind, Sweden's recent trends toward increased criminalisation, penalisation, and marginalisation set off alarm bells that inspired this project. Was Sweden replicating some of the same forces that have contributed to penal excess elsewhere? If so, what motivated the sudden shift, and what are the consequences? These questions formed initial points of investigation, but the answers painted an intricate image that inspired additional areas of evaluation. A broad scope analysis was deemed necessary that weaved in Swedish history, culture, and contemporary society to explore the emerging penal trends.

Throughout the course of this project, the initially identified themes have become ever more relevant to a Swedish society undergoing rapid changes. Sweden has emerged as a frontrunner in lethal gun violence in Europe (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021a), penal nationalism has appeared as a driver for carceral expansion (Barker, 2018), and the country's prisons are becoming enormously overcrowded (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). A reality is revealed that seemingly opposes the flattering image painted at the start. Aiming to examine the penal reorientation, the project contributes to forefronting the

voices of those working within or with close proximity to the Swedish carceral regime. The research addresses a gap presented as the development of qualitative research has arguably not kept pace with the punitive turn.

As will be discussed, research exists that explores specific components of this project. However, the multitude of sociopolitical mechanisms at play warrant an exploration with a broader scope. The research then synthesises the elements to construct a cohesive framework. The emerging themes are elucidated through an examination that begins with Sweden's sociocultural history, moves to marginalised communities, dives into populism and nationalism, and ends with the consequences of repressive policies for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (SPPS) and its treatment agenda. Each point of investigation is essential to understanding what happens when a carceral regime known for its humane and rehabilitative philosophy faces conditions undermining its objectives. Thus, the project seeks to make a conceptual contribution to the way that penality is imagined and social marginality is governed in Sweden. The study is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of the current state of punishment and penal practices in Sweden but serves to promote the participating frontline workers' perspectives. Subsequently, the accounts can be used to alert attention to the described issues that may or may not be reflected in official reports and academic literature.

1.1 Background and context

The next sections will provide background and context to situate the research that investigates penal practitioners' and community professionals' understanding of an evolving Swedish punitiveness. First, the country's cultural traditions and immigration history are presented to offer a lens through which to consider the project. Then, the settings that represent a significant

area of contention are introduced and explored in relation to both colour blindness and growing inequalities.

1.1.1 Folkhemmet and the national narrative

> 'The good home does not know the privileged or the misfortuned, no favourites or undesired. There no one looks down on the other. There none try to gain benefits on the others expense, the strong do not oppress and plunder the weak. In the good home reigns equality, kindness, cooperation, helpfulness' (Per Albin Hansson, 1928, Swedish Prime Minister, official translation).

Significant cultural forces underpin this project and need to be understood to grasp the significance of the changes that Sweden is undergoing. A prevalent underlying dynamic is the *folkhemmet* ideology, the people's home, a defining concept that has united Sweden over the last century. However, in contrast, the ideal may now be functioning as a motivator for division, warranting a review of its features. Initially, the Swedish Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson revived the *folkhemmet* concept to unite the social classes in Sweden following a period of mass emigration, poverty, and industrialisation. As evident by the quote above, the term is central to the country's welfare history as a signifier of togetherness and sentiments of equal privilege. The idea behind this nationalising project was to fuse the class struggle with a national struggle in hopes of blurring the lines between the classes (Stråth, 2005). This act of social engineering 'tied the fate of the individual to the fate of the nation' (Barker, 2018, p. 40).

While Swedes strongly favour individualism, the state is viewed as an ally that, through a reciprocal relationship, establishes trust, insurance, and investments that allow for mutual autonomy. Trägårdh calls this concept the 'Swedish Theory of Love' (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2006), which can be likened to Durkheim's *organic solidarity*. Individuals function separately but are simultaneously integrated into society through a mutually beneficial relationship with the state. In turn, a strong redistributive welfare state was created where everyone contributes

and benefits. Schall (2016, p. 38) highlights the interconnectedness of the Swedish people and the state, where the *folkhemmet* ideology ensures that citizens understand that they are 'made equal because of their connection to a protective state'. The prosperity of the state was considered an individual success. This principle is essential to remember as this thesis develops as a reminder of what Swedes envision is at stake as Swedish society experiences transformative challenges.

The *folkhemmet* ideology demanded social solidarity and homogeneity. During a time of low immigration rates and a dedication to wartime neutrality, Sweden was able to be 'left alone in peace to mind our own business' (Myrdal, 1938, p. 204), which fuelled a nationalist sentiment. The goal was to 'keep society intact, avoid divisions, and inspire everyone to work together for the common good' (Asard and Bennett, 1997, p. 92). Interestingly, at the time, the people's home was considered 'a great symbol of the democratic community in opposition to Nazism' (Tilton, 1991, p. 142), despite its nationalist undertones and demand for homogeneity. The promise of *trygghet*, a foundational pillar of the Swedish welfare state that can be translated to safety, stability, or social security (Barker, 2013; Pratt, 2022), was considered a means to achieve equality, dismantle class distinctions, address gender-based power disparities, and move beyond conventional hierarchies (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2006). Similarly, the popular concept of Scandinavian exceptionalism comes from 'strong cultures of equality, social solidarity, faith in social engineering, state expertise, and consensus politics' (Barker, 2018, p. 7). Scandinavian exceptionalism is a national narrative and, in the Swedish context, builds on the perception that the country is 'the closest thing to a utopia which exists in the world' (Childs, 1936, as cited in Popenoe, 1977, p. 9). As will be revealed, the well-intentioned demand for *trygghet* and the striving for equality may have inadvertently had the opposite effect.

A community's shared interpretations of the past play a critical role in shaping its collective identity (Halbwachs, 1950). The Swedish self-perception as a model country and utopia was established following a century of transformation from one of Europe's poorest nations to the fourth richest in the world in the 1970s (Götz, 2004; Bergh, 2011). Additionally, the country's historically generous welfare state and policies centred on equality have resulted in continuously high rankings in indexes of quality of human life (Thakur *et al*., 2003). The country's accolades and the success of the Swedish welfare state have led to Sweden frequently being put forth as an inspirational model with much to praise and imitate. While Swedes have a love for moderation and self-effacement that contributes to strong disapproval of overindulgence (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013), the country has simultaneously been armed with an internalised superiority complex. This outlook forms part of the backdrop of this project and inspires an examination of how a country could go from being considered a welfare state par excellence (Tham, 1995) that had 'nearly the best of everything' to an unexceptional society (Pratt and McLean, 2015, p. 335). The story of Sweden's journey from strongly radiating Scandinavian exceptionalism to a country plagued with unprecedented social challenges will develop throughout this chapter. First, Sweden's recent experiences with immigration are reviewed and considered against the *folkhemmet* values of equality and solidarity.

1.1.2 Immigration

> 'What do we want the Swedish flag to symbolise? What do we want to tell our children and grandchildren about the society in which they are being raised? I believe in a Sweden that we create together […] that has unity and solidarity. […] A country that welcomes people who are escaping wars and oppression' (Former Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Government Offices of Sweden, 2015, my translation).

2015 was a challenging year for Sweden. The country's humanitarian principles were pinned against its national interests. In a matter of weeks, the country went from a near open-border

policy echoing the quote above to a significantly more restrictive strategy. A brief look at Sweden's immigration history reveals a similarly vacillating approach, where a willingness to radiate solidarity and equality is interrupted by contradicting features.

After several decades of negative net migration, where Swedes mass emigrated internationally, zero net migration was reached in the 1930s (Skodo, 2018). At the time, foreign-born persons represented less than one percent of the Swedish population (Byström and Frohnert, 2017). The country had maintained its homogeneity by establishing strong borders that withstood the events beyond. During the World Wars, the tune changed. Due to Sweden's wartime neutrality and peace, the country received migrants escaping the nearby conflicts. A conservative immigration policy was maintained during WWI, while the country was more welcoming towards foreign citizens during WWII. A possible reason for the changing attitude was that the majority of the refugees were of Nordic descent, an idea coined the 'brotherhood hypothesis' (Levine, 1998, my translation). The postwar period proved lucrative for Sweden as goods were copiously exported to war-torn Europe, an operation that demanded assistance from its new immigrant population and additional migrants from Europe (Byström and Frohnert, 2017). The workers were largely covered by the same generous rights afforded to native Swedes (Byström, 2012), likely due to the workers' valued contributions to the welfare state.

The size of the foreign-born population tripled between 1950 and 1970 (Byström and Frohnert, 2017). Immigration policies were then restricted again, partly due to the decreased demand for migrant workers but also because the demographic had evolved from primarily Nordic to include other European countries, who were perceived as further removed from Swedish culture. Nonetheless, many repatriated when the conditions in Europe stabilised and Sweden's golden postwar era suddenly ended. From being one of the wealthiest countries in the world in

the 1970s (Bergh, 2011), Sweden experienced 25 years of financial decline (Byström and Frohnert, 2017). In turn, the country reverted from a demand for migrant workers to mainly receiving asylum seekers.

The ambition of being '"exceptional" in their solidarism with the world's poor' (Browning, 2007, p. 40) was considered an obvious moral obligation, and Sweden aspired to be perceived as a 'moral superpower' (Nilsson, 1991). This moral high ground resulted in a large influx of migrants from war-torn countries across the globe. By 1990, nine percent of the Swedish population was foreign-born, and the immigration policy took another restrictive turn as Sweden could no longer 'accept migrants in a dignified manner' (Byström and Frohnert, 2017, p. 66, my translation). Nonetheless, joining the EU and Sweden's continued desire to emulate humanitarian values led to a continued welcoming of refugees at a steady rate until 2015, when the country faced an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers (Statistics Sweden, 2024a).

2015 is noted for record human displacement due to numerous ongoing wars, persecutions, and conflicts across the globe (UNHCR, 2016). A willingness to 'carry the torch for Western liberalism and tolerance' (Pratt, 2008b, p. 282) led Sweden to open its borders to those in need. Initially, accepting asylum seekers at a remarkable rate was done with pride, reflecting a core element of Sweden's national image and identity rooted in a commitment to humanitarian principles (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016). The framing of immigrants as needing the help of Swedish society spoke to the 'goodness' of the Swedes' identity (Hübinette and Lundström, 2014). However, the attitude swiftly changed as the rate of those seeking refuge in Sweden reached 10,000 people a week (Statistics Sweden, 2024a).

What started with a compassionate response from the Swedish public, who opened their homes and assisted the rapidly arriving refugees, took a sharp turn when headlines about a system collapse started circulating. The government issued statements such as 'public authorities and municipalities are now finding it difficult to cope with the pressure' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015, as cited in Barker, 2018, p. 2), culminating in a significant reversal of its open-border policies. From having a reputation for a welcoming attitude towards migration (Sainsbury, 2012) and being one of the top European receivers of asylum seekers relative to population (Swedish National Institute of Economic Research, 2015), Sweden restricted the acceptance rate to the EU minimum to gain some 'breathing room' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016). The changed attitude signified a paradigm shift.

The UNHCR (2022, p. 1 and 2) went from describing Sweden as a 'strong voice for greater solidarity and responsibility sharing' to emphasising concern about the implemented restrictions 'present[ing] a reduced set of standards and safeguards'. The wave of mass immigration that 'struck at the heart of the welfare state' (Barker, 2018, p. 5) set a polarising political climate in motion. A point was reached when the country perceived that it needed to choose between *us* and *them*. The national interest ultimately won. In the aftermath of being one of Europe's top per capita receivers of refugees (European Economic and Social Committee, 2015), the then-Swedish Prime Minister asserted that the unprecedented wave of asylum seekers had been drastically disproportionate to the country's ability to integrate the arrivals (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024a). The consequences of these failures will be illuminated next.

1.1.3 Residential segregation

Sweden's prosperous post-World War era set in motion an urbanisation that demanded labour migration, both domestic and from other European countries. The workforce required housing, and the flourishing Swedish state responded with an ambitious plan to build one million new homes over 10 years (Vidén and Lundahl, 1992). As housing is a cornerstone of the Swedish welfare state, 'the million programme' has been considered the last push to establish *folkhemmet* (Ristilammi, 1994, p. 58). Large blocks of flats were erected primarily on the outskirts of Sweden's major cities. Shortly after the goal of a million homes was accomplished and Sweden celebrated housing equality, the country was hit with a sharp financial downturn that upended the economy (Byström and Frohnert, 2017). Migrant workers were no longer needed, and most returned home, which left the new housing projects echoingly empty (Gerell *et al*., 2020). Shortly thereafter, many economically privileged residents also vacated, which altered the neighbourhood demographic and resulted in a disproportionate number of socioeconomically disadvantaged residents (Berggren *et al*., 1996).

When waves of asylum seekers started arriving in Sweden in the mid-80s, the empty flats provided welcomed shelter (Gerell *et al*., 2020). As the accommodations were filled with foreign nationals seeking refuge, the neighbourhoods containing the 'million programme' estates were called out as 'non-Swedish' (Ericsson, Molina & Ristilammi, 2000, p. 19). Attempts were made to prevent ethnic segregation and clustering by geographically dispersing refugees across Sweden (Kölegård Stjärne *et al*., 2007). However, the policy changed shortly thereafter to allow refugees to choose their location (Andersson, Musterd and Galster, 2019). Naturally, many chose to settle around other immigrants. Simultaneously, a 'white flight', similar to what was observed in the U.S., took place where a growing number of ethnic Swedes chose to leave the immigrant-dense neighbourhoods (Andersson, Berg, and Dahlberg, 2018).

Consequently, Stockholm, Sweden's capital, has become one of Europe's more segregated cities (Musterd *et al*., 2017).

While ethnic enclaves allow for vertical integration and the creation of a familiar surrounding that may appear comforting when arriving in a new country, a problem arises when these areas are labelled problematic, given subpar social interventions and marginalised treatment. Renowned Swedish criminology professor Jerzy Sarnecki (2020) highlights the assumption that due to the generosity of the Swedish welfare state that provides refugees with accommodation and financial support, criminal behaviour is reduced. However, he argues that what makes people law-abiding is not food on the table but strong ties to society. The following section examines how segregation seems to have fuelled a marginalisation with deadly consequences.

1.1.3.1 'Vulnerable' neighbourhoods

The discursive conflation of immigration with crime and the socio-spatial formations of ethnoracial confinement that have formed in Sweden are the focus of this section. Particular attention is paid to the ongoing escalations in street violence that have tragically become synonymous with Sweden's marginalised neighbourhoods. The 'million programme' housing estates provide the backdrop for many of these marginalised areas (Gerell *et al*., 2020). The Swedish Police Authority (2015) introduced the concept of *vulnerable neighbourhoods* to classify residential areas plagued by crime and socioeconomic vulnerability. Neighbourhoods labelled *especially vulnerable* are characterised as parallel societies excluded from traditional society, a history of failed police interventions, a lack of trust and cooperation with the criminal justice system, and a normalisation of violence. In 2015, 53 areas in Sweden were considered *vulnerable neighbourhoods.* In 2023, the number was 59 (Swedish Police Authority, 2023a).

Gerell, Puur, and Guldåker (2022) have called out the labelling for being primarily grounded in subjective police perceptions based on prejudice and weak statistical relationships. Criminologist Amber Beckley found that areas in Sweden with a greater concentration of residents with a foreign background are more likely to be defined as 'vulnerable' (Institute for Futures Studies, 2022). About 74 percent of the population in vulnerable neighbourhoods are either born abroad or have two foreign-born parents (The Global Village, 2020). While ethnic and socioeconomic segregation are distinct phenomena, they often overlap, as areas with significant socioeconomic disadvantage frequently exhibit a high proportion of foreign-born residents (Biterman, 2010).

Urbanisation and segregation are relatively recent phenomena in Sweden. The former Prime Minister concluded that Sweden's integration efforts have largely failed, which has resulted in parallel societies and violence (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022a). In the 1990s, the Swedish Police Authority (2014) began observing that criminals were joining forces in the country's marginalised neighbourhoods. Previously, Sweden was relatively unfamiliar with criminal organisations tied to residential areas. However, the organisations were far from the structured 'gangs' in American inner cities. Instead, the term *criminal network* has gained traction in Sweden. Unsurprisingly, akin to the problems surrounding the 'gang' terminology, Sweden faces the same challenges in agreeing on a definition. In Swedish law, *criminal networks* remain undefined (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023a). The Swedish Police Authority (2024a, p. 2, my translation) vaguely defines the term as 'all collaborations within the context of what would be considered organised crime on a local, national, and international level'. Since the turn of the millennium, these loosely structured groups have evolved into an escalating problem (Swedish Police Authority, 2014). Participants in an interview study by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2019) painted the picture of a volatile

criminal environment with constantly shifting allegiances. The Swedish Police Authority (2024b) estimates that 62,000 individuals in Sweden are active in or connected to criminal networks. 88 percent are Swedish citizens, a figure which arguably disrupts the assumed link to immigration discussed throughout this thesis.

In what Rostami (2021) calls the 'Swedish crime paradox', alarming developments can be observed in gun and explosive violence, typically associated with criminal networks, while crime overall has not increased equivalently. Between 2019 and 2022, nearly 1500 shootings occurred in Sweden, and 27 percent took place in vulnerable neighbourhoods (Swedish Police Authority, 2023a). Gerell and colleagues (2020) highlight that areas plagued by violence are more likely to experience further violence. According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2019), shootings have increased due to escalating conflicts between criminal networks. While lethal gun violence is decreasing in most European countries, Sweden is trending in the opposite direction (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021a). In Sweden, four people per one million are fatally shot compared to the European average of 1.6. Consequently, Sweden was among the countries with the highest rates of lethal gun violence in Europe (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021a; Sturup *et al*., 2019). This reality is far from the utopian society depicted previously and a distant truth from Åberg's (2019, p. 23) description of Sweden as being 'among the world elite of high performing countries'. Sweden is deviating from its Scandinavian neighbours to the point that the term 'the Swedish condition' was coined by Nordic politicians to reference the country's recent problems and to illustrate a cautionary tale (Rostami, 2021).

The deadly violence in marginalised neighbourhoods leaves its mark and causes residents to develop different strategies for survival. Looking at high-crime areas in the U.S., Tolleson

(1997) found that boys and young men frequently develop a form of fatalism, where death is believed to be unavoidable and imminent. In areas where death is all around, a similar fate can become accepted as one's own. Simultaneously, showing signs of fear is viewed as weakness, so the violence is downplayed and accepted as 'part of the game' (Storm-Mathisen, 2025, p. 7). A Swedish study found that nihilism, in which the value of life is lost, can also become a common coping mechanism when surrounded by tragedy (Gerell *et al*., 2020). Consistent with international findings, the same report found that young men in Sweden are at a significantly higher risk of being fatally shot. The likelihood of being a victim of crime is more notable for men and women in vulnerable areas compared to other urban areas (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020a). Furthermore, those with a foreign background are overrepresented among suspects of deadly violence (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021b). Subsequently, a victim-offender overlap is elucidated. Once a victim of a violent offence, the person is more likely to become the perpetrator (Gerell *et al.*, 2020), whereby the cycle of violence continues.

Zooming in on the overrepresentation of persons with a foreign background among criminal suspects in Sweden, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2021b) found that between 2015 and 2018, the majority of suspects were Swedish-born with two foreign-born parents. The fewest suspects were Swedish-born with two Swedish-born parents. Put into numbers, those born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents were 3.2 times more likely to be criminal suspects. Differing amounts of disposable income, levels of education, gender and age distributions, and the residential council were offered as possible explanations. When controlling for these variables, the likelihood of a Swedish-born person with two foreign-born parents becoming a crime suspect goes from 3.2 to 1.7. The same study also found that the number of suspects among those born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents and among

those born outside Sweden has increased. However, the number either decreased or remained constant among Swedish-born persons with Swedish-born parents and those born in Sweden with one parent born abroad. A possible explanation could be that minoritised ethnic youth from marginalised neighbourhoods are overwhelmingly subjected to interactions with the police (Wästerfors and Burcar Alm, 2020).

The above findings are consistent with American research that regularly concludes that first-generation immigrants commit less crime than their second-generation immigrant children (see Chen and Jiang, 2020). Nonetheless, within the Swedish context, an overrepresentation remains compared to the native population. Sarnecki and colleagues (2025) set out to investigate the claim that immigration is responsible for Sweden's high crime rates. In line with international and previous Swedish research that finds minimal association between crime and immigration, the study found little to no connection. A suggestion was made that despite the weak evidence that immigration contributes to the growing crime rates, other social dynamics (e.g. social cohesion) may be affected that indirectly influence crime rates.

As immigrants are not a homogenous group, acknowledging the vast range of risk and protective factors is important to avoid sweeping generalisations that undermine the complexity of diverse populations. The intention is to maintain a nuanced approach when exploring how Sweden appears to have failed to integrate the population to whom the country opened its borders, which has had detrimental consequences. Following this train of thought, rather than continuing to employ the minimising term 'vulnerable neighbourhoods', I will refer to *marginalised neighbourhoods* or *areas of urban relegation* as an acknowledgement that the 'proper object of inquiry is not the place itself and its residents but the multilevel structural processes whereby persons are selected, thrust and maintained in marginal locations'

(Wacquant, 2016, p. 1078). Later sections will contextualise this conceptualisation by showcasing Sweden's dichotomous nature that vacillates between soft and hard powers in a Janus-faced manner.

Moreover, while a complete examination of the causes of crime within areas of urban relegation is outside the scope of this project, the overrepresentation of second-generation immigrants among crime suspects and Tonry's (1997, p. 20) 'not the foreign-born but their children' conclusion suggests that a brief review of the literature on assimilation and integration may be useful. For example, Vogiazides and Chihaya (2019) highlight how limited social interaction with the native population may impede the successful integration of migrants. The finding is particularly alarming due to Sweden's high residential segregation and younger people rarely leaving their local communities (Aretun, 2009). Furthermore, Swedish migration researcher Joakim Ruist (2019) argues that the more significant the perceived cultural differences, the longer integration will take. Thus, the strategic relegation of immigrants to segregated communities raises notable concern.

While Kärrholm (2022) considers immigrants' distant culture a barrier to integration that has resulted in an alternate 'gangster culture' prone to crime, Hällsten, Sarnecki, and Szulkin (2011) found that culture was insignificant in explaining a crime gap. Waters (1999) suggests that immigrant crime rates are more likely the result of structural differences than imported culture. Following attempts at promoting multiculturalism, Sweden reverted to civic integration and placed the burden of assimilation on the immigrants (Hudson, Sandberg, and Sundström, 2022). Accordingly, failed integration is considered the immigrants' fault who unsuccessfully transformed into 'good' Swedish citizens (Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Elmersjö *et al*., 2020). Through this lens, the 'Swede becomes the taken-for-granted norm, and the

immigrant is subordinated and becomes “the Other”, the unmodern’ (Hudson, Sandberg, and Sundström, 2022, p. 556). This outlook tends to ignore matters of poverty, inequality, and racial discrimination (Lentin and Titley, 2011) while turning areas of urban relegation into transnational waiting rooms, where residents await acceptance into traditional society.

Despite shared notions of what a good life entails, individuals face disparate prospects in realising these aspirations. According to Merton’s (1938, 1968) strain theory, this conflict leads to a frustration that utilises crime as a coping mechanism in response to facing limited opportunities. However, this perspective fails to consider that most people from marginalised backgrounds do not commit crime. The segmented assimilation theory acknowledges the versatility of immigrant communities and suggests three paths of social mobility (Portes and Zhou, 1993). While most immigrants are likely to follow a path of upward or no mobility, another path points to failed integration that results in a downward trajectory encouraged by assimilating into the norms and values of high-crime areas with socioeconomic risk factors (Bersani, 2014). Second-generation immigrants may be at an elevated risk of trailing down a path of downward mobility due to the potential conflict of navigating dual worlds.

1.1.3.2 Coping with othering

Managing the potential friction associated with social integration in communities characterised by vast social fragmentation presents a considerable challenge (Gerell *et al.*, 2020). Finding harmony between the minority groups’ norms and codes and those of mainstream Swedish society is vital because clashes can result in social disintegration. Exclusion from traditional society can instead lead to social integration within subgroups, promoting community, belonging, and safety. However, the process can also function to demarcate parallel societies further. The children of those born in foreign countries may experience this fragmentation

particularly intensely, inspiring the coinage of the term *third culture kids* (Useem and Useem, 1967). The concept describes children raised in a country different from their parents and the cultural space created in the middle. Children become cultural chameleons as they learn to navigate this complex cross-cultural bay. Being surrounded by several cultural cues can negatively influence self-concepts and identities, which could lead to accentuating differences and difficulties with belonging (Pollock and van Reken, 2009). Solhjell and colleagues (2019) found that feelings of belonging may be further weakened when residing in an area where police interference is common and an individual is frequently made to feel like a threat.

Sweden's marginalised neighbourhoods are recurrently referred to as 'areas of exclusion' in need of intervention and painted as isolated problems outside an otherwise well-functioning society (Dahlstedt and Ekholm, 2018). Through continuous narratives that characterise these areas as different, residents understand society as divided into 'us' and 'them', where the former is preferred, but the residents are fixed to the latter, the lesser (Dahlstedt and Ekholm, 2018; Léon Rosales, 2010). The constant reminder of this conceptualisation and the description of their neighbourhood as problematic has the power to both instil a sense of solidarity and togetherness among the residents while also functioning to maintain social hierarchies and exclusions (Lindbäck and Sernhede, 2012). Wacquant (2013, p. 26) writes about the 'double-sidedness of the ghetto' and that neighbourhoods should not be limited to an interpretation as troubled sites for the remainder of society to scrutinise but also need to be regarded as rich sources of cultural production and effective 'collective identity machines'.

When the boundaries are sharpened between relegated racialised residents and the surrounding population, the divisions between the confined groups can be blurred, and collective pride ignited. However, despite unifying sentiments, Shafa and colleagues (2015, p. 159) argue that

'honour cannot be claimed unless it is acknowledged by others'. In what Weber (1992, as cited in Wacquant, 2013, p. 27) calls the 'negative evaluation of honour', individuals remain aware of their inferior neighbourhood status and may consequently exhibit self-doubt and self-hatred. While unified communities likely experience higher rates of collective efficacy, which can reduce violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Felton, 1997), low self-esteem and social exclusion may encourage delinquency (Foster, 2000; Mier and Ladny, 2017). As a later section will reveal, while Sweden aims to project itself as the epitome of equality, sociocultural mechanisms appear to be producing a highly divisive society that reinforces a narrative that otherises and situates some as outsiders.

Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) agree that street subcultures likely emerge as solutions to structural problems as entire groups disengage from mainstream society, adopting alternative norms and values. Within this context, deviance can then become a collective response to marginalisation. Minority groups entrenched in inferior conditions may cultivate *oppositional cultures* that contest the predominant social norms of the majority society (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Vigil (2002, p. 7) concluded from his research on immigrant youth in the U.S. that experiencing repeated cultural and economic barriers can result in the perception that there are '[…] few options or resources to better their lives. Often, they seek a place where they are not marginalized—and find it in the streets'.

Building on the theoretical insight of Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman, Loïc Wacquant (2007) developed the concept of *territorial stigmatisation* to better understand the stigma of life within marginalised neighbourhoods. While Wacquant (2008) makes clear that urban relegation differs across nations, there are also comparable mechanisms. For example, as a strategy to cope with and invert territorial stigma, a 'young son of immigrant tenants' is

considered more inclined to embrace the territorial strain and, along with his peers, perform 'in-group alignment' (Goffman, 1963, p. 112) where the 'badness' of the neighbourhood is celebrated and paraded (Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira, 2014, p. 1276). This collective performance is 'socialised, moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented' (Goffman, 1959, p. 44). Thus, to maintain the expected persona, there may be pressure to conduct deviant acts as a form of impression management. These oppositional cultures are escalated by the prejudice and racism that are contributing to the problems that Sweden's marginalised neighbourhoods are facing (Gerell, Puur, and Guldåker, 2022). The upcoming section will discuss race, or the lack thereof, as a point of departure for this project.

1.1.3.3 A place without race

To understand how social marginalisation and segregation formed, examining the 'institutional mechanisms [that] produce, reproduce and transform the network of positions' (Flint, 2019, p. 250) may be useful. Sweden's 'ethno-cultural view of national belonging' (Barker, 2013, p. 17) forms a lens to assess the internal processes that have contributed to the country simultaneously amplifying and denying systemic mechanisms promoting inequity. The previous section referred to national background to highlight overrepresentations in Swedish crime data. What is missing from Swedish research are race-related statistics, as the country has largely banished the term and does not collect such data (McEachrane, 2018). The omission may be considered peculiar considering Sweden's hegemonic whiteness and that Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus is credited as one of the first to subdivide humans by phenotypic characteristics. In early racial hierarchies, Swedes were fixed as superior and highly exemplary models of the white Caucasian race (Sawyer, 2008). This '"scientific" presentation of

Swedishness […] both created and reflected the fact that one truly had to "look" Swedish in order to be "Swedish"' (Miller, 2017, p. 385).

Werner and Björk (2014) highlight the extraordinary interconnectedness of Swedishness and whiteness where the latter is fused to the national identity and impossibly separated. Hübinette and Lundström (2014, p. 425) consider Sweden a 'white nation in crisis' where 'whiteness [becomes] a pivotal analytical category for understanding'. The nation wrestles with an identity crisis where a growing racial diversity challenges the memory of racial homogeneity. The contention of reconciling with an increasingly heterogeneous society appears exacerbated by the country's failure to accept its active participation in colonialism. Despite having had trading colonies in Ghana and St Barthélemy, Sweden deludedly considers itself a country without a colonial past (McEachrane, 2018). Miller (2017, p. 377) captures a fitting description of Sweden's curious perception of its righteousness and exceptionalism:

> Sweden thinks of itself as a place that is morally superior and advanced, having avoided the most direct political, social, and cultural consequences of twentieth-century Europe's most significant upheavals: the Second World War and the so-called official end of colonization/imperialism. Thus, racial problems happen elsewhere.

The Swedish perception of goodness and equality seems to have led to an assumption that Sweden is devoid of racial problems, a premise made more peculiar due to the country's unsettling history of eugenics. The rose-tinted lens through which *folkhemmet* is viewed offers little room to remember its dark side, which includes attempts at racial hygiene (Broberg and Tydén, 1991).

During the construction of the welfare state, an era initially burdened with a population crisis following the mass emigration of one million Swedes to the U.S., there was concern about the population's quality as much as the quantity (Myrdal, 1938). Between 1935 and 1975, Sweden operated one of the most comprehensive sterilisation programmes in any liberal democratic

society (Baldwin, 2005). Eugenics was offered as one of the primary motivators of the practice (Lynöe, 2007), which was performed under the guise of 'genetic well-being of the nation' (McEachrane, 2018, p. 478). A combination of the belief in ethnic Swedish superiority and the fear of its degeneration led to the sterilisation of tens of thousands of people, many for medical reasons, but some due to their racialised identity (Wyver, 2023). Lynöe (2007) considers Nazi race ideologists to have influenced the sterilisation policies. Sweden's history of discriminatory practices contradict the image the country wishes to portray. The country has historically been criticised for the discrepancy between rhetoric and practice. Maurice Keens-Soper harshly called out Sweden as '[…] the darlings of the Third World, whose good works are matched only by their glutinous smugness' (Holmberg, 1989, p. 123).

The evasion of responsibility and dismissal of inequalities 'may perpetuate the production of interpersonal and structural racism' (Elias, 2024, p. 484), which may be what is happening in Sweden. Elias further argues that neglect and denial are significant contributors to the persistence of racism. The denial of its colonial past, the neglect of systemic discrimination, and the colourblind approach may have functioned to water the seeds of inequity in Swedish society. Whether intentional or unintentional, the result is the same. When racism is left unconfronted, there is a risk of emboldenment (Nelson, 2013). For example, Afrophobic hate crimes accounted for nearly 30 percent of the country's reported hate crimes in 2022 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022b). This statistic indicates that racial problems are undeniably present in Sweden, and by failing to employ adequate frameworks to consider race, valuable data is lost that could offer insight into patterns of discrimination (McEachrane, 2018). Thus, an argument could be made that Sweden's historical attempts at colour blindness have functioned to exacerbate the country's current social problems by failing to acknowledge structural differences and adopting frameworks to assess marginalisation. In other words, racial

eliminativism and erasure have not done the country any favours. As suggested by Miller (2017, p. 377), Sweden is 'a kind of time bomb that will soon finally be forced to acknowledge a lost innocence in terms of its self-perceived goodness in the world'.

Similar to the indecisive duality displayed in Sweden's immigration history, where permissive and restrictive policies alternated, Hübinette and Lundström (2011) discuss the country's duelling nostalgias. On the one hand, there is national grief over the loss of a racially homogenous society. On the other hand, there is a nostalgic mourning that Sweden can no longer be considered a morally superior beacon of tolerance and equality during escalating anti-immigrant sentiment, a topic discussed later. Hübinette and Lundström further suggest that Sweden is experiencing white melancholia because the 'old Sweden' and the 'good Sweden' are becoming distant memories. Research by Branteryd and colleagues (2022) highlights the role that race, and particularly whiteness, has played in shaping Swedish society through state policies that reproduce exclusion and racial alterity. Miller (2017, p. 388) questions how Sweden can allow its Black population to 'live in a place without race' and critiques the erasure of *race* under the disguise of an anti-racist motivation.

Wright (2015, p. 3) argues that some consider that recognising 'blackness as an identity is racist', which appears to align with the Swedish approach. For example, in an official statement, the Government of Sweden (2017, as cited in McEachrane, 2018, p. 481) stated that persistently employing the word *race* 'might legitimise racist assumptions and confirm race as an existing category'. Although Sweden understandably wants to distance itself from terminology that formed the basis for scientific racism (Charmantier, 2020), denying the existence of race does not erase its existence. Instead, the omission of the term not only hinders international comparisons but also contributes to insufficient language to identify and track

discrimination (McEachrane, 2018). On the other hand, Morning (2008) has called out the American tracking of race as a lingering consequence of slavery and by employing race counting, the country upholds an antiquated perception.

In contrast, colour blindness and racial eliminativism, however well-intentioned, may exacerbate racial bias and resentment (Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers, 2012). The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2008) concludes that persons with a foreign background are not treated equally to their ethnically Swedish counterparts in the judicial system. A possible reason may be that the Swedish justice system is inherently built on Swedish norms and values, and those who appear to deviate from these standards are at risk of disadvantageous treatment or harsher judgment (Diesen, 2005; Schömer, 2016). For example, those with a background outside Europe were more frequently sentenced to prison (Petterson, 2006) and were more likely to receive longer terms of incarceration (Kardell, 2006).

Another reason for the unequal treatment may be a fear narrative, which is reviewed later, built on assumptions that populations other than the familiar native population are more dangerous and more significant threats to the public (Diesen, 2005). Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2020, p. 380) note the role of white hegemony in creating a '[…] mistrust towards ethnic minorities and groups defined as "others"'. Hegemonic whiteness 'simultaneously produce[s] and maintain[s] racial cohesion and difference' by 'positioning those marked as "white" as essentially different from and superior to those marked as "non-white"' (Hughey, 2010, p. 1290) and then 'foreclos[ing], silenc[ing] and exclude[ing] experiences of everyday racism among non-white Swedes' (Hübinette and Lundström, 2014, p. 426).

In addition to an enduring and persistent denial that structural discrimination occurs in Sweden (Petterson, 2006), there is also a lack of consistency surrounding appropriate terminology. As visible throughout this chapter, instead of *race*, Sweden seemingly haphazardly utilises *ethnicity*, *foreign background,* or *immigrant* in research investigating discrimination (Kardell, 2006). The umbrella term *immigrant* emphasises an essentialist cue restricting individuals to identifying with a singular, grouped ethnicity. Although Sweden collects data related to national origin and sparingly employs references to ethnicity, the country largely relies on a rigid binary between *immigrants* and *Swedes*. The narrow understanding of a vast concept leaves little room for nuance and forces individuals into categories to which they may not belong.

Furthermore, *invandrare*, the Swedish word for immigrant, has accumulated such a negative connotation that its use has become restrained (Brune, 1998). Even so, the immigrant label appears transgenerational, and anyone who does not appear ethnically Scandinavian is grouped with other minorities under the umbrella term (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2005). Keskinen (2016, p. 354) argues that 'those marked out by their non-white bodies are […] exposed to racializing practices even if they were born and raised in the country'. In turn, a growing part of the Swedish population is prevented from being viewed as Swedish and welcomed into the privileged ethnocultural members club. Xenophobia, the fear or dislike of foreigners, intersects with racism and socio-economic status to form the more nuanced ideology of *xenoracism* (Sivanandan, 2001). Swedish society has traditionally afforded its members a high standard of living and equality, but those who are on the outside are rapidly familiarised with the meaning of xenoracism. When the strive for equality is pinned against the protection of national interests, an apprehension about welcoming new members seems to appear. Sweden's

polarising duality is explored throughout this thesis and is utilised as a point of insight into the ongoing politicisation of crime.

1.2 Research aims

Swedish society is evolving. The country is experiencing a paradox where organised crime is rising disproportionately to crime in general (Rostami, 2021). Lethal shootings and explosions have reached unprecedented highs in recent years following escalating conflicts between criminal networks (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2023a; Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019). The trends are often tied to marginalised neighbourhoods experiencing ethnoracial confinement (Gerell *et al*., 2020), which has contributed to narratives that crime originates from the outgroup. In response to the developments, Sweden seems to be experiencing a reconceptualisation of punishment. In contrast to the *folkhemmet* philosophy that inspired a less punitive approach to crime that situated criminals as welfare clients who needed rehabilitation and not punishment (Pratt, 2008a), Sweden is undergoing a punitive turn that appears to be putting restrictions on the traditional logic. As rising crime is increasingly framed as the fault of immigrant communities (Branteryd *et al.*, 2022), a penal nationalism is emerging that employs the criminal justice system to preserve the social order and national identity (Barker, 2018). A reactionary populism and political short-termism focused on satisfying a growing public demand for punishment has materialised that disrupts Sweden's strong tradition of expert-led crime policy. These sociopolitical trends and their consequences need to be investigated.

Guided by constructivist grounded theory and interviews with penal practitioners and community professionals, this project aims to:

- Analyse the relationship between punishment and social change.

- Examine the perceptions of Sweden's increasing punitiveness.
- Explore the practical implications of a growing correctional population for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.
- Assess the Swedish carceral regime's ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda.

The primary research questions ask:

- How is punishment employed to govern social marginality in Sweden?
- What happens when a penal system known for its rehabilitative philosophy faces conditions undermining its objectives?

Sweden's transforming social, political, and carceral landscape is studied from the perspectives of 35 penal practitioners and community professionals. As prisons, remand prisons, and probation offices operate as a unified system within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the term 'penal practitioners' refers to correctional employees working on the frontline of one of the branches. The community professionals are unaffiliated with the SPPS and work in various roles that engage directly with offenders and marginalised communities.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service is bracing for a historic expansion due to an exceptional demand. The current prison trends present a break from traditional philosophy and practices. Although penal excess and overcrowding are prevalent concerns in the Anglosphere and beyond, Sweden is navigating unfamiliar territory. The pace of qualitative knowledge production does not appear to have evolved as rapidly as the operational crisis facing the SPPS. This project intends to fill that gap by offering a space for the participants to evaluate the regime and the ongoing transformations. While official statistics paint a rough image of an alarming penal expansion, the interviews will provide colour. The need to inflict research that elucidates the realities facing a system often shielded from the public is more significant than ever as the criminal justice discourse becomes further detached from its previous scientific anchoring.

Furthermore, the existing research inadequately addresses the governance of social marginality and the role of Swedish culture in the punitive reorientation. This thesis aims a wide lens at specific points of interest to offer insight into a complex phenomenon with serious consequences.

1.3 Chapter synopsis

Chapter 2 provides a literature review exploring the structures and mechanisms situated both inside and outside the criminal justice system to scrutinise the relationship between punishment, the welfare state, and social exclusion. The sections cover Swedish society's contradicting dualities, sensationalist media narratives, the emergence of populism, and an introduction to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service with a review of existing research about sentence length and prison culture. The existing gaps and the project's contributions are discussed.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and justifies the methods used. The application of grounded theory is discussed. The inductive approach was deemed most suitable for gaining an understanding of an unfamiliar situation and developing theory from the data. A guide to the data collection details the process of designing the study, recruiting participants, and conducting and analysing the data from 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Ethical considerations are highlighted and the study's strengths and limitations are explored. Chapters 4-7 present the findings and provide accompanying discussions.

Chapter 4 explores the participants' views on Sweden's shifting political and social landscape, linking crime policy to concerns about racism, populism, and declining evidence-based approaches. The practitioners discuss the punitive reorientation and express their

overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the growing penalisation and criminalisation. However, when longer sentences are considered as facilitators for increased exposure to treatment interventions, some changed their stance.

Chapter 5 unpacks the strain placed on the SPPS by the punitive turn driven by penal populism and rising crime. The chapter examines the operational changes that have taken place as a result of the growing prison population. The authority is preparing for a historic expansion, and the effects of an unprecedented overcrowding are already visible. The practitioners report an unmanageable environment with an evolving clientele, employment challenges, and growing security concerns. Many describe the ongoing situation as a crisis threatening desistance efforts.

Chapter 6 reviews the participants' perceptions of the treatment agenda and its current state. An overwhelming faith is expressed in the SPPS's rehabilitative philosophy, while the diminishment of the treatment focus is vastly criticised. The practitioners discuss the ongoing transformations that may be undermining the authority's rehabilitative mission. The chapter explores whether the changes are conscious decisions or forced consequences of the evolving conditions.

Chapter 7 assesses the increasingly divisive occupational culture developing among penal professionals. Clear demarcations are forming between officers with different penal philosophies that centre around either security or treatment. The latter experiences sidelining, which jeopardises client relationships and weakens the rehabilitative climate. New professional dilemmas are forming as a result of the polarising culture. The participants' intensifying concerns about the future of punishment are Sweden is unpacked.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by synthesising the main findings to illustrate the conceptual contributions and highlight how the research aims and questions have been addressed. The study finds that a critical departure has occurred from past penal practices, signalling a crisis with operational and philosophical consequences. The Swedish penal system's rehabilitative foundation is giving way to a more punitive strategy, reflecting broader societal shifts and provoking questions about the legitimacy and intentions of punishment in Sweden. Accordingly, future research is suggested and policy recommendations are presented.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The introduction offered a history of the Swedish welfare state, its complicated relationship with immigration, and the areas of urban relegation that have developed in its shadow. As evidenced, Sweden is facing an unprecedentedly challenging situation in terms of crime and marginalisation. The insight into Swedish culture and society forms part of the context needed to situate the project's findings and the literature introduced next. This chapter aims to showcase how the conditions and circumstances previously presented have formed an ideal soil for social exclusion and othering that has catapulted Sweden towards nationalism and penal populism. The national identity and maintenance of the welfare state appears threatened as a fear of crime narrative is advanced and crime is conceptualised as originating from the outgroup. Despite resisting populism and the radical right longer than most Western nations (Demker *et al*., 2008), Sweden has recently experienced a significant political evolution as punitive inclinations are increasingly displayed. The trends have real consequences for the Swedish prison regime.

From a flattering reputation of Scandinavian exceptionalism, the Swedish carceral landscape is revealing growing cracks that dim the light on the commendatory descriptor. The perception of a moderate penal order with a humane and rehabilitative philosophy is examined to assess how the renown developed and to contrast the emerging reconfiguration. Finally, as the country moves further towards a punitive turn, a review of the existing research about sentencing harshness is presented. First, to situate the amplifying inclination to punish, the demand for welfare preservation and the ethnocultural conception of citizenship must be understood. The idea of a Janus-faced society provides a suitable conceptual framework to assist this understanding.

2.1 The Janus-faced Society

The following three sections explore the literature around some of Sweden's political and cultural responses to an evolving society. A romantic longing for the past and an image of exceptionality underpin this discourse and fuel the developing culture clash between the dominant ideology and the emerging subculture within urban majority-minority areas (Andersson, Musterd, and Galster, 2019). An assumed threat to the national identity is leading to a resurgence of ethnonationalism in Sweden through segregation justified by ethno-pluralist notions that cultures should keep separate to survive (Griffin, 2000). Swede's ethnocultural conception of citizenship excludes perceived outsiders by portraying their ethnic or cultural differences as undemocratic and 'un-Swedish' (Barker, 2013). In turn, foreign nationals, immigrants, and perceived 'others' become particularly vulnerable to deprivation and exclusion in Sweden due to the narrow understanding of citizenship. Previously labelled a 'moral superpower' (Nilsson, 1991), Sweden's internal logic is now motivating a divisive society that privileges those tied to the national identity. In other words, the desire to maintain a reputation as 'active norm entrepreneurs' (Browning, 2007, p. 28) clashes with the national interest in maintaining the solvency of the welfare state.

Although solidarity and an image of equality have historical importance for Swedes, the country is composed of self-realising individuals who wish to maintain a strong state and stable society with limited disturbance from the state or neighbours (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010). Considered a modern *Gesellschaft* characterised by self-interest, the demand to preserve the status quo for some drives the exclusion of others. The government is expected to ensure its members a sense of social security and 'will do so even if it means producing insecurity for those on the outside' because 'the welfare state is a national project first and foremost and will use its hard and soft power to uphold it' (Barker, 2018, p. 1). The concept of *trygghet,* mainly

understood in terms of social security, carries the same weight in Sweden as the American obsession with freedom. The demand to uphold citizens' security is a fundamental feature largely undisputed in the Swedish consciousness. However, Pratt (2008b) suggests that Sweden is an outlier among its Nordic peers due to being at the greatest risk of failing to perpetuate the tradition of social solidarity, security, and homogeneity. Although these values are traditionally associated with a *Gemeinschaft*, the Swedish ideal that everyone contributes and benefits suggests an organic solidarity with social cohesion and interdependence. Thus, if one cog in the wheel is not adequately performing, removal is necessary. In other words, not upholding the traditional social contract will rapidly illustrate just how exclusionary Swedish society can be.

The shared sentiment of *folkhemmet* that previously used to unite Sweden may have become the strongest motivator for separation as nostalgia evokes memories of a flourishing society. Boym (2001, xiii) considers nostalgia 'a longing for a home that no longer exists', which can be understood as a defence mechanism during 'a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals' (xiv). Boym argues that nostalgic longing has the potential to create monsters. While seemingly an overreach within this context, the Swedish state's protective characteristics that were assumed to generate low crime rates in the past now appear to fuel segregation, exclusion, and criminality. However, Barker (2018) points out that inclusionary policies have not been replaced by exclusionary elements, as can be observed in neoliberal transformations, but rather, these features operate in parallel. The objective is welfare state preservation rather than retraction.

In contrast to neoliberal ideology that considers the welfare state a drain on the economy, maintaining a strong welfare state is not up for debate in Sweden. Instead, its steadfast existence

is largely considered a social fact. The imagined drain, on the other hand, are those who threaten the welfare state and Sweden's national imagination. The perceived threats are swiftly exposed to one of the harsh paradoxes of Swedish society. Punishment and welfare have been called the government's soft and hard sides (Cohen, 1985) and the state's left and right hands (Bourdieu, 1998). On one side, the country's exclusionary nature intersects with an increasingly punitive inclination, which is the continued focus of this project.

Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2016) argue that, among the Nordic countries, Sweden likely exemplifies the most advanced ongoing transformation from a social democratic welfare state to a neoliberal model. Barker (2013, p. 7), on the other hand, is critical of using accounts of 'the globalisation of punitiveness (Brown, 2005), the spread of American neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2009), or converging cultures of control (Garland, 2001)' as causes of Sweden's welfare state reconfiguration. Instead, Barker summons Wacquant's compelling image of a Janus-faced regime to portray how the concept of the double-sided institution applies to the Nordic penal order. Described as mild and harsh simultaneously, the paradoxical concept offers freedom and security at the top while fostering punishment and insecurity at the bottom (Wacquant, 2009). The foundational split has created a conceptual misalignment with significant consequences for the penal order. While the characteristics of Scandinavian exceptionalism, which are discussed later, were intended to decrease criminogenic conditions (Lappi-Seppälä, 2008), the romantic longing for ethnocultural homogeneity and the 'old Sweden' have seemingly come to rely on criminalisation as a mechanism of disqualification. Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2020, p. 379) consider the Nordic societies to be constructed through 'repressive and assimilative policies', which is a distant reality from the flattering characterisation as a moderate penal order assumed by Scandinavian exceptionalism.

Kundera (1993, p. 85) suggests that all societies have a 'longing for order' due to the human desire for a world where 'everything would function perfectly'. However, Sweden has been described as a country that is particularly concerned with law and order (Popenoe, 1977). This deeply ingrained cultural norm can function to constrict 'the range of tolerable behavioural patterns and privileges certain kinds of conduct as normal, while casting all other sorts as abnormal' (Bauman, 2000, p. 206). Fleisher (1967, p. 342) notes that 'nonconformists often have difficulty fitting into Swedish life'. Huntford (1971, p. 32) similarly argues that 'to be different in Sweden is to be burdened with a sense of guilt and to be the worst of failures'. Swedish culture is defined by its love for *lagom*. The concept offers no English equivalent but can be understood as 'everything in moderation', 'just right' or 'just enough', but still does not quite capture the moral force behind the expression (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013). As eccentrics or rule-breakers often face difficulty fitting into the narrow outline of what it means to be Swedish, a schism is created as groups possessing diverse outlooks 'invade' the social sphere.

Due to the success of the state being understood an individual success in Sweden, 'all deviance from the group norms and common group patterns is potentially threatening to the individual' and their well-being (Daun, 1996, p. 107). A Last decade's immigration, which is perceived by some as excessive, seemingly set in motion a cultural sorting process that rigidly demarcates those who belong from those who do not. Described by Bauman (2000, p. 206) as 'sharp knives pressed against society', order and norms have the power to exclude, separate, and expel. Bauman reflects on the perspective that the excluded have brought the rejection upon themselves and that the exclusion is an act of 'good sense and justice' where 'those who do the exclusion […] becom[e] the defenders of law and order and guardians of values and standards of decency' (p. 207). The reframing of exclusionary practices as preservations of a beloved welfare state appears to allow Swedes to maintain the disguise as active norm entrepreneurs.

Bauman's (1995) concept of *adiaphorisation* focuses on the process of othering and moral indifference. One applicable aspect is the idea of 'effacing the face' of groups considered unworthy or undeserving of moral consideration. Consequently, the dominant group rids itself of moral responsibility for the 'other'. Furthermore, in more recent work, Bauman (2016) argues that following last decade's 'migration panic' in Europe, governments exploited citizens' sense of insecurity. The increasing presence of foreign cultures 'becomes a synonym for a fortress under siege, and the inhabitants […] are expected to manifest their loyalty daily, and give up, or at least radically curtail, any contacts with the outside world' (Bauman, 2012, p. 190). The Swedish national frame of reference captures a differentiating reality that exists to villainise those whose behaviour is different from the comfort of the well-known. Mattsson (2005) posits that references to other cultures with accompanying ascription of negative values contributes to an otherisation and a dichotomous *us* and *them*. Due to Sweden's strong collective consciousness that considers the country morally superior (Lappalainen and Lundgren, 2004), a dual process takes place where features related to the national identity are praised, while negative characteristics are projected onto the 'others' (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006). This cognitive process was deemed a contributor to the rise of nationalism in the country. Coupled with the objective of welfare state preservation, Sweden is at risk of displaying strong welfare nationalism and chauvinism.

Welfare nationalism is becoming a way for the social fabric to underpin the structural barriers to integration. To invoke Tilly (1999), ethnic Swedes seem to be opportunity hoarding by ensuring that the resources are preserved for them, which upholds inequality. Goldschmidt and Rydgren (2017) found a positive association between welfare chauvinism and an inclination to be socially distanced from immigrants. In turn, a resentment towards the outgroup seemingly

flourishes that negatively impacts social solidarity. Andersson (2009) argues that welfare nationalism is an attempt at restoring *folkhemmet* following perceived threats to its existence. The focus on preserving the welfare state by limiting access and sustainability to those on the inside was amplified following the most recent migration wave (Barker, 2018).

As discussed, the Swedish welfare state is guided by social investments and protections, which have successfully tied the fate of the individual to the fate of the nation. Consequently, only those who contribute to bettering the nation's fate are considered worthy of the benefits and protections (Jerneck, 2023). Thus, the threat to the welfare state is perceived to go beyond economics or politics. Instead, the threat appears ontological, which fuels a determination to protect the welfare state at any cost, even if the preservation drives exclusion. The welfare chauvinist tendencies currently exhibited in Sweden showcase how foreign nationals and racialised minorities are structurally excluded from the welfare state, and this weak incorporation is suggested to lead to increased social control (Barker, 2013). So, to hold on to its foundational pillars, Sweden increasingly relies on the criminal justice system as a tool to reinforce national identity (Lappi-Seppälä, 2016) and as a weapon to combat outside threats to the institution (Andersson, 2009).

Furthermore, Eger (2010) found that immigration influx is associated with less favourable public attitudes towards generous welfare expenditure. Subsequently, what may be perceived as a weaker welfare state due to sharing resources across a larger pool of recipients with greater needs may, in fact, be due to spending cuts. In 2022, Sweden's social protection expenditure relative to GDP was the lowest since 1993 (Statistics Sweden, 2024b). In the U.S. and the U.K., welfare spending cuts have indicated penal expansionism (Downes and Hansen, 2006). The same may be true in Sweden, as some studies suggest that harsher penalties are used to deal

with social problems resulting from reduced or insufficient welfare spending (see Wakefield and Uggen, 2010). Lea (1997) found that spatial fragmentation and the uneven distribution of welfare can have criminogenic consequences, which the Swedish crime paradox seemingly evidence. Barker (2017, 2018) writes extensively about the relationship between the welfare state and punishment in Sweden since last decade's migration wave. Scholars in comparative penology have largely utilised the punishment-welfare nexus to understand and explain the internationally differing penal regimes. Garland (1985) has argued that the way that crime and punishment are governed is connected to the governance of social marginality, particularly as the institutions commonly deal with similar populations (Western and Beckett, 2001). Looking at the relationship between Sweden's unravelling social order and an increased reliance on criminal justice interventions, the country appears to be no exception.

2.2 A sensationalising fear of crime

This section reviews the distribution of the narrative that Swedish society is out of control and that the outgroup is responsible. As Andersson (2002) points out, a narrative about rising crime rates is one of the most powerful tools in a politician's arsenal when the goal is a repressive shift. This perspective provides an important building block that assists in situating Sweden's increasingly punitive inclination. The fear of crime discourse and media sensationalism is by no means unique to Sweden but is, nonetheless, a relevant avenue to pursue as the media is deemed one of the country's most powerful entities (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1990). However, the media is not always subjected to the controls needed to monitor its role in reproducing ethnic injustices. The media framing of immigrants in Sweden does not seem much different from the American experience of turning non-European foreigners into what Wacquant (1999, p. 219) describes as 'suitable enemies' or what Christie (1986, as cited in Wacquant, 1999, p. 219) calls 'symbol[s] of and target[s] for all social anxieties'. Di Masso,

Castrechini, and Valera's (2014, p. 342) exploration of the fear of crime found that prejudicial opinions towards immigrants and racial minorities are often 'surreptitiously articulated through a language of risk, fear, anxiety and/or hatred', which leads to stereotyping and a subjective fear of victimisation.

An extensive Swedish Government Official Report (2006) concluded that the Swedish media contributes to structural discrimination through its nationalism and discursive construction of stories concerning the relationship between different ethnic groups. Brune (2004) calls out Swedish news media's facilitation of upholding the framing of immigrants and asylum-seekers through a tendency to perpetuate stereotypes of certain countries, persons, religions, and cultures. Lappi-Seppälä (2016, p. 70) notes that criminal justice policy in Scandinavia has become 'more aggressive, more politicised, as well as more responsive to the views and voices of the media' compared to previous decades. The media appears to paint a one-sided picture by sensationalising a vastly complex issue (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019). Hanan (2020) notes the paradox that appears when a phenomenon is widely discussed, but the lived experiences of those within that context are not adequately exposed. Fricker (2007) posits that an epistemic injustice occurs when marginalised groups are excluded from knowledge production.

There are multiple subtle institutionalising mechanisms used by the media to reproduce structural discrimination. The Swedish Government Official Report (2006) highlights journalists' role in reproducing and enabling an 'us versus them' mentality. While recent years have called for increased diversity among journalists in Sweden, established media houses have been known to hire those with an immigrant background who are prepared to conform to 'us' while reporting as experts on 'them'. The essentialising of the two sides as separate entities

with differing cultural properties has established the 'us' as the normal, the familiar, and as a measuring tape for 'them'. Similarly, in what Barker (1981) describes as the 'new racism', racialised minorities are no longer believed to be biologically inferior, but the perception remains of cultural differences, which are framed through deficiencies and common racial tropes such as low achievement, dependency on welfare, criminality, and drug abuse. Deviations from the homogenous 'us' are thereby offered a greater space in media, which can be observed through the fascination with and disproportionate coverage of immigrants' criminality (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006).

However, Esser and Strömbäck (2014) importantly highlight that the media does not always describe a universal reality but rather forms and constructs one version of reality. News media tends to report on a topic directly when it happens, framing the event as a catastrophe cloaked in simplicity. When the whole picture is later understood, it can be too late to change the storyline (Pollack, 2001). A fearmongering is produced that alters the public's perceived sense of justice, which in turn influences political opinion. Theorist Jean Baudrillard (1983) moved beyond the postmodern discourse to employ a cultural analysis to assess the impact of technology and media on social life. According to Baudrillard, society has lost touch with reality by increasingly indulging in simulations of reality. The hyperreality created is not unauthentic but has assigned meaning and power to a perception of a reality that never existed. Kellner (2019) posits that, in the age of consumerism, objectivity has been discarded for presupposed personal simulations that may arm the public with misleading sentiments. The creation of alternate realities helps to rationalise and legitimise penal harshness. Consequently, there is a manifestation of the desire to create penal policies that idealise a society that no longer exists (Baudrillard, 1983). Worth noting is that the arguments raised here are not intended to

minimise or overlook Sweden's recent escalations in organised crime but rather to contextualise the discourse about the 'criminal other' and the fear of crime narrative.

The threat of crime is becoming increasingly standard within modern consciousness as shootings and explosions reach unprecedented levels in Sweden, and marginalised neighbourhoods are often understood as the assumed setting. Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira (2014) point out the nationalisation of territorial stigma. Some urban areas are framed and circulated in media as 'social hell' and 'redoubts of self-inflicted and self-perpetuating destitution and depravity' (p. 1273). Through this logic, the mere mention of some of Sweden's most 'vulnerable' neighbourhoods has loaded reactions, even by those in remote areas unlikely ever to set foot in the territories characterised as 'no-go zones' (Pred, 2000). Advocating to transform or destroy spaces belonging to the socially marginal can function as social catharsis by subsiding fears of social falling (Atkinson, 2015). When Young (1996) released the book *Imagining Crime*, the conversation about crime and representation was a new and thrilling area of analysis in criminology. The cultural value assigned to crime is used to describe how crime can act as a sign of threat and evil, which creates a shared sense of victimisation and a nostalgic yearning for unity. The imaginary community uses victimisation as an entry requirement while describing the criminal as a *textual outlaw* and a victim of the desire for community. Examining how crime is imagined is highly relevant in the Swedish context due to its use in maintaining the fragile borders of hegemonic communities and producing enclosed enclaves and polarisation.

Building on the concept of the textual outlaw, Garland (1996) similarly discusses the punitive strategy of essentialised difference. This type of crime theory uses stereotypes and relies on public anxieties, rather than research findings, to present criminals as 'alien others' who belong

to different racial and social groups than *us*. Punitive policies rely on these othering representations to encourage consensus that there is no sympathy or useful way to aid these offenders other than imprisonment. The demonising rhetoric appears to be increasingly employed in Sweden, which opposes traditional perceptions of deviants and outsiders. Laing (1837, p. 159) recognised that in Swedish society, 'the good manners of the people to each other are very striking and extend lower among the ranks of society in the community than in other countries'. The same logic has historically supported the framing of criminals as 'orphans of the Swedish people's home' and as 'just another group of welfare clients' (Pratt, 2008a, p. 130) who require assistance from society to reemerge as productive citizens able to contribute to the welfare state. However, as crime and violence have been successfully painted as 'something external to Swedish society and stemming from immigrant communities themselves' (Branteryd *et al.*, 2022, p. 950), a 'criminal other' identity has formed that, based on the Janus-faced logic described previously, society needs protection from. Put differently, a nativist fear of crime narrative has successfully situated criminality as originating from the outgroup.

Another possible explanation for the reimagination of criminals in Sweden can be observed in the Swedish Prime Minister's national address following a string of deadly shootings in 2023. His message fuelled the fear of crime narrative by suggesting that anyone can be a victim while also employing Christie's (1986) 'ideal victim' discourse by highlighting that children, a woman, and a visually impaired elderly man were among the fatalities (Schclarek Mulinari, 2025). His approach can be seen as problematic when not everyone is afforded the right to be viewed as a victim. Rather than permitting frameworks to view men, especially racialised men, as victims, the group is frequently conceptualised as 'ideal suspects' (Christie, 1986) or 'perpetual suspects' (Long, 2018). For example, fatally shot victims from marginalised

neighbourhoods are often highlighted as active participants in criminal networks. A victim-offender overlap complicates the matter. Traditionally, the victim is seen as the antithesis of the offender, a 'poor thing' in direct opposition to a 'scoundrel' (Sahlin, 1994, as cited in Heber, 2014). However, an overlap has been widely noted internationally, and Sweden is no exception (Heber, 2012).

Once the victim label is withdrawn, punishment can proceed without sympathy or understanding. By ignoring the likelihood that the offender was also a victim, just deserts can ensue, which seemingly satisfies Sweden's increasing desire to punish the criminal other. Simultaneously, the non-offending population, particularly the ethnic Swedes, are situated as the true victims who deserve retribution from those who threaten the country's comfortable status quo. The dramaturgical abilities of the media have allowed outside actors, such as politicians, to use the logic of the media to their advantage, which can be summed up as *medialisation* (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Asp, 1986). Populism, which is explored next, entails an expanded influence of the mass media, presented as the voice of the populace. In turn, the pressures from a punitive public inflate a sensationalist media, further amplifying a demand for criminal justice reform. As previously noted, politicians commonly employ narratives about increasing crime rates as a powerful instrument to justify and enact more punitive criminal justice policies. Although Sweden is undoubtedly experiencing dire social challenges, this chapter attempts to elevate this discourse by exploring the sociocultural mechanisms at play. These underpinnings are now infiltrating and playing out in the political arena.

2.3 Reactionary populism and the pursuit of punishment

The previous chapter introduced the clash between Sweden's cultural heritage and immigration, neighbourhoods haunted by surging crime and marginalisation, and a

simultaneously colourblind and ethnonationalist rhetoric. This section will examine how the interplay of these factors seem to have converged to create the ideal soil for penal populism to flourish. The resulting policies and strategies form a foundational pillar of this project and demand a review. Sweden was long portrayed as a country that resisted penal populism while remaining committed to prevention and non-custodial sentences (Demker *et al*., 2008). However, according to the beforementioned, the Swedish public has demonstrated an increasingly punitive stance since the turn of the millennium. Consequently, an altering penal rhetoric has emerged. Carceral and welfare regimes are used by governments to address social structures and inequalities. When one fails, the other is forced to work overtime. In Sweden, the previously relied-on comforts of the welfare regime are arguably not doing enough to minimise social antagonisms and inequalities. Thus, the penal regime is forced to go into overdrive to regulate and address social problems. The discussion evokes Rusche and Kirchheimer's (1939, as cited in Garside, 2008, no pagination) point 'that the dominant economic and social relationships of any given society will determine the nature and scope of penal interventions'. The Swedish society previously associated with equality may now be better defined by its displays of exclusion, chauvinism, and inequality. In turn, the political direction is following suit.

Roberts and colleagues (2003, p. 50) highlight the obvious, which is that 'the central tool of penal populism is imprisonment'. Prisons are seen as an instrument to eliminate the public visibility of the suffering and hardship experienced by those who have been convicted (Foucault, 1977). Arguably, for Sweden's punitive public, the goal of imprisonment is not only about obscuring the suffering but also about harshly removing those who are disrupting the country's high-functioning society. The discourse points to a sharply contrasting philosophy to that of the *folkhemmet* principle, where criminals were viewed as orphans needing nurture and

support from society. Adding to Foucault's argument, Bauman (1989) posits that the shared moral responsibility of the perceived 'other' can be justifiably dismantled through social separation. In the process of becoming blind to the humanity of marginalised populations, those who have been 'otherised' are effectively 'evict[ed] from the realm of moral duty' (Fein, 1979, as cited in Bauman 1989, p. 191). Consequently, punishing the 'other' is made more conceivable and straightforward as the process becomes devoid of moral responsibility.

Pratt (2007, p. 8) considers penal populism a sign of 'a major shift in the configuration of penal power in modern society'. Al Weswasi and colleagues (2023, p. 972) refer to Sweden's punitive turn as involving an 'increasing trust among policymakers in the ability of incarceration and longer prison sentences to reduce crime'. Whether advocating for the expanded use of imprisonment is motivated by a sincere faith in the country's renowned prison system, belief in the inherent efficacy of incarceration, or motivated by a social exclusion of racialised criminal others is beyond the current project. What is more certain is that penal populism emerged conceptually in the criminological literature as a response to growing incarceration rates in Western nations and the evolution from a reliance on evidence-based practices to punitive measures that account for the public's punishment-seeking sentiment (Bottoms, 1995, and Pratt, 2007, as cited in Koning and Puddister, 2024). Swedish criminal justice policy has historically been shielded from public and political influences (Andersson and Nilsson, 2017), which has allowed evidence to guide policymaking. Tomasson (1970, p. 226) praises the 'enormous respect among Swedes for science, technology, and expert opinion. No society in the world utilises experts and knowledge in the whole process of writing legislation as does Sweden'. However, the punitive turn highlights anomalies in the otherwise rational, knowledge-based crime prevention as new policies seem to lack evidence and are instead guided by the perceived demand for tougher sentencing (Träskman, 2004).

Madfis (2014, p. 1) argues that the politicisation of crime prevention has occurred because postmodern thinkers started to 'question the validity of scientific knowledge and authority' due to the rise of systematic inequality resulting from modern progress. Foucault (1980) suggests that 'objective science' is under the control of experts who claim to possess special knowledge that makes them particularly equipped to make decisions for those considered less educated or powerful. The postmodern critique encourages the revealing of implicit assumptions and concealed ideologies to reveal hidden interests. Arrigo and Bernard (1997, as cited in Madfis, 2014, p. 3) assert that 'postmodernists are concerned with those who control the means of linguistic production with the power to define law and crime', which almost exclusively are the political and economic elite. In turn, the way that those in power represent crime becomes increasingly important, and because 'oppositional language is not incorporated into the dominant forms of communication, alternative ways of knowing are entirely dismissed' (p. 3). As evidenced by the penal populism visible in Sweden's last election, where political parties competed over who could promote the harshest stance on crime, alternative views and criminological expertise were largely ignored. Consequently, a singular solution to a vastly complex social problem was advanced.

Further on the departure from an evidence-based reliance on criminological research, the government recently released a report regarding potential increases in the sentencing guidelines for the commission of multiple criminal offences (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2023). Although the review was conducted by expert professionals such as lawyers, judges, a criminal law adjunct professor, an investigator, and a detective superintendent, Emeritus Professor in Criminology Henrik Tham (2023) criticises the absence of social researchers in the authoring of the report and the lack of research considered. Tham questions whether the

motive for the sentencing increases was expressive or instrumental. The answer seems clear as the report states, 'If the system is perceived to lose its meaning […] this can give the impression that criminal justice is indifferent to the harms of criminality. Such risks undermine the system's reliability and legitimacy' (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2023, p. 458, my translation). With a growing disregard for criminological research, the shifting focus towards an expressive motivation is becoming increasingly obvious.

The punitive policies can be understood as symbolic gestures aimed at gaining public approval and virtue signalling to a punishment-seeking society rather than structurally addressing crime. In turn, Sweden may be caught in the trap of political short-termism. Mackenzie and Green (2008, p. 2) discuss the use of performative regulations, which function as frantic crisis responses that offer the appearance of 'doing something' but hinder real long-term problem-solving. In other words, policy reform may be more about managing public dissatisfaction and the appearance of performance than actual resolution. Scholars have highlighted that expanded police powers and harsher punishments are not uncommon when reassuring the public using legislative decision-making, regardless of evidence disproving efficacy (Ayling, 2011). In an ideal world, crime policy would be evidence-based. However, criminal laws are sometimes 'created and wielded as a political weapon in response to the public outrage or anxiety and media rhetoric precipitated by a violent incident' (p. 152).

The discrepancy between public perception and judicial discretion is evidenced by Jerre and Tham (2010), who investigated Swede's public sense of justice. The research used three different methods with varying amounts of background information provided to participants to examine how the Swedish public would sentence criminal cases compared to presiding judges. When respondents were given no background information but asked directly about their

perception of sentencing, most of the respondents considered the suggested punishments excessively mild and generally backed longer sentences. Another set of respondents received postal questionnaires that detailed several criminal cases. Compared to the sentences ordered by the judges, the respondents suggested shorter sentences or non-custodial sanctions. The third method used focus groups that viewed and discussed footage from four criminal trials. In most cases, these participants advocated for even shorter sentences or non-custodial sentences compared to the judges, who ordered longer sentences than the participants in all but one case.

The above study concluded that the proportion of those advocating for harsher sentences declined and those advocating for shorter prison sentences or non-custodial sentences increased as more information was obtained. Jerre (2013, p. 14) argues that '[o]ne could say that the more the participants' ability to assess what might constitute appropriate sanctions for concrete offences approach that found in a court of law, the closer they come to a mean assessment that is in line with prevailing sentencing practices in court'. A similar conclusion was drawn by Flemming Balvig (2006, as cited in Jerre and Tham, 2010) in an equivalent Danish study that suggested that the public demands harsher sentences because of a lack of knowledge about the extent of sentences actually awarded. A limited legal understanding may contribute to reduced public confidence in the political system, which has been noted to result in increases in populism and penal severity (Pratt and Clark, 2005).

Garland (1990, p. 4) calls modern punishment a 'cultural as well as a strategic affair; that it is a realm for the expression of social value and emotion as well as a process for asserting control'. Garland remarks on the demand to scrutinise the values and sentiments that underpin the sociology of punishment. In Foucault's (1977, p. 23) famous work *Discipline and Punish*, he urges us to 'regard punishment as a political tactic'. In Sweden, that is arguably precisely what

the punitive reorientation is becoming. Occasionally considered contraries in their conceptualisation of punishment, Durkheim proposes that 'to think of punishment as a calculated instrument for the rational control of conduct is to miss its essential character' (Garland, 1990, p. 7). While the punitive motivation appears calculated within the Swedish political realm, its essence lies in the emotional reaction to violated social traditions.

Consequently, the utility of punishment may be less about the belief in the success of carceral practices and more about the catharsis of punitive sentiment. Durkheim emphasises the role of the onlookers and how harnessing the third party's emotional energy remains the 'soul of penality' (p. 8). Like Garland and Durkheim, Carvalho and Chamberlen (2018) point to punishment's role in generating social solidarity, especially in the presence of a common enemy. Research has found that during times of social uncertainty and anxiety, when solidarity is especially vulnerable, punitive attitudes and support for punitive policies are elevated (Ericson, 2007; Sparks, 2012). A punitive inclination also correlates with perceived inequality (Carvalho and Chamberlen, 2018). Facing these conditions, hostility towards crime or criminals has the power to promote solidarity by uniting communities against a common enemy. Again, acting as an avenue for social catharsis.

In summary, the sensationalist media coverage of the immigration wave, the increases in deadly violence and the social marginalisation experienced in the last decade may have served as catalysts to further encourage penal populism and the use of imprisonment as population control. Hermansson (2023, p. 37) proposes that '[t]he political use of fear of crime has been interpreted as a conservative project, reinforcing racialized stereotypes and legitimising the pursuit of order'. Schclarek Mulinari (2020) notes that punishment-orientated strategies are particularly common when racialised, non-white groups are targeted and deemed to be

disrupting the order. This racialisation process recasts those in need of support and protection into threats that must be rejected or eliminated, which is where punishment comes in. Penal populism capitalises on the public's anxieties about victimisation and criminality (Roberts *et al*., 2003). When fear is coupled with dwindling trust, demands for punitive actions are increasingly common (Lappi-Seppälä, 2011).

Seemingly, the adjustments to the Scandinavian welfare model has led to diminished levels of security and heightened disparities along class and ethnic lines. This evolution appears linked to increased intolerance and a more pronounced sense of punitiveness towards marginalised groups (Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012). Shelby (2022) argues that advocating for an expanded use of custodial sentences can be easily understood when a population assumes that their basic rights are in jeopardy. Research about the politics of immigration in Europe has shown that actively pursuing or opportunistically using racist or xenophobic rhetoric to further positions of power is not uncommon (van Dijk, 1991). In recent years, a narrative in which immigrants are presented as the cause of discrimination and segregation has become more common (Peralta, 2005). As the next section will show, politicians and political parties have gained success by anchoring themselves to the anti-immigration agenda. The perceived void created by the retrenchment of the beloved *folkhemmet* ideology may have contributed to the rise of a reactionary populism that is reconfiguring the country's political landscape. As will become clear, the Sweden Democrats epitomise the philosophical transformation that Sweden is undergoing and showcase penal populism in practice.

2.3.1 The popularity of the radical right

In 2022, the Sweden Democrats (SD), a radical right-wing populist party, dressed a Stockholm Metro train in the party's colours and logo. An image of the publicity stunt was posted on social

media by a high-ranking spokesperson for the party along with the caption, ‘Welcome onboard the repatriation train. You have a one-way ticket. Next stop: Kabul!’ (my translation). Years prior, the party produced a TV advert that showed women in burkas competing against an elderly woman assisted by a walking frame to pull a break with the message ‘On September 19th, you can choose between a break on immigration or pension’ (my translation). These are just two examples of the openly xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric that the party is spewing. Still, the party has had enormous political success over the last decades. Considered a party inspired by its roots in neo-Nazi contexts (Ekman and Poohl, 2010), the Sweden Democrats have swapped their marching boots for fashion-forward suits. The party has gone from garnering enough votes to enter parliament for the first time in 2010 to being Sweden’s second most popular party in the 2022 election (Swedish Election Authority, 2024). Initially, SD’s emergence was countered with an antiracist eruption where the party was called an ‘un-Swedish phenomenon’ (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå, 2010, as cited in Hübinette and Lundström, 2014, p. 423). Some understood the surfacing of a perceivably racist party in the Swedish political arena as a clear end to Sweden’s exceptional image.

Prior to 2010, Sweden could take pride in being among the few remaining European nations without a radical right-wing party in parliament (Hübinette and Lundström, 2014). Rydgren (2002) explains the absence as partly owing to voters being unreachable for mobilisation, immigration being considered of low importance, and a perception that the Sweden Democrats were overly extreme. While still regarded as significantly radical by the left, the populist party has garnered a substantial voter base due to evoking national sentiment and nostalgic longing for a traditional Sweden. Right-wing populists tend to allege that the elites are more concerned about internationalism and cosmopolitanism than ‘the people’ (Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019). Similar to Swedes’ self-perceived goodness discussed previously, populists often

consider themselves the 'good guys' despite outside impressions of immorality (Vahter and Jakobson, 2023). By considering 'the people', or *folk* to invoke Swedish terminology, as the victims of social change, right-wing populists call on nativist sentiment to frame themselves as heroes offering protection and justice. The victimhood narrative is portrayed both in opposition to the elites and in terms of a 'lost' society.

Jimmy Åkesson, the leader of SD, expressed the view that Sweden 'no longer feels like Sweden' (Vahter and Jakobson, 2023, p. 14) while aiming to depict his party as the 'only remaining link to what once was and to what was a good society, now disappeared in degeneration and multiculturalism', while accusing other parties of being responsible for the demise of the welfare state (Sunnemark, 2014, p. 14). Although the country's most popular party, the Social Democrats, are considered the engineers of *folkhemmet*, the Sweden Democrats position themselves as the last remaining heirs of the tradition. Considering the earlier mentioned nostalgic longing for an era that represents *folkhemmet*, the party's recent polling results are unsurprising during a time of unprecedented immigration and street violence. While the *folkhemmet* metaphor traditionally signified modernity and progressivism, the Sweden Democrats are banking on the more conservative monocultural aspect of the concept. The *folkhemmet* principle has been fundamental to SD's agenda to blame immigration for the perceived welfare state demise. Rydgren and van der Meiden (2019) remark on the significance of a stern stance on immigration as a key tactic for the party to mobilise voters.

Moreover, while the *folkhemmet* principle remains intimately connected with a traditional Swedish self-understanding, the concept also appears in modern debates. Zaremba (1999, p. 19, my emphasis) writes that '[t]he *folkhem* nowadays is a loaded concept and subject to conflicts which seem to have more to do with the future and with positions of power than with

our understanding of history'. Sunnemark (2014) contends that the desire to appropriate the memory of the traditional Swedish welfare state has impacted Sweden's punitive outlook. Attitudes and emotions linked to the welfare state play a significant role in the discourse about safety within Swedish criminal policy (Hermansson, 2022). At the start of the 21st century, Swedish voters did not regard law and order as a critical question or a matter that swayed voters (Andersson *et al*., 2021). The recent election and its associated political debates elucidated that the reality is starkly different today. As research by Andersson and colleagues (2021) found, right-wing voters in Sweden are considerably more concerned about matters of crime and punishment than those on the left.

Hermansson (2023) analyses emotional expressions in Swedish election campaigns and notes how trust is framed as a national core value that crime has eroded, threatening the social contract. She adds that when the trust is broken, there is a perception that we are failing previous generations who have worked hard to develop the emotion. The argument is a wink at the growing distance from *folkhemmet* and the importance of preserving the welfare state. Punitive measures are thereby understood as weapons for disarming a fear of a changing society. Parties on the radical right have been called out as 'products of the societies from which they emerged, they are symptoms of deeper social malaise' (Barker, 2018, p. 53). Similar expressions have been observed in the Anglosphere. The punitive outbursts in the U.S. and the U.K. have referenced legitimacy crises, the loss of public confidence, and pressure to use punishments to demonstrate sovereignty (Garland, 2001). Sweden trending in a similar direction is undoubtedly a concern, which is an essential area of investigation for this project. Especially as prominent thinkers rarely praise punitive regimes and the criminological evidence seems equally critical.

Friedrich Nietzsche and Émile Durkheim shared few points of insight, but they both agreed that there is no need for strong political regimes to be intensely punitive. Garland (1996, p. 445) concurs by adding that 'punitiveness may pose as a symbol of strength, but it should be interpreted as a symptom of weak authority and inadequate controls.' Although not the only measure of a functioning regime, Rothstein and Holmgren (2020) found that the social trust in Sweden has remained high over the last 20 years. However, there was an exception. SD's voters displayed significantly lower social trust than average, which, following Garland's logic, may help explain the heightened demand for punishment in Sweden. The increasing punitiveness is evident by the Tidö Agreement, an array of policy proposals agreed upon by the ruling four-party alliance that emerged victorious in the 2022 election. Reflecting the parties' 'get tough on crime' rhetoric, the deal outlined several drastic measures to fulfil their campaign promises. While a growing portion of the public may welcome the proposals, the sentiment was not universal.

The human rights organisation Civil Rights Defenders (2022, p. 3) called out the agreement as 'clearly repressive' and stated significant concern. Additionally, Amnesty International Sweden (2022) condemned the proposals for infringing on human rights, particularly discriminating on the grounds of residential area and ethnicity. Furthermore, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023a) was commissioned to review what implementing the Tidö Agreement's proposed measures would mean for the authority. The findings revealed that out of the 48 proposals relating to crime, 13 are presumed to impact the SPPS significantly. Swedish criminologists have urged a reconsideration of the Tidö proposals due to the tremendous costs and because the amendments would turn Sweden's modest prison population into the largest per capita in Europe (Alm *et al*., 2023). Schclarek Mulinari (2025, p. 10) calls the new government's turn towards a security state a 'race to the bottom', where Sweden is

suddenly topping lists never imagined. To situate these developments prior to exploring their consequences in Chapters 4 through 7, the Swedish prison regime needs to be introduced.

2.4 Situating the Swedish penal regime

Scandinavian prisons have long been highly regarded and synonymous with rehabilitation and utopian penal estates. Pratt (2008a) writes about short prison sentences with limitless quality food, spacious cells, and material comforts. Regrettably, the factual basis for this view appears to be shifting, particularly in Sweden. On the other hand, as will be revealed, some Nordic scholars argue that the image has always been largely false. Nonetheless, hints at a comparatively milder penal climate can be observed within the terminology. For example, the Swedish name for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, *Kriminalvården*, can be directly translated to 'criminal care'. Similarly, the Swedish term for prison officer is *kriminalvårdare,* which translates to 'criminal caregiver'. The gentler language emphasises the rehabilitative philosophy by highlighting the staff's role in supporting desistance and caring for the inmates. Furthermore, the person ordered to serve a sentence with the SPPS is referred to as *klient* (client in English) rather than 'prisoner'. The intention is to humanise the individual and alter the negative connotation by using terminology found in other industries and social services. The assumed humaneness of the contemporary Swedish carceral regime has developed over time, and as an attempt to employ its welfarist philosophy by considering '[d]eviation in any way [as] an indicator of something being wrong, and if something was wrong, it was up to the state and its officials and civil servants to find a cure or remedy' (Andersson, 2012, p. 164). In turn, considering Swedish prisons as a place intended for care, caregivers, and clients can be better understood. Like any other penal regime, the Swedish prison system has undoubtedly evolved since its creation. While this project mainly focuses on understanding the last decade's

evolution, a brief review of the history of Swedish prisons and the rehabilitative ideal may help conceptualise Swedish penality and contextualise the ongoing changes.

2.4.1 Historical context

Towards the end of the 1800s, Sweden abolished public executions and increasingly restricted the death penalty (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013). As the use of punishments to the human body declined, the prison became a central concept in establishing modern penal systems. In an *economy of punishment*, deprivation of time and the enforcement of isolation became the way to pay for criminal wrongdoings (Foucault, 1977). The aspiration of separate cell confinement signified the transition to modern penal arrangements. By the 1880s, Sweden housed most of its prisoners in separate cells in one of its 45 newly built separate system prisons (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013). While the Western world commonly opted to build severity into the system, the Nordic countries realised imprisonment's potential to force reformation. The motive was that the fruits of the Enlightenment, civilisation and industrialisation should not be discarded but be introduced to those who had been excluded by 'making him used to order, discipline and industriousness', to become an 'impeccable, productive and useful citizen' (p. 100).

The above philosophy was the standard for several decades as mandatory treatments and care were administered. The era came to be known for its rehabilitative ideal, which Andersson (2018, p. 112) suggests was primarily the result of 'the establishing of a social democratic welfare state, the hegemony of a medically based criminology, and a firm belief in a scientific crime policy that could be used as a means of social engineering'. While the philosophy was unchallenged for extended periods, the critique started accumulating. Despite being internationally labelled '"the promised land" of treatment ideology' (Anttila, 1977, as cited in Pratt, 2008a, p. 130), the evidence-led liberal criticism of the rehabilitative ideal was mounting as empirical findings

highlighted the ineffectiveness and injustices of individual treatment (Andersson, 2018). The compulsion and coercion that came to signify the rehabilitative ideal led to mistrust of the prison system. As a result, Sweden, along with the other Nordic countries, experienced a period of penal liberalisation in the 1970s (Lappi-Seppälä, 2016).

The outcome was a reduction in penal severity by 'develop[ing] a sentencing system that respected principles of proportionality and humanity' (Lappi-Seppälä, 2016, p. 21). A regime change took place in Scandinavian prisons that included more open prisons, routinely granting early release, and the expanded use of furlough. Sweden also successfully replaced many custodial sentences with community sentences (For a comprehensive overview of Swedish probation, see Boijsen & Tallving, 2017). Lappi-Seppälä (2016) notes that a large majority of penal sanctions between 1960 and 1980 were implemented to reduce the use of imprisonment and its harmful effects. While penal liberalisation was ongoing, there were fears that moving away from the rehabilitative ideal and its focus on individual prevention towards general prevention would motivate penal harshness due to the absence of evidence-based alternatives (i.e., the nothing works doctrine) (Andersson, 2018). The discourse culminated in a move towards just deserts, where the blameworthiness of a crime determined the deservedness of punishment. Social engineering was thereby largely replaced by moral engineering. Accordingly, the last decades' penal policies seem to have become more about protecting society from criminals than rehabilitating individuals who can successfully be returned to society.

In turn, the size of the Swedish prison population has fluctuated depending on the perceived threat to society. The introduction of measures that increased the severity of punishments and expanded the scope of criminalisation led to increases in the prison population around the turn

of the millennium (Lappi-Seppälä, 2007). The prison population then steadily declined for 12 years to the point that prisons were closing. Since 2016, steady annual increases have occurred and the penal population has continued to trend upward (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). The recent growth, motivated by the mechanisms discussed previously, forms the foundation for this project. Although Sweden is no stranger to fluctuating prison populations, there now appear to be factors in addition to crime that are promoting the growth. Furthermore, the objective of punishment also seems to be evolving from primarily focused on rehabilitation to a more pronounced emphasis on punishment. These trends must be investigated to ascertain their implications and whether Sweden can maintain its rehabilitation-focused philosophy during an era of penal expansion. First, the development of the rehabilitative ideology, Scandinavian exceptionalism, the contemporary unravelling of the SPPS, extended sentencing, and the professional penal culture will be reviewed.

2.4.2 The return of the rehabilitative ideology

Although the height of Sweden's rehabilitative ideal and the physician's role as the primary scientific authority in shaping crime policy dissipated several decades ago, a focus on rehabilitation has remained, and the culture of intervention persists. Andersson (2012) considers medical science to have returned to Swedish prisons since the turn of the millennium, which is evident by the SPPS' reliance on a council of physicians and subject matter experts to verify the authority's treatment programmes. While a punitive turn has emerged, the paradigm oriented towards aggregated risk populations was assumed to be able to work in symbiosis with treatment (Nilsson, 2013). Better yet, treatment programmes in Swedish prisons and probation offices have evolved far beyond that of the era of the rehabilitative ideal. The treatment categories are vast, with 10 accredited programmes in 2024 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). The programmes are continuously evaluated and discontinued if the desired

results are not achieved. While scientific experts do not carry out the programmes, the content is based on scientific knowledge about *what works* and largely operates with strict adherence to a manual (Nilsson, 2013). Berman (2004) found that those who completed treatment programmes produced a 25 percent lower reconviction rate and experienced both long-term and short-term benefits. A 2014 review by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service revealed that four of the nine evaluated treatment programmes yielded statistically significant risk reductions, which is in line with international findings. A more recent study also concluded that treatment interventions deployed by the SPPS play a significant role in reducing the risk of recidivism (Roxell, 2024).

However, following neoliberal thinking, treatment in Sweden may have become less about individual rehabilitation and more about assessing the risk of reoffending and safeguarding the public (Nilsson, 2013). While standardised risk assessments have been utilised by the SPPS for over two decades, the practice has recently ascended at additional decision-making points. The authority widely employs the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model, used both in prison and probation settings to assess risk and track the rehabilitative process (Lardén, 2022). Garland (2001) regards risk-based approaches as essential in the punitive turn towards neoliberal crime policies. Much like the Janus-faced Swedish society, risk-based approaches can be seen as possessing two faces that are both inclusionary and exclusionary (van Eijk, 2020). For example, the subjective judgements that standardised tools are meant to eliminate can instead be emphasised through practitioners' discretionary power, which permits inequalities to be reproduced in risk-based decisions. While Nilsson (2013) suggests that the dichotomous nature of treatment and control may dissolve through risk management instruments, Robinson (1999) found that risk-based practices can both align and conflict with rehabilitative approaches.

Moreover, the Swedish carceral regime's rehabilitative philosophy goes beyond treatment programmes. Rehabilitation is also perceived to be achieved through 'the principle of normality', which suggests that conditions inside the prison should resemble those outside the prison as much as possible and that the deprivation of freedom should be the only punishment (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2021a). Treatment and inclusion while attempting to rehabilitate the prisoner into a contributing member of society have been prioritised over stigmatisation and exclusion. The social-inclusive approach intends that anyone who comes into direct contact with the Swedish criminal justice system should find themselves in a better condition to 'voluntarily conduct their lives in accordance with the law' (Díez-Ripollés, 2013, p. 44). The SPPS' mission is to 'break the vicious cycle' and the motto is 'better out', which underscores the authority's rehabilitative mission (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2007). Despite its turbulent history, rehabilitation is deemed an essential component of the Swedish prison system due to the fundamental belief that humans can change (Scott, 2017). This outlook, along with other flattering perceptions of Scandinavian penal institutions, provides the foundation for Scandinavian exceptionalism, a concept that serves as a point of reference for the present project.

2.4.3 Scandinavian penal exceptionalism

This section unpacks the favourable image of Swedish prisons, the Scandinavian exceptionalism thesis, its critique, and contemporary standing. As discussed, Swedish prisons have experienced periods of both liberalisation and repression. However, the country has historically resisted international penal trends and instead paved its own path. Consequently, in the 1960s and 1970s, Swedish prisons became a site for study tours for international scholars (Nilsson, 2012). As the Swedish welfare state was already regarded as an aspirational model, the country's carceral system was naturally well received and described as 'probably the

world's most progressive country in prison care and reform' (Fleisher, 1956, p. 205). This era signified the prime of Sweden's treatment ideology and penal welfarism (Nilsson, 2012). Swedish prisons became characterised as humane, sensible, and effective. These descriptors are partly owed as the inspiration for the development of Scandinavian penal exceptionalism.

Pratt's (2008a, p. 119) famous paper about Scandinavian penal exceptionalism zooms in on the region's 'low rates of imprisonment and humane prison conditions', which he argues have developed 'from the cultures of equality that existed in these countries which were then embedded in their social fabrics through the universalism of the Scandinavian welfare state'. In contrast, Whitman (2003) argues that in the United States, the country's exceptionalism allowed egalitarianism to produce harsh and repressive punishments. This seems similar to what is happening in Sweden today. However, Scandinavian exceptionalism has historically allowed the robust egalitarian traditions to produce the opposite conditions. In a world progressing inexorably towards heightened punitiveness, the Scandinavian countries have been regarded as beacons of tolerance (Nelken, 2009). The characteristics of Scandinavian exceptionalism were believed to function as antidotes to mass incarceration. Times have changed. While mainstream criminology assumes the Scandinavian countries' ability to mildly administer penal sanctions using moderate penal powers, Barker and Scharff Smith (2021) argue that immigration has altered the region's carceral patterns.

At the time when Pratt (2008b) wrote his Scandinavian penal exceptionalism thesis, Sweden was experiencing a temporary rise in the prison population. He suggested that this increase, including similar developments in Norway and Finland, resulted from an 'erosion of security and egalitarianism, of homogeneity, and solidarity' (p. 277), the cornerstones of Scandinavian society. Pratt further remarked that the countries had become particularly vulnerable to '[t]he

decline of trust in government, discrediting of expertise, sensational rather than objective media reporting, [and] the politicization of victimhood associated with such developments', which are 'the same forces that have contributed to penal excess elsewhere' (p. 277). Pratt concluded that Scandinavian penal exceptionalism is facing its greatest threat in Sweden as the country is becoming an outlier among its Nordic neighbours, which is an insight that has undoubtedly materialised. As previously mentioned, the term 'the Swedish condition' has gained traction among Nordic politicians in recent years to describe the country's accumulating challenges (Rostami, 2021). Pratt's (2008b, p. 288) assessment that Sweden faces a 'danger of moving out of the "exceptional" category altogether' points to more than the country's growing prison population. He also considers the prison conditions to be in jeopardy.

As cracks are starting to form in the shield of exceptionalism in Sweden, Hörnqvist (2012, as cited in Barker, 2013, p. 7) is critical of the Scandinavian Exceptionalism thesis 'fast becoming a social fact, that is, a taken for granted reality with a force of its own'. Another common critique stems from Pratt's generalisations of the region's carceral systems and policies, as the countries are far from monolithic, yet often consolidated (see Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012; Barker, 2013). Moving beyond methodological challenges, Scharff Smith (2012, p. 41) is not convinced that a 'Scandinavian culture of equality' exists. If so, he submits that such a culture has not compellingly resulted in an extraordinarily humane penal culture or practices. Others outright disagree with the notion that Scandinavian prisons offer the humane prison conditions that Pratt (2008a) praises.

For example, Mathiesen (2012, p. 20) contends that remand policies in Sweden and Norway are 'painfully embarrassing' due to the number of detainees and the length of detention in extended isolation. The pre-trial detention regulations in Sweden have faced criticism from

both the United Nations Committee Against Torture and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Holfverberg, 2019). Insider accounts from Nordic prison researchers have traditionally adopted a more critical perspective in their analyses of the region's prison conditions and penal policies. In their book dedicated to unpacking Scandinavian exceptionalism, Ugelvik and Dullum (2012) conclude that Nordic scholars have dedicated entire careers to critiquing ethnocentric perspectives while suggesting that penal oppression may be exercised in a more covert manner in the Scandinavian countries.

Although Pratt's Scandinavian exceptionalism thesis has been widely criticised, he has defended his stance. Pratt (2022) posits that while there are notable reconfigurations, the region's exceptionalism remains and has showcased remarkable resilience in the face of vast social challenges, particularly in Sweden. Of course, everything is relative. From the Nordic context, scholars may understandably struggle to label the penal regimes as humane and moderate. However, compared to the U.S., Lappi-Seppälä (2019, p. 10) argues that 'the Nordics come from another penal planet'. According to Pratt (2008b), although not exportable, the traditional Scandinavian penal philosophy serves as a reminder to other nations that there are alternative options to managing crime and operating prisons that do not demand severity. Similarly, Reiter, Sexton, and Sumner (2018, pp. 93-94) point out that 'Scandinavian Exceptionalism has served as both a theoretical tool with which to critique harsher prison systems' as well as 'an aspirational goal implying that harsher prison systems are fixable with just a little more humanity, a little more normalization, or a little less brutality'.

However, similar to the Nordic researchers critical of the assumption that Scandinavian exceptionalism offsets penal severity, Reiter, Sexton, and Sumner (2018) point out that

suffering is underscored as fundamental to incarceration. Crewe and Liebling (2012) highlight the scholarly discourse that considers liberal-humanitarian prisons a contradiction due to the inherent punitivity of carceral estates. The consequential human suffering is an important reminder for Sweden as the nation moves towards expanding its penal regime. So, ironically, while other regions are encouraged to find inspiration in the Scandinavian approach, Sweden is undergoing a penal reconfiguration that is moving the country away from its own ideals and towards a criticised American approach. The concept of Scandinavian exceptionalism, disputed or not, underpins the present project. The suspected departure from values that have situated the Swedish prison system as an aspirational model warrants an investigation. The opposing forces pulling Swedish penality in different directions must be understood to assess whether a humane and moderate penal order centred around rehabilitation is a characterisation of the past.

2.4.4 The changing conditions

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service is navigating unfamiliar territory as the consequences of the escalation in street violence and the punitive demands are playing out in the country's penal system. Nilsson (2013, p. 25) calls Sweden a follower, albeit a slow follower, of international trends emphasising security, control, and increased penalisation. According to Tham (2022), the magnitude and rigour of Sweden's punitive legal reforms over the last decade could be considered unprecedented in historical terms. The SPPS is preparing for an extraordinary expansion over the next decade to accommodate the nation's exceptional penal demand. The growth has occurred rapidly. In 2020, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2021c) averaged approximately 6,700 clients in prisons and remand prisons. In 2024, the number was around 11,000 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). By 2034, the authority expects to increased its capacity to 29,000 clients in prisons and remand prisons (The Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025b). Yet, the expansion may be insufficient enough

to accommodate all the correctional clients that the recently-elected right-wing government's Tidö Agreement and other legal amendments are assumed to produce. The reforms, if implemented, can increase the number of years served in prison by 450 percent, which could result in approximately 35,000 clients. The policy changes would also contribute an additional 11,000 probation years over the next decade, a 74 percent increase (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023a). In response to these astonishing figures, the authority reveals that there is a risk that they may be unable sufficiently increase its capacity to accommodate the remarkable demand.

Calculations by Hörnqvist (2024) suggest that if the projected estimate of 35,000 clients is realised by 2033 and is weighed against the population prognosis for the same year, then that would mean 316 inmates per 100,000 Swedish residents. Compared to current penal statistics, the figure would place Sweden within the top thirty countries with the highest prison populations in the world and among nations that Sweden traditionally has little in common with. Although the world prison population has expanded by 27 percent since 2000, the increase remains less than the growth in the world's general population (Fair and Walmsley, 2024). Nonetheless, the world prison population rate was 140 per 100,000 residents in 2024 with 49 percent of countries' rates under 150. While future international rates are unknown, the Swedish figure illustrates a clear deviation from the country's moderate penal order. In turn, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023b) reports that the terrifying capacity projections have resulted in investigations into the possibility of prison ships and renting space in foreign prisons. These developments sharply contest the complementary image suggested by Scandinavian exceptionalism.

As of March 2025, the majority of the proposals suggested by the Tidö Agreement are yet to be implemented (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025b). However, the SPPS remains committed to increasing its capacity to accommodate the surging demand. The ongoing construction of large-scale prisons offers another indicator that the moderate penal order is evolving. Sweden's largest prison holds just under 600 clients, but environmental scanning is being conducted to assess future possibilities of operating prisons with 1,000-2,000 spaces (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023b). In addition to being desperate attempts at accommodating the growing demand, the larger prisons are intended as cost-saving measures. Concerns about the financial implications of an expanding prison system are valid, considering that the SPPS' budget has already expanded by 63 percent since 2018 (Swedish National Audit Office, 2024a). The budget can be expected to grow further as the authority has about 45 ongoing property developments (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025b).

As previously noted, Swedish prisons have experienced periods of both punitiveness and liberalisation. The difference is that the resulting fluctuations in the prison and probation population have been largely contained 'within a relatively narrow bound' (Lappi-Seppälä, 2007, p. 245). In contrast, the recent growth has been rapid and significant. A large contributor is the growing average sentence length (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). The number of incoming clients serving custodial sentences longer than two years has more than doubled since 2015. Meanwhile, the number of prison sentences under a year has decreased. Between 2018 and 2023, the average sentence has increased from 351 to 480 days (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention *et al*., 2024). For context, the later number remains shorter than the average custodial sentence in England and Wales, which was approximately 605 days in 2024 (Ministry of Justice, no date), but longer than the Norwegian average of about

243 days (Kriminalomsorgen, no date). Subsequently, Sweden can once again be seen as an outlier among its Scandinavian neighbours and as moving in an Anglo-American direction.

As more clients receive custodial sentences and remain incarcerated for longer in Sweden, overcrowding has become a significant problem. In 2024, the prison occupancy for permanent beds averaged 131 percent (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). Including the addition of temporary beds, the authority operated at a 98 percent occupancy. Research published by von Hofer and Tham in 2013 described Sweden's penal estates as having no overcrowding at the time and the declining prison population even warranted closing prisons (Svenska Dagbladet, 2013), which evidences how recently the punitive turn has occurred. Unfortunately, these capacity reductions are now proving detrimental due to the urgent demand to accommodate a rapid influx of clients. As illustrated, the ongoing penal expansion is primarily understood in terms of statistics. The current project aims to fill that gap by contributing a qualitative study that contextualises the understanding and nuances the discourse.

2.4.4.1 Casting a wider net

Trends in Sweden's criminal justice statistics suggest that the country is 'defining deviance up' and pursuing a 'net-widening' strategy (Cohen, 1985) by pulling more people into the system and expanding the net of penal control. Sarnecki (2021) agrees that the Swedish criminal justice system's increasing punitiveness may stimulate a time of increased net-widening. Suggestions of paradigm shifts commonly become the foci of analyses of global penal regimes. The association between penal changes and political, cultural, and economic trends has long been of interest to scholars. Discussions about eras characterised by 'mass' and 'hyper' incarceration defined much of the 1990s and 2000s criminological discourse in the Anglosphere (see

Garland, 2001). The descriptors suggest breaks with previous penal policies and practices, not dissimilar to the explorations of penal layers seen in Sweden over the last two decades. According to Rubin (2016, p. 432), '[p]enal layering emphasizes both the introduction of a new layer and its ongoing relationship with existing layers'. While Cohen's net-widening and mesh thinning (1979, 1985) illustrate how the altering punishments operate in practice, layering, contrastingly, explains the relationship *between* punishments. Rather than acting as a replacement, layering provides a coexisting relationship between the old and the new. In Sweden, the traditional focus on rehabilitation seemingly intends to remain while more recent punishment-seeking traditions are introduced.

Rubin (2016) explains penal layering as gradual institutional adjustments rather than a comprehensive break with prior approaches. Through the 'attach[ment of] new rules, practices, ideas, and actors to those already in place, layering can change how existing actions are structured and given meaning within institutions' (Örnlind and Forkby, 2023, p. 1084). However, the subtle adjustments to the standing framework can result in more significant institutional change over time. The intricate coexistence and negotiations between the new and the old situate penal layers as the outcome of struggle. In prisons, where there is little room for significant change, amendments are likely added on top of old rules to cope with tensions (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). New penal layers are reportedly being formed in Swedish prisons as staff learn to navigate the 'new normal', which later chapters will discuss. Örnlind and Forkby (2023, p. 1094) posit that '[p]enal layering is a critical analytical tool for challenging monolithic explanations of penal change' and explaining the 'duality of penal institutions.' The approach echoes the Janus-faced logic previously discussed.

Seemingly, penal harshness has become the answer to mass mobility when integration appears to have failed. As Barker (2018, p.137) writes, 'criminalization and penalization of migrants are effective precisely because they bring moral weight to this sorting process'. The strong redistributive welfare state, where everyone contributes and benefits, was fuelled by social solidarity and homogeneity. However, mass immigration placed overwhelming pressure on the welfare state, which arguably warped the system and unintentionally created unprecedented levels of exclusion, discrimination, and alienation. Using the criminal justice system to manage an undesirable migration is nothing new. *Crimmigration* is a term coined by Stumpf (2006) to refer to the intersection of criminal law and immigration, and its exclusionary nature. Through the application of membership theory, crimmigration is used as a means of exclusion where certain powers of the state are used as an apparatus to expel, punish, or regulate those deemed alien from society.

Barker (2018) further develops the above line of thinking by advancing the concept of *penal nationalism*, which examines how criminal justice responses are employed to maintain the national identity and social order. Penal nationalism encapsulated the convergence of national interest with the exercise of penal power (Haney, 2016; Barker, 2017). Penal nationalism has become a way for the government to use its powers to criminalise migration by increasing penal harshness in a way that seems legitimate (Barker, 2018). Sweden is an exemplar of penal nationalism in practice. The welfare state provides an ideal setting that emphasises the significance of safeguarding its members' material and social wellbeing at any cost. Penal nationalism seemingly challenges the idea of Scandinavian exceptionalism by highlighting the expansionist forces that have been put into play in recent years. Barker argues that these forces are 'seriously erod[ing] the core tenet of human dignity as it imposes extraordinary penal harm

on some of the least protected people' (p. 12). As Sweden flexes its carceral arm, the resemblance to Anglo-American penality appears more pronounced.

Although the narrative of a Scandinavian convergence towards an Anglo-American penal order has been contested (see Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012; Barker, 2013), ignoring the intensifying pipeline between Sweden's areas of urban relegation and prisons would be a mistake. Wacquant (2000) draws a line between neighbourhoods characterised as 'ghettos' and prisons, both considered institutions of forced confinement. The socio-spatial formations can be classed as social prisons due to their ethnoracial relegation of stigmatised populations and social exclusion. Furthermore, the penal arm of the state is seemingly utilising sentencing harshness to create a *carceral continuum* in which marginalised populations, mainly minority-ethnic boys and men, 'circulate in closed circuit between its two poles in a self-perpetuating cycle of social and legal marginality with devastating personal and social consequences' (Wacquant, 2000, p. 384). Sweden's evolving crime control raises critical questions about the reinforcement of marginality but also about how the extent of the exposure to the penal system influences the prospect of desistence.

2.4.5 The relationship between sentence length and reoffending

As the Swedish prison population grows and sentences are expanding, the existing literature around sentence length and type must be investigated to assess the emerging punitive approach's efficacy. The discourse about penal harshness and the relationship between sentence length and recidivism is not new. Yet, contradicting results are common and little definitive evidence exists that sentencing increases are universally efficacious, a worrying revelation as punitive eras have been vastly normalised. Furthermore, despite abundant international literature, these penological explorations cannot seamlessly be applied

transnationally. Therefore, this section will focus on Scandinavian literature while only briefly reviewing the international findings.

In the U.S., Marvell and Moody (1997) found that as the prison population grew, the rate of homicides decreased. Meanwhile, Levitt (2001) found no association between incarceration and violent crime. A meta-analysis of 116 studies noted that imprisonment had no effect or a slightly increasing effect on recidivism, especially compared to non-custodial punishments (Petrich *et al*., 2021). The study assertedly called the null effect of custodial sentences a 'criminological fact' (p. 401). Moreover, comprehensive research by Eisen, Roeder, and Bowling (2015) concludes that overly harsh criminal justice policies, mainly the mass use of incarceration, have declined in effectiveness for over 30 years and have been entirely ineffective as a crime control tactic since 2000. Some studies found that harsh prison conditions can cause elevated criminal activity post-release (Drago *et al*., 2011; Chen and Shapiro, 2007). Thus, while there are some indications of the usefulness of imprisonment, research concerning longer sentences appears to primarily conclude an ineffectiveness at reducing offending (see Nagin *et al*., 2009; Cullen *et al*., 2011). Similarly, in a context closer to Sweden, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2017) concludes that sentence severity is not correlated with crime rate reductions.

In Sweden, Tham (2023), among other Swedish criminologists, considers the evidence clear that longer prison sentences do not reduce crime. However, a limited literature review indicates that the research seems to vary in conclusiveness. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2020) analysed changes in the legal precedent resulting in sentence reductions for certain drug offences between 2011 and 2012 and found a 20% reduction in reoffending for those offered the shorter sentences. Al Weswasi and colleagues (2023) were unable to establish

a statistically significant relationship between length of incarceration and reoffending. Similarly, a comprehensive study by von Hofer (2011) analysed the Swedish crime statistics over a hundred years to assess the existence of a correlation between sentencing harshness and crime levels. No such correlation was found, and a conclusion was drawn that sentence length did not impact crime levels. Alm (2024) suggests that the statistically insignificant findings are likely the result of Sweden's relatively short prison sentences, where reforms only result in slight increases or reductions. Sarnecki (2019) argues that the low risk of detection and the late average age at which routine criminals first go to prison indicate that employing longer sentences as a form of crime prevention offers limited success. Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2021a) found that higher arrest and clearance rates had a more substantial deterring effect than harsher sentences.

In terms of alternatives to custodial sentences, Al Weswasi and Bäckman (2024) concluded that replacing short custodial sentences with non-custodial sentences coupled with electronic monitoring reduced reconviction and reincarceration rates in Sweden over the studied 10-year period. Grenet, Grönqvist, and Niknami (2023) also conclude that electronic monitoring produced lower recidivism rates compared to imprisonment. Additionally, the reoffending rate was determined to be significantly lower when electronic monitoring was used for the final portion of a custodial sentence (Marklund and Holmberg, 2009). These results are positive for the SPPS, as the authority is experiencing a growing number of clients serving non-custodial sentences with electronic monitoring (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). Several of the studies highlighted the importance of maintaining ties to society and pointed out that even humane penal regimes can have criminogenic effects.

In contrast, Tyrefors Hinnerich and colleagues (2016) found that those who received a prison sentence over a community sentence for drunk driving had a 30 percent lower recidivism rate. The authors hypothesised that the results were not due to the increased access to rehabilitative support, but due to the prison experience and its deterring impact. Whether these findings are transferable to other types of crimes was not determined. However, the results of the study prompted the SPPS to review its practices and implement 'Krimstics', which focuses on building and maintaining probation and parole officers' therapeutic skills to produce a similar rehabilitative climate for non-custodial sentences that Swedish prisons are intended to provide (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2021a). The current project's interviews with SPPS employees will reveal that the above rationale has been reversed and probation officers are now viewed as the superior facilitators of a rehabilitative philosophy.

Moreover, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2021a) reviewed several studies regarding the role of harsher sentences as a crime deterrent and found a limited correlation. There was, however, more clear support for incapacitation as a tool for crime reduction. The size of the reduction and the recidivism rate varied among the studies and was assumed to depend on the type of individual imprisoned, the prison conditions, and the support offered during the sentence. So, while the relationship between longer prison sentences and crime appears inconclusive, there is something to be said about the increased exposure to rehabilitation that extended periods of incarceration permit. Hjalmarsson and Lindquist (2020) found that prolonged participation in treatment programmes and health care decreased recidivism in Sweden. Similar findings were noted in Norway, another country with a strong rehabilitative philosophy (Bhuller *et al*., 2020).

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024a) highlights that preventing reoffending is one of its primary objectives. However, the reality is that the authority reported its highest reoffending rates since 2010 in 2023. Among these recidivists, the reoffending rate was lower for those who served a minimum of two years in prison compared to shorter sentences. The rapidly expanding throughput experienced by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service requires further investigation. These policy changes cannot be examined in a vacuum but must be situated in contexts that account for additional variables. For example, in Sweden, a punitive turn has meant immense overcrowding. In turn, the conditions within Swedish prisons have changed and may be undermining the objective of incarceration. Thus, longer sentences need to be understood within the current circumstances facing the SPPS. Furthermore, while prisons, remand prisons, and probation exist for the convicted and the accused, they are not the only actors. A review of the existing literature around the SPPS' occupational culture will help set the scene for the forthcoming chapters that engage with how the increasingly punitive approach is experienced by Sweden's correctional employees.

2.4.6 The professional experience

In Scandinavia, criminological explorations appear comparatively limited regarding the practical implications of the punitive reorientation. Understandably so, as the ongoing carceral trends are recent manifestations. Swedish academics Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg have been the primary sources of qualitative research about prison officers' professional experiences and the existing occupational culture in Swedish prisons over the last few decades. Manning (1989, p. 360) defines occupational culture as:

> […] a reduced, selective, and task-based culture that is shaped by and shapes the socially relevant worlds of the occupation. Embedded in traditions and a history, occupational cultures contain accepted practices, rules, and principles of conduct that are situationally applied, and generalized rationales and beliefs.

The SPPS employees are essential to this project. Chapter 4 explores the practitioners' perception of the punitive turn, Chapter 5 investigates the frontline workers' operational experiences amid the ongoing expansion, while Chapters 6 and 7 engage more directly with the occupational culture and rehabilitative approach. As the Swedish carceral regime's culture and philosophy differ from the Anglosphere, this section will mainly focus on research based on Sweden and by the academics named at the top. First, some applicable theoretical frameworks are explored, and then previous research about Scandinavian prison officers' practical experiences is reviewed to create a larger context to situate the thesis' findings within.

Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) call on *social representation theory* to conceptualise prison officers' professional culture. The theory was developed by Serge Moscovici (1972) as an approach grounded in social psychology that establishes a social order through the interplay between individual cognitive and affective processes and collective patterns of interaction and communication. Through this lens, the development and maintenance of a professional culture can be understood while creating a shared reality for its participants that enables communication and orientation. Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) also look at *interaction rituals* to examine prison officers' occupational culture. First developed by Goffman (1967) and further advanced by Collins (2004, p. 7), the latter defines the term as 'a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership'. Successful rituals produce emotional energy that is satisfying and strengthening, whereas failed rituals have the reverse effect. In rituals involving power, such as in interactions between prisoners and officers, the former commonly loses emotional energy while the latter gains (Nylander, 2011).

Prison officers likely experience wavering solidarity and emotional energy throughout their daily interactions. This is where Hochschild's (1983) idea of *emotional labour* is appropriately applied by Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2011) to consider its application in prison work. The term can be understood as 'managing emotions so that they are in accordance with the organizational display rules' (p. 471). Prison work requires significant emotional labour, as staff must navigate the emotional states of incarcerated individuals while also regulating their own emotional responses. Prison officers may experience the strains associated with emotional labour particularly intensely, as there is limited time and space to be 'backstage', to invoke terminology deriving from Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical perspective. The above concepts will prove helpful in exploring the occupational culture in Swedish prisons, especially during a time of change.

Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) found that a turn towards an increased focus on security has created divides between the officers, impacting the ingroup solidarity while promoting suspicion and an 'us versus them' mentality. In turn, the social representations between and among prison officers are cemented as subcultural groups are created. The study notes that officers were commonly divided between those specialising in security and treatment. Here, social representations were further elucidated between the groups as the former commonly described the clients as manipulative and untrustworthy, while the latter highlighted the importance of respecting the clients and believing in their ability to change. The participation in increasingly different rituals was found to create emotional energy among the subcultural group while also serving as a source of lost emotional energy between the groups.

Furthermore, the officers interviewed by Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg raised how emotionally laborious the profession can be as they come in contact with clients experiencing

a vast range of emotions each day. The subcultural divisions between officers are illuminated again as the security-focused officers create more distance from the clients and consequently experience less emotional labour compared to the treatment-focused officers. The strain of the emotional labour was further exacerbated by the normative demand for officers to suppress emotions. This 'frontstage' suppression intensifies the need for a 'backstage', or an 'emotional zone' (Crawley, 2004) where emotions can be unloaded. However, these spaces and moments are reportedly limited.

Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2010) continued developing their argument about the subcultural divisions forming within Swedish prisons. As a securitisation of prison policy took place following a number of high-profile prisoner escapes that occurred in 2004, there was a growing demand for a security specialisation of officers and investments in physical safety measures. At the same time, there has been a growth in treatment programmes. This is 'fundamentally a reflection of an organisation based on the conflicting aims of Sweden's prison system' (p. 81), which has contributed to growing subcultural gaps between officers sympathising with the opposing aims. In turn, officers are increasingly faced with a recurring dilemma regarding which way to lean. A dilemma can be described as a 'two-sided phenomenon in which a situation and/or discourse characterised by uncertainty, contradictions or conflicts, is related to cognitions and feelings of ambivalence in individual or institutional thinking' (Höijer, Lidskog, and Uggla, 2006, as cited in Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2010, p. 80).

Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2010) propose three ideal-typical tactics for dealing with the dilemma. First, the *frustrated*, who find the contradictory duties of prison work challenging as the role vacillates between repressive and rehabilitative functions. Secondly, the *rigid* type,

who finds comfort in the strict routines and who employs a distanced and withdrawn approach. Finally, the *flexible* approach, the most common, was described as dynamic and unbothered by the dilemma as they perceived the duality of the roles as beneficial. Moreover, despite the security turn, the authors found that being security conscious was not ranked by the participating officers as the most important quality for a prison officer. Instead, being empathetic was ranked higher, which echoes the philosophy of Scandinavian penal exceptionalism discussed earlier.

The significant changes that have occurred in the Swedish carceral landscape since Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindström's first survey in 2009 prompted Bruhn and Nylander (2024) to conduct a new survey in 2019 to assess if their findings still applied. The authors point out that in addition to the intensifying security turn, which has contributed to a near elimination of rehabilitation units and an increase in elevated security units, the prison officers' high turnover rate has resulted in a significant workforce replacement since the last survey. Consequently, a conclusion was drawn that the newer employees are likely more drawn to the role due to the security focus rather than expectations of facilitating rehabilitation. This finding suggests that the workforce has increasingly resigned itself to the security shift, which may be why the study found less friction between subcultural groups in 2019 compared to 2009, indicating a more integrated occupational culture. The study also reveals that officers were less concerned about the punitive emphasis in public debates in the later survey, likely due to the escalating crime trends. The authors remark that these perceptions have likely changed further since 2019, as the consequences of a penal populist agenda were barely noticeable then. This is where my research aims to make a conceptual contribution.

The present project intends not only to examine the occupational culture within contemporary Swedish prisons and probation practices, but also to consider the perception among these professionals towards a punitive trend. No such research could be located in Sweden, but in Denmark, Damsa (2023) has expertly engaged with the topic. Focused on remand prisons, she asks, 'What happens when punitive policies are adopted by a penal regime built on a humane approach to punishment?', which closely resembles one of my research questions. Like in Sweden, as will be illuminated in forthcoming chapters, the Danish Prison and Probation Service is experiencing a crisis that is forcing the authority to move further and further away from its objectives and vision. The conflict between security and welfare has presented the same dilemma for Danish prison officers as for their counterparts in Sweden.

Damsa also found that her interviewees were dissatisfied with the growing use of repressive measures within the prisons, which were believed to be counterproductive. The stricter regime was perceived to have transformed the officers from welfare workers to turnkeys, a fear that had become a recent reality. A conclusion was drawn that a gap is growing between the officers' professional opinions about punishment and the policies enacted by the political elite. The lines of questioning and themes that Damsa establishes closely resemble those of the present study. However, the current project goes beyond remand prisons to investigate how a range of relevant practitioners perceive the punitive trend in Sweden while also widening the scope of inquiry.

A small number of researchers have conducted extensive research about penal professionals' culture and experiences in Scandinavian prisons. The intention is to build on these findings by applying a wider lens and by capturing an updated understanding of the evolving carceral system in Sweden. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service's existing philosophy and culture

will be pinned against the emerging penal expansion to assess how a contemporary pursuit of punishment is perceived by some of the professionals closest to these matters. Existing research has established that the Swedish carceral regime has been experiencing a shift for the last two decades and a massive growth in recent years. However, less is known about the effects of the current political direction and social landscape on Swedish prison and probation functions.

This research project aims to fill the noted gap by considering the philosophical, cultural, and operational implications of a punitive reorientation. Although the concept of Scandinavian exceptionalism has been disputed by many Nordic researchers from the start, Sweden's repressive turn has likely further solidified the critics' arguments. The penal reconfiguration is worthy of a qualitative exploration that enriches the vast governmental statistics. Furthermore, the literature review identified a gap in the knowledge production about punishment and imprisonment from Swedish penal professionals' perspective. These accounts are largely absent, which is a concerning discovery considering their practical experience and the existing trend towards limiting expert testimony in the policy discourse. Therefore, following a chapter unpacking the employed methods, the consequent four chapters set out to uncover the interviewees' perceptions and experiences related to Sweden's punishment-seeking turn, the operational crisis unfolding in the SPPS, the shifting rehabilitative agenda, and the polarising occupational culture.

2.5 Chapter summary

Sweden is a country with a self-perceived moral superiority that has historically encouraged equality, political neutrality, and liberal immigration. This chapter illuminates another side of the country by evidencing a polarising society with a romantic longing for the past. A narrow ethnocultural understanding of citizenship has ignited nationalism and established an excluding

Janus-faced logic. A successful politicisation of crime and framing of immigrants as responsible for the social upheaval has activated penal populism and the far-right. Sweden's political landscape has evolved as the public reimagines punishment and demands punitive interventions. The penal philosophy has seemingly transformed from a welfarist approach where the offender was viewed as a product of society's failure in need of support to a victim-centred perspective that seeks to harshly penalise.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service is undergoing significant changes with a projected growth that would move Sweden into a context with some of the world's highest prison populations. The development contradicts previous traditions. Scandinavian exceptionalism has cemented a view of the Swedish carceral system as a moderate regime with low rates of imprisonment and a focus on rehabilitation. Despite varied internal criticism of the system's humaneness, the chapter has established the authority's rehabilitative intention through a brief review of Swedish penal history. As sentences are becoming increasingly extended, existing literature was examined to assess efficacy. Both the international and the Swedish research varied in conclusions. Although, the Swedish studies seemed to advocate for non-custodial sentences and highlighted the value of rehabilitative interventions. Finally, Sweden's occupational prison culture revealed growing polarisation as the conditions evolve, which was producing new professional dilemmas.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter is dedicated to discussing the methods and research philosophy employed throughout this project. Both theoretical and reflexive features are included to motivate the decisions and to locate the utilised methods within existing research. With elements borrowed from grounded theory (GT), this qualitative research used in-depth interviews to assess:

- How is punishment employed to govern social marginality in Sweden?
- What happens when a penal system known for its rehabilitative philosophy faces conditions undermining its objectives?

To successfully address the research questions, the project aims to:

- Analyse the relationship between punishment and social change.
- Examine the perception of Sweden's increasing punitiveness.
- Explore the practical implications of a growing correctional population for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.
- Assess the Swedish carceral regime's ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda.

Prison and probation practitioners were deemed the most suitable participants due to their proximity to correctional institutions. The SPPS employees were also assumed to offer an interesting perspective emerging from being professionally exposed to the realities of the Swedish carceral system while also being members of the public subjected to the sociopolitical forces described previously. Pinning the participants' personal views against their professional experiences was expected to offer a nuanced perspective on questions concerning punishment. To gain additional perspectives, professionals in various relevant roles within the community who were unaffiliated with the SPPS also participated.

3.1 Approach

As the precious chapter illustrated, Sweden is dealing with an evolving society facing unprecedented extremes. While penological explorations of mass incarceration, overcrowding, and its many consequences are nothing new within an international context, Swedish criminology has largely placed its focus elsewhere due to the country's comparatively mild penal climate. Sweden has by no means been spared from the pains of imprisonments, nor is there an absence of prison research. However, as the country's sociopolitical landscape changes, a reassessment of its carceral pattern is warranted. The evolving circumstances suggested that an inductive approach would best serve to gain an understanding of the unfamiliar situation. The decision aligned the project with grounded theory. The use of grounded theory encourages the conceptualisation of theory from the data collected within the study rather than by verifying past theoretical assumptions (Sebastian, 2019). More specifically, the project is primarily guided by constructivist grounded theory due to its compatibility with contemporary thinking. Some classic grounded theory methodological strategies are adopted in the constructivist approach, but then shift the epistemological foundation to incorporate some of the contemporary methodological evolutions that have occurred since the conception of the original approach (Hallberg, 2006).

Unlike classic grounded theory, but in line with the more contemporary approaches, the researcher brought the idea of the phenomenon to be studied and conducted a literature review prior to data collection. The latter has been suggested to address some of the critiques of grounded theory concerning the delay in conducting a comprehensive literature review (Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, 2018). The reviewed literature in combination with my prior criminological knowledge produced a number of specific questions for the participants. However, the aim of gaining a significant level of understanding meant the focus would follow

the participants towards their own perceptions of the studied phenomenon. The iterative movement between data and analysis invoked analytical leads, and new questions allowed the participants' primary concerns to remain at the forefront of the study while deprioritising issues that did not prove relevant.

While the interviewees are the experts within their context, the researcher may contribute relevant theoretical perspectives and understandings of the data, which allows for a co-construction of the findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). A researcher should refrain from forcing their perspective onto the research process but instead contribute an 'empathetic understanding to discover how people construct their lives and why they act as they do' (Charmaz, 2011, p. 292). Thus, my personal views on the increasing reliance on imprisonment were not injected into the interviews but were framed as empathetic concern employed to encourage participants to guide each conversation onto the issues that they deemed most pressing. While the findings have not been discovered and neither do they present 'objective truths', I have taken the power of representation seriously (Charmaz, 2017, p. 38), which has demanded iteration and reflexivity. As I am not a *tabula rasa* and cannot escape prior knowledge, my existing understanding was used to strengthen theoretical sensitivity and insight into relevant issues. The constructivist grounded theory encourages the researcher to take a deeply reflexive position. This methodological self-consciousness led me to examine the data, actions, and budding analyses.

By dissecting our worldviews in the research process, we can understand how these enter the research and construct meaning (Charmaz, 2017). This can include 'defining intersecting relationships with power, identity, subjectivity, and marginality for both the researcher and research participants' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 36). Furthermore, grounded theory's more

contemporary perspectives consider the macro conditions that impact the studied phenomenon, which urges the production of theories that suit the circumstances, promotes understanding, and guides action and practice (Cooney, 2010). Particularly within the constructivist perspective, the research process is located in social, historical, and situational conditions (Charmaz, 2017), which are factors that were deemed particularly important to acknowledge in order to situate this research project and develop theories.

While I have not strictly aligned myself philosophically with one school of thought, inspiration was drawn from critical theory, which foregrounds issues of power and inequalities while challenging common assumptions about identities, structures, institutions, and practices (Carspecken, 2008). Furthermore, due to the choice of a grounded theory method with a particular focus on the constructivist paradigm, I want to highlight the underpinning relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology that have guided aspects of this project. The former is the reality in relation to punishment in Sweden. The research participants' perspectives on reality are multiple and subjective (Creswell, 2014). Individuals are not only seen as unique but also considered in the context of their environments. The subjectivist epistemology assumes the co-construction of understanding between the researcher and the participant. The researcher is not required to be neutral, and it is through their active involvement in the interview process that ideas are collectively generated and knowledge jointly attained (Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2006). Nonetheless, I decline strict adherence to established knowledge categories as these may construct disciplinary boundaries that can limit scholarly inquiry (Skeggs, 1995). However, in the interest of clarity, I reject the positivist outlook that there is a singular social reality with enough stability and regularity to be known. Rather, as mentioned, I acknowledge the existence of multiple subjective realities, and my research aims to build ‘an inductive

understanding of [the phenomena] as events unfold and knowledge accrues' (Charmaz, 2008, p. 155).

3.2 Participants

Due to the project's relatively broad scope, including a range of participants was important. Each of the interviewees had experience with the Swedish criminal justice system and could offer insight into Sweden's penal reconfiguration. Primarily, the focus was on the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's employees. As stated above, gaining an understanding of how employees in various roles within the authority perceive punishment and their experiences with the increasing prison population was the main objective. These penal practitioners' submersion in the relevant context and insight into organisational characteristics offered a unique perspective that helped answer the research questions. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024b) employs just over 14,000 full-time equivalents. About half of those work in prisons, around 1,600 in probation, and approximately 3,000 in remand prisons. Given that this study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm and grounded in social constructivism, the aim was not to obtain a representative sample of the broader population. Instead, participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria outlined below. After widespread recruitment efforts, the participants employed by the SPPS included prison officers, probation officers, treatment facilitators, training officers, an intelligence officer, and a prison governor. Several of these participants had previous experience from multiple roles.

The participants who did not work for the SPPS were selected based on their proximity to or expertise related to marginalised populations in the community, particularly those involved in criminal networks. In line with grounded theory, I also employed theoretical sampling, which

emphasises selecting participants or data sources based on their potential to contribute to the refinement and development of emerging conceptual categories within the analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Thus, to advance the findings from the interviews with the penal practitioners, representatives from organisations that support 'gang exits', an advocate for children with incarcerated parents, a police officer, a community activist, and a manager at a treatment centre for young offenders were included. These interviewees did not only offer their own subjective understanding of the studied phenomena but also assisted in developing the tentative analysis further in hopes of reaching theoretical saturation. A decision was made to limit participation to professionals rather than offenders due to the complexities associated with interviewing the latter. As I become more experienced in field research, I hope to work more directly with marginalised communities and frequently excluded groups. Nonetheless, the chosen participants were deemed the most suitable for this project. Once approval was received from the City, University of London Research Ethics Committee, the recruitment commenced.

3.2.1 Recruitment

While the SPPS has revealed itself to be a relatively transparent authority, my initial perception was that gaining access to participants through the authority's official channels would be challenging. I also feared that the SPPS would dictate my access or attempt to influence who would be a suitable candidate. Therefore, my attention rapidly turned to the use of social media as a recruitment tool, which has emerged as a valuable method for identifying and recruiting prospective participants (Gearhart, 2015). While traditional recruitment methods can be costly and time-consuming (Fenner *et al*., 2012), social media recruitment is effective in accessing participants who may be hard to reach (King, O'Rourke, and DeLongis, 2014). Social media also supports purposive sampling, as populations relevant to the phenomenon under investigation can easily be identified (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006). While I had an

insignificant number of personal contacts with ties to the SPPS, I decided that a social media post outlining my research and requesting participants would be ineffective. I assumed that a more effective method for reaching my target participants was to locate them on social media and then send a direct message to each individual. LinkedIn was identified as an ideal platform for recruitment due to its niche towards professionals.

LinkedIn has a search function that permitted searching directly for individuals employed by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. Furthermore, the platform immediately indicates if the person is a past or current employee. The initial search provided over 6,000 results after filtering for current employees in the authority. My first target was prison officers in male facilities, so I scrolled through the search results in pursuit of participants who indicated that they were current prison officers working for the SPPS. Once an individual who fit the criteria was identified, I reviewed their profile to further assess their suitability. I considered length of service and used their geographical location in an effort to identify whether they worked in a prison or a remand prison. As my initial target was prison officers in prisons, not remand prisons, I used a map on the SPPS' website to compare the potential participants' stated geographic location to their proximity to prisons in Sweden. Reich (2014, p. 403) highlights the usefulness of this type of 'presearch' prior to interviews to gather information available online to identify suitable participants. After reviewing a LinkedIn profile that seemed to fit the criteria of more than a year's experience working in a prison as an officer, I sent a direct message to the individual briefly outlining the project and requesting their participation. The message was sent in Swedish, but an English translation is included in Appendix A.

The effectiveness of qualitative interviewing frequently relies on the interpersonal trust that a researcher is able to establish (Reich, 2014). When recruitment takes place using an impersonal

tool such as social media, trust may be more challenging to establish. However, LinkedIn was perceived as one of the more serious and trustworthy platforms due to the ability to review a user's credentials and work history. That is not to say that a profile cannot be inauthentic, but the ability to cross-reference and further investigate an individual's authenticity arguably increases when professional information is available. Furthermore, accounts on other social media platforms may include personal content, which offers a less professional representation of the researcher that may jeopardise credibility. In the same vein, contacting a possible participant on LinkedIn may be viewed as less intrusive than on other platforms where individuals may post personal pictures or communicate private information. Additionally, an account on LinkedIn may suggest that a potential participant has an interest in being involved within the professional community and therefore more open to being contacted.

While one of the perks of social media recruitment is the reduced costs, I incurred some expenses due to my chosen method. Although LinkedIn offers free accounts, which I have used for several years, I decided to upgrade to a Premium account during the recruitment stage of this project to enhance my efforts. The free version restricts the ability to send messages to only those you have connected with, which I found limiting as I did not intend to 'friend' my participants. With a Premium account, I was able to send messages to any LinkedIn user. I opted for the *Sales Navigator Core* subscription as the plan offered 50 monthly InMail credits, which meant the ability to send 50 recruitment messages per month to potential participants. However, when an InMail message is accepted or declined by the respondent, a credit is returned to the sender. Subsequently, I was able to far exceed 50 messages per month. A negative aspect of the premium plan is that once you cancel your subscription, all InMail messages disappear. Consequently, I had to continue paying for the upgraded subscription until recruitment was completed. Excluding a month of a free trial, I paid for a Premium plan for

four months. While relatively expensive, I found the additional features to be significantly valuable, which justified the incurred costs.

In total, just over 200 messages were sent to identified prison officers. Approximately 40 recipients rejected the message or replied that they were not interested. Some responded that they needed to ask for permission from their superiors or requested time to consider the decision to participate. None of these participants returned with a decision, regardless of a follow-up message. One of the targeted participants responded that she no longer worked for the SPPS but that she would be happy to forward my message to one of her former colleagues. This helpful gesture resulted in a supervising prison officer contacting me the following day, agreeing to participate. She then recommended two of her colleagues who also decided to participate. This was the only instance in which snowball sampling occurred. From the LinkedIn messages, nearly 30 participants expressed interest in participating. The next step included sending the interested participants the Participant Information Sheet, which further outlined the project. An English version of this document can be found in Appendix B.

My intention was to be as straight-forward and transparent as possible, as the 'experience of online communication may shape the expectations of the online interview' (Evans, Elford, and Wiggings, 2010, p. 10). Nonetheless, only half of the participants who received the abovementioned document continued the communication. On the other hand, the other half were happy to continue. Participants were offered the possibility of an online or an in-person meeting. Once a time had been agreed upon, participants were sent a link to read and digitally sign a consent form (Appendix C) using DocuSign. One of the participants who seemed eager to participate had signed the consent form and agreed on a time but cancelled 5 minutes prior

to the meeting and then stopped responding to any further communication. Other than this minor incident, the recruitment was effective and straightforward.

The first round of recruitment resulted in 13 prison officers. Two of these officers were supervising officers, and another two had extensive experience as prison officers but mainly worked as training officers at the time of the interviews. While the intent was to focus the initial round of recruitment on officers working in prison, an additional three officers who worked in remand prisons were identified and included. The described recruitment process was then repeated to seek additional participants who worked as treatment facilitators, probation officers, or other relevant operational roles within the SPPS. As indicated above, several of the participants had previous experience in other roles within the authority, but when considering the role that a participant was in at the time of recruitment, the second recruitment stage generated five intervention facilitators, six probation officers, an intelligence officer, and a prison governor.

The final recruitment stage targeted individuals who worked in the community and were not employed by the SPPS. These participants were identified through a variety of methods. A Google search for Swedish 'gang exit' organisations resulted in the identification of two coordinators and a community activist who were either emailed directly or located on LinkedIn and messaged there. A police officer was identified on LinkedIn through her work with the SPPS on matters related to network criminals. While attending a community event in one of Stockholm's marginalised neighbourhoods, I spoke to representatives from an organisation that advocates for children with parents or relatives in prison. One of their employees later agreed to participate in a formal interview. The last participant was a manager at a treatment centre for at-risk youth who was a guest on a YouTube channel that I watched where the escalating

violence in Sweden was discussed. I found his contact information online, sent an email, and he agreed to be interviewed. A detailed table outlining the participants can be observed in Table 1. I received consent from all the participants prior to commencing with the interviews.

Table 1.

Experience	Job Title	Gender	Total
0-5 years	Prison Officer	Female	4
	Prison Officer	Male	5
	Treatment Facilitator	Female	2
	Treatment Facilitator	Male	0
	Probation Officer	Female	0
	Probation Officer	Male	0
	Children's Advocate	Female	1
5-10 years	Prison Officer	Female	2
	Prison Officer	Male	0
	Treatment Facilitator	Female	0
	Treatment Facilitator	Male	1
	Probation Officer	Female	2
	Probation Officer	Male	3
	Gang Exit Coordinator	Female	1
	Gang Exit Coordinator	Male	1
	Community Activist	Male	1
	Treatment Home Manager	Male	1
>10 years	Prison Officer	Female	3
	Prison Officer	Male	0
	Treatment Facilitator	Female	1
	Treatment Facilitator	Male	1
	Probation Officer	Female	0
	Probation Officer	Male	1
	Intelligence Officer	Male	1
	Training Officer	Female	1
	Training Officer	Male	1
	Prison Governor	Male	1
	Police Officer	Female	1
Total			**35**

3.3 Interviews

This project was originally intended to take on a more ethnographic approach where direct observations were going to supplement the interviews to create more textured accounts of the studied phenomenon. However, restrictions on physical access to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, geographical limitations, and the complexities of a novice researcher conducting observational research in high-crime neighbourhoods and amongst convicted criminals led to the decision to solely focus on in-depth interviews. Nonetheless, the intention remained to capture the lived experiences of the participants. Boylorn (2008, p. 490) explains that:

> Lived experience responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences. The body of work on lived experience focuses on everyday life occurrences and self-awareness. As a life history or life story, lived experience concentrates on ordinary, everyday events (language, rituals, routines) while privileging experience as a way of knowing and interpreting the world.

Interviews allow the subject to narrate their experience while introducing the interviewee's 'cognition, emotion, and behaviour as a unifying whole rather than as independent parts to be researched separately' (Nunkoosing, 2005, p. 699).

By capturing the intricate perspectives of those closest to the studied issues, a researcher can avoid being labelled a 'jailhouse or courthouse sociologist' (Polsky, 1967, p. 145) whose eagerness for insight considers data from state sources while overlooking the lived experiences of everyday people. The unveiling of participants' in-depth accounts of lived experiences encouraged *verstehen* by supplying textured insight into phenomena that may not otherwise be accessible. By challenging the assumptions of positivist criminology, the subjective experiences of the participants are allowed to be highlighted and investigated. The results are not that of glorified journalism but a rigorous method that complements positivist approaches by picking up valuable insight that statistics cannot reach. In consideration of the 'separateness

of the prison world, where cultural values and norms may be different from the world of the researcher' (Jones, 1995, p. 107), an approach that permits the researcher to investigate how the participants understand their social world is of particular importance.

Furthermore, interviews are a useful tool for getting the most expressive responses from participants (Kvale and Brinkman, 2014). The responses may say little about an objective reality, but that is not the aim. Instead, the focus is on authenticity and accurately capturing the linguistic transactions on both a conscious and unconscious level. The reason for choosing qualitative interviews was to achieve an understanding rather than to provide explanations (King and Horrocks, 2010). To ensure that a thorough understanding was gained from the interviews, a semi-structured format was selected, and an interview guide was created. Interview guides enable researchers to explore participants' experiences systematically and thoroughly while maintaining a focused interview process that aligns with the intended research objectives (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

A thorough set of 34 open-ended interview questions covering several topics was generated to support a semi-structured interview format that would allow for some standardisation while remaining flexible. These questions were informed by the literature review, my prior knowledge, and the research aims. However, while the interview guide was strategically placed in front of me during each interview, the guide was rarely utilised. This was partly because I was very familiar with the questions, but also because the interviews took on a slightly more unstructured nature where participants were allowed to freely steer the direction of the conversations. I adapted to the interviews' varying directions by injecting relevant questions that were either new or inspired by the interview guide.

Despite the participants' free reign, the conversation rarely veered off course or ventured into subjects that were outside the scope of the project. This suggested that the research objective is of considerable relevance while managing to capture the main areas of concern for the participants. Additionally, the experience seemingly supports the use of an inductive research approach where the direction of the research is guided by the observations. So, while the research questions are inspired by theory, the findings have directed the course of the research. Consequently, new points of interest appeared throughout the interviews as participants provided a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. These revelations were then used in later interviews to probe other participants about their potential experiences with the new points of interest. This iterative process allowed the research to account for additional perspectives and highlight the concerns that were most relevant to the participants, which were then used in the generation of theories.

As previously mentioned, the interplay between the researcher and participants led to a co-construction of the data. One of my roles in intensive interviewing was listening carefully to the participants and employing open and probing questions in an effort to grasp their perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). As I cannot escape prior knowledge, my role becomes a mix between an investigator and informant who used previously attained knowledge to guide the interview in a way that elicited additional relevant information. The data was coloured by my perspective but grounded in the participants' interpretation of their lived experiences. So, while '[…] the emphasis must be on how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events' (Bryman, 2012, p. 471), 'the development of rich, relevant data rests on the interviewer's ability to understand, interpret, and respond to the verbal and nonverbal information provided' during the interviews (Ayres, 2008, p. 811).

To ensure that the meaning of what the participants were communicating was adequately absorbed, I used my phone to record the interviews. The interview process as a lone researcher who employed 'double attention' by synchronously listening to the participants' responses while ensuring that the answers are adequate for the research purpose and preparing for the next question (Wengraf, 2001) was mentally laborious. Therefore, the knowledge that an audio recording was capturing the interview data was comforting and guaranteed that important details and meaning that I was unable to grasp during the interviews remained available for interrogation after the interviews. In the event that the audio recording failed, I also used a secondary device to record the same interview. Both devices are password-protected, and I am the sole user with access. Once I could confirm the complete uptake of the interview with adequate audio quality, one of the duplicates were deleted. A recording of each interview will remain on my device until this project is completed, and then will be permanently erased.

While audio recordings are valuable for reviewing the interviews and generating transcripts, the tool fails to capture nonverbal communication, which has been acknowledged as a potent source of information that complements the scholarly examination of verbal behaviours (Denham and Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Begley (1996) went as far as to say that the omission of nonverbal communication could threaten the verisimilitude of the data. Therefore, I took brief notes throughout each interview in an effort to capture any emotion expressions or behaviours that enriched the data further. Participants' emotional responses can be difficult to adequately capture, but the 'best we can do is to retell the person's story while telling our own story as researchers' (Nunkoosing, 2005, p. 703). To facilitate this, I also summarised each interview immediately after to capture any important insight that may otherwise be lost.

Furthermore, in line with grounded theory, I was also memoing throughout the research process. The practice was done in an effort to record my ideas, thoughts, and feelings, which were then used as analytic details that assisted theory development (Charmaz, 2006). Like many novice researchers, I did not adequately estimate the importance of memos until the later stages in the research process. If I had followed my naïve assumption that I would remember ideas and points worthy of interrogation, then I would have lost many of the analytical avenues that the project pursued. I found memo writing throughout the interview stage the most valuable as the process developed my reflexive and critical thinking, which elevated the data from verbal communication to scrutinised accounts of lived experiences that comparable meaning could be derived from and theories developed.

The interview process was mostly smooth and forthright. However, one interview was comparably challenging. The participant was enthusiastic throughout recruitment, but once the interview commenced, his tone was significantly different. He behaved as if he took offence to each question and made me feel like an investigative journalist who was probing into a secret matter. His responses were short, polished, and persistently complimentary of the SPPS. While a viewpoint that contradicted the other participants' alarming accounts of working in Swedish correctional facilities was welcomed, his responses came off as media-trained and inauthentic. Fortunately, after about half of the interview, which took on a much more structured format as I rapidly exhausted each line of inquiry due to the short responses, he appeared to settle into the role and opened up. Due to the co-collaboration between the researcher and the respondent in the construction of knowledge, I felt satisfied with the eventual change of pace that allowed for more elevated interview findings.

Nunkoosing (2005, p. 702) importantly acknowledges that '[o]ne cannot hurry a good interview, nor can one push the interviewee to reveal what he or she does not want to tell or does not know about'. By no means did I want the participants to provide data that did not reflect their realities. I did, however, value an open dialogue with rich accounts, which is why I perceived this interview to be particularly challenging initially. However, I consider myself fortunate because my participants made the interview process easy and enjoyable. Furthermore, three participants complemented my interviewing skills and extensive knowledge of the topic. The prison governor went as far as asking if I had previously been employed by the SPPS and suggested that I should seek employment there in the future. The positive feedback was welcomed and comforting for a fairly inexperienced interviewer.

Moreover, as data generation in qualitative research is often about the strategic selection of participants who can offer an understanding or add meaning to the studied phenomenon (Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter, 2014), I reached a natural point of saturation when the interviews seemed to stop adding value to the research. The participants' perceptions of the studied phenomena appeared largely similar, which suggested that further interviews would generate comparable data. An argument could be made that I should have continued recruiting additional participants until I found someone who offered a starkly contrasting point of view. However, predicting when a dissenting participant would appear was impossible, and recruiting someone based on a specific opinion seemed like poor practice. Furthermore, in line with the ethical principle of respect for persons, I did not want to interview any participant unnecessarily in hopes of possibly finding an outlier. As overrepresentation of specific perspectives is a known weakness of theoretical sampling, I felt confident in my results and thereby concluded the interview stage. I perceived that saturation was reached after completing 36 interviews with 35

participants. The interviews lasted between 43 minutes and over two hours, with an average duration of approximately 63 minutes.

3.3.1 Setting

Each of the participants who agreed to be interviewed was given the choice between a face-to-face or a virtual interview. Owing to the fact that I lived in the U.K. and my participants lived in Sweden, I was open to the possibility of using videoconferencing technology to facilitate my interviews. Simulating a face-to-face environment, the use of videoconferencing provides richness by offering the ability to retain emotional, sensory, and non-verbal cues (Nehls, Smith, and Schneider, 2015). Furthermore, I assumed that videoconferencing would aid the development of rapport, which research by Deakin and Wakefield (2013) supports. In the interest of not alienating any interested participants, a telephone interview was also offered. While telephone-based interviews represent an established and extensively researched method for collecting qualitative data (Novick, 2008), I had an initial concern that the method would render the interview inferior due to the increased difficulty in developing rapport and the loss of visual cues. On the other hand, telephone interviews may benefit from the absence of visual cues due to the decreased social pressure, which could encourage vivid disclosure (Novick, 2008). Thus, offering a variety of methods was important to cater to the diverse group of participants.

Mann and Stewart (2000, p. 66) highlight that a potential disadvantage of videoconferencing is the demand that 'the researcher and all respondents have access to the required technology and the confidence to use it'. As Sweden is one of the most digitalised countries and computer literacy is higher in Sweden than the European average (Kralj, 2023), I assumed that the use of technology would not present an issue. Moreover, the use of videoconferencing experienced a

sharp increase during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karl, Peluchette, and Aghakhani, 2022). While the majority of the participants did not have roles that offered the possibility of working from home during the pandemic, videoconferencing became a default mode of communication for many during the social timeout. Therefore, in addition to Swedes' introverted nature (Ting, 2017), I was not surprised that, except for two participants, most opted for the alternatives to face-to-face interviews.

The two interviews that did take place face-to-face were conducted either in a meeting room at a local library or in the participant's office. Minimal costs were associated with these interviews, as both participants lived in close proximity to my family's home in Sweden. Despite the majority of the interviews occurring by videoconferencing, which allowed me geographic freedom, I spent extended periods of time in Sweden throughout this project. Thus, the in-person interviews were easy to accommodate. While face-to-face interviews can prove costly if logistical arrangements need to be made, I was fortunate that limited travel was needed and that I was able to use a meeting room at a local library free of charge. Thereby, my initial concern that I would have to travel back and forth between the U.K. and Sweden while also arranging suitable meeting places was dispelled.

The remaining interviews that did not take place in person occurred by phone, Facetime, Teams, or Zoom. Nearly all the participants using videoconferencing chose to turn on their camera, which was a decision left to their discretion. One person stated that they felt more comfortable with the camera off, while another participant claimed that poor broadband speed eliminated the possibility of camera use. My camera remained on throughout all the video calls, which was done in an attempt to establish trust and transparency with the participants. As previously noted, access to technology and the skill set required to be technologically proficient

determined the success of the method. My past experiences teaching remotely during the pandemic provided me with the confidence to navigate the videoconferencing software proficiently when sending out digital invitations and holding meetings. Nonetheless, the interviews included experiences with a broken microphone, an issue with account access, an unstable internet connection, and a failed recording. Rapid troubleshooting offered effective resolutions to the complications, and each interview could be successfully completed.

3.3.2 Transcription

Transcription can be a laborious task, but value can be found by being immersed in the collected data. In the interest of time, I used an AI transcription service to aid in the transcription of the interviews. While Zoom and Teams, where most of the interviews were conducted, offer audio transcripts, a trial interview revealed insufficient transcription results. The reason may be that the interviews were in Swedish, which the technology failed to adequately transcribe. Instead, I was recommended a transcription application by a Swedish journalist friend. To satisfy any ethical concerns about using a transcription service, I made sure to thoroughly research the company and their practices. Good Tape, the transcription service utilised, is GDPR compliant and uses an encryption principle where the uploaded audio recording is transferred fully encrypted and is then deleted immediately after transcription.

While cloud-based technology can never be entirely secure, I found the company to be reputable and able to protect the integrity of my interviews. Thus, after using a free version to test the quality of the transcriptions, which revealed impressive results with low word error rates, I subscribed to the premium plan that permitted a larger volume of transcriptions. Although the service provided high-quality transcriptions in Swedish, I thoroughly reviewed each interview for accuracy by listening to the audio recordings while proofreading the

transcripts and making appropriate edits. In addition to ensuring that the interviews were adequately represented in the text, revisiting the audio recordings facilitated an elevated level of comprehension and insight into the data.

Transcriptions can offer a natural record of events, but oral communication cannot be fully transcribed (Kowal and O'Connell, 2014). Rather, transcription requires decision-making, which results in a transcript that is the result of the interviewer's interpretation of the data (Bailey, 2008). While the interviews were transcribed ad verbum, turning spoken words into a written format necessitated abridgement, interpretation, and reconstruction to produce a readable and coherent textual representation (Green, Franquiz, and Dixon, 1997). Capturing the meaning of what the participants appeared to be communicating was imperative for my methodological approach and because features of verbal communication can be crucial for data interpretation (Bailey, 2008). Therefore, notes were compiled throughout and after each interview to capture any interpretations that an ad verbum transcription may miss. To avoid cluttering the text, some verbal features, such as coughs or false starts, were removed, as these were not considered relevant. While written language can be significantly different from audible speech, the participants generally used standard grammar and spoke in a clear and formal manner, which largely eliminated the demand to make decisions about converting colloquial spoken language to standard grammar that aided readability. The participants did, however, use a considerable amount of industry-specific language, which remained in the transcripts, but notes were made in a separate document with definitions.

3.4 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. While this method deviates from the approaches traditionally used in grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 115) contended

that GT can inform a ‘theme analysis’. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) emphasise that grounded theory was not meant to serve as a prescriptive manual but rather as a set of research principles and methods to be applied with nuance. So, while a thematic analysis was used, several of the principles that characterise GT remained. The integration of thematic analysis into a grounded theory framework offered a layered and nuanced approach to data analysis. The theory-building process was enriched by the identification of themes, which both allowed for the focus to remain on the most prominent issues while also providing a lens through which to view the data.

The constant comparison that is valued in grounded theory was employed to the emerging themes to refine and develop these further. The iterative process enables the developing theories to be firmly rooted in the data. Furthermore, an inductive approach, which is a foundational principle of GT, was used, which meant that ‘the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis c[a]me from the data; they emerge[d] out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis’ (Patton, 1980, p. 306). The exploratory and data-driven approach demands that the researcher remain open to new concepts and themes that may emerge (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). As the researcher is immersed in the data, themes are permitted to appear organically. Theoretical sensitivity was also considered, which is the intention to be receptive to the subtle meanings in the data and to incorporate these into the analyses (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Additionally, following the constructivist paradigm of GT, the codes were shaped by a combination of the researcher's interests and perspectives, as well as the information contained within the data (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012).

The analysis commenced with multiple readings of the interview transcripts, which is a step that was initiated in the transcription process. Sensitising concepts helped form a starting point

for the data analysis by guiding the approach (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2003). Although the process involved a substantial time investment, I decided to code by hand to remain immersed in the data and to encourage the inclusion of subtle nuances that may be lost if the data is driven by the attributes of analytical software. The initial round of coding resembled GT's open coding by its breakdown of the data into small segments with the intention of analytically attending to each by labelling and grouping the segments based on uniting characteristics. By fracturing the data to assess beginning patterns, a generous number of codes were established throughout the course of the analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that coding by sentence may be suitable when participants employ extensive language to respond or convey an idea, which was deemed an appropriate technique as the participants frequently offered rich accounts. If a sentence included several ideas, then multiple codes were assigned. Unlike GT, which creates codes from gerunds, my labels were more descriptive while still aiming to capture the meaning and actions communicated by the participants.

Once all the relevant interview data had been coded, the focus shifted from interpreting individual sentences to finding meaning across the dataset. I ended up with 26 codes, which were then analysed to assess where combinations could be made that formed broader themes. For example, codes such as 'competence', 'turnovers', and 'workload' were merged under the theme 'staffing issues'. King and Horrocks (2010, p. 150) define themes as 'recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question'. In the interest of 'making connections between categories' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96), I sought internal homogeneity (i.e., cohesion amongst the themes) while also ensuring external heterogeneity (i.e., clear distinction between themes) (Patton, 1990). The analysis continued until I was confident that the identified themes and the overall findings accurately and comprehensively

captured all the relevant data. Although Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 50) argue that thematic analysis generates accounts that need 'very little interpretation' and instead offers 'very nice descriptive' outcomes (Strauss and Corbin, 2008, p. 162), I agree with Sandelowski (2010) that the results are still interpretive. The data collection and analysis generated themes and theories related to the understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

3.5 Language and translations

All communication with the participants, including the recruitment messages, Participant Information Sheet, consent form, and interviews, was in Swedish. The use of native language assists the production of authentic communication that captures subtle nuances (Welch and Piekkari, 2006), which was particularly important when seeking meaning from the participants' experiences. The interview process can be seen as an active production of meaning where the interview data becomes interpretatively collaborative rather than just a vessel for information exchange (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Tsang (1998) describes the importance of communicating in a language that the interviewees can express themselves freely in, which serves to establish rapport and to aid cultural understanding. While conducting interviews in a language different from that of the research project or the supervisors adds additional hurdles to achieving conceptual equivalence, my advanced understanding of both languages suggested that any issues related to language could be overcome.

Henceforth, the data analysis was performed in Swedish, and only specific quotes that were used to emphasise certain findings were translated into English. During this process, particular attention was offered to moving beyond directly translating the words to more importantly transferring the meaning of the data into English 'by using the generality of a semiotic that contributes to meaning' (Spivak, 2000, as quoted in Choi *et al*., 2012, p. 654). Larson (1998)

describes the importance of considering the cultures of both societies when translating to prevent a reduction in the validity of the data. Culturally competent knowledge assists the researcher with any structural conditions that may contribute to the participant's responses. Almanna and Farghal (2015) explain the importance of probing the symbolic language in the translated text to ensure the capture of cultural implications. While not all concepts are universal, the researcher's familiarity with both languages and cultures suggested that the integrity and validity of the data could remain intact. Although my knowledge of the technical language was limited prior to this research, the interviews enriched my vocabulary and understanding, which allowed for an emic approach to translation.

3.6 Strengths and limitations

All research should be seen in the light of its strengths and weaknesses. For this project, the former appear to far outweigh the latter, which instead can be understood as suggested avenues for further research. I consider my experiences as a Swede living in the U.K. and the U.S. nearly half my life to add an interesting perspective to this project. As discussed in the literature review, Pratt's Scandinavian exceptionalism thesis was widely criticised by Nordic scholars who suggested that his background in the Anglosphere provided a biased image of the carceral regimes in the Scandinavian countries. My views of my native Sweden are also likely coloured by my experiences living in the Anglosphere. However, unlike Pratt, I am well-versed in both contexts and speak the required languages. By viewing Swedish society and its penal order through an Anglo-American lens while simultaneously being familiar with the nuances of Swedish culture, I consider my international experience as a welcomed point of comparison that offers this project an elevated perspective.

In qualitative research, particularly interviewing, membership status is relevant. There was an initial concern prior to commencing the data collection that I would be viewed as an outsider, causing inferior findings. However, my experience was the contrary. The rich accounts proved to be a strength of this research. In addition to being well-prepared for the interviews and comfortably using industry jargon that may have put the participants at ease, the interviews occurred at a seemingly ideal time. For an overworked workforce amid an operational crisis and following a provoking election, the interviews appeared to provide a place for venting frustrations. The participants were remarkably forthcoming about their experiences and perspectives. The many similarities between the interviews suggested that the accounts may reflect common themes across the wider workforce. On the other hand, the interviewees who answered the call to research may be understood as something of a self-selecting group, which may have influenced the data. While the sampling method and motivation to participate are valid areas of reflection, the practitioners contributed clear and detailed accounts of an unfolding crisis that lend credibility to their contributions.

Despite the success of obtaining a variety of participants, the time constraints of doctoral research limited the number of partaking interviewees. Dedicated recruiting efforts were made, but slow and absent responses further constrained the process. Thus, relative to the size of the workforce, the number of participants could be considered small. Coleman and Hellerman (2011) note that samples of this size can be viewed as a 'slice of the whole' that illuminate a demand for additional research. On the other hand, the immense data gained from those who agreed to participate proved that additional participants may have only impeded or delayed the analysis. So, while the sample size may be insufficient for generalisability, the number of interviews proved suitable for a doctoral project with a limited time frame and in consideration of the interpretivist framework.

Given the opportunity for a redo, there is an obvious aspect that could be improved. Although the data collection materialised as intended, writing about Swedish prisons without visiting the country's prisons is a limitation. Despite the colourful data collected, site visits and observations could have provided an elevated authenticity to the findings. While different in many aspects, I have past experiences visiting prisons in the U.S. and therefore possess some basic understanding of the studied setting. However, future research would benefit from primary data gathered from within Swedish prisons and probation facilities.

3.7 Ethical considerations

While recruiting participants using a social media platform provides a rich pool of potential interviewees, the method also produces a new set of ethical dilemmas to consider. As previously mentioned, social media allows both the researcher and the participants to gather any relevant information about the other party using public information. A potential drawback is gaining information that negatively alters the perception or creates preconceptions about the other. However, as LinkedIn is a platform that is primarily utilised for professional endeavours, the likelihood of coming across intimate or personal information is significantly reduced. As Reich (2014) points out, doctoral students may benefit from their novice status in the field as there is limited, if any, published research or public posts by the researcher that could dissuade the potential participant from partaking due to opposing views. Thereby, a neutral persona is maintained, and a potential ethical issue is contained.

Furthermore, utilising social media for recruitment provides an easy opportunity to consider further cementing the interviewer-interviewee relationship by becoming 'friends' on the platform, which is another point that requires ethical consideration. Again, as LinkedIn is a

more professional platform, a friend request could be considered less invasive than on a more personal social media platform such as Facebook or Instagram. Nonetheless, I decided prior to commencing the recruitment that I would not accept any friend requests from participants. In the interest of expanding my professional network, I did, however, accept an invitation to connect on LinkedIn from a potential participant that declined participation.

Like most research projects, maintaining the participants' anonymity was essential. The interviewees were advised that steps would be taken to hinder identification. The majority of participants employed by the SPPS did not seem overly concerned about concealing their identity due to either feeling entitled to openly voicing their opinions or because they understood identification would be difficult amongst a large number of employees. Nonetheless, I took deliberate steps to ensure that they would remain anonymous. However, there was a small number of participants who requested reassurance about my ability to conceal their identity throughout the project. These participants were part of a smaller group of employees that could easily be identified, and therefore asked that I limit the use of descriptive language in reference to them. I took these requests seriously and have aimed to ensure that participants cannot be identified. Furthermore, all the interview data and relevant documents adhere to strict GDPR and UK-GDPR guidelines and are stored on a password-protected device that only I have access to.

Additionally, the research methodology presented above was reviewed and endorsed by the Ethics Board at City, University of London prior to commencing the data collection. A determination was made that the procedures adhered to professional and institutional standards. Accordingly, the ethical considerations of the study have been sufficiently addressed and deliberated upon, ensuring they do not hinder the overall study and the research framework.

The participants were provided with contact information to the university and my supervisors in the Participant Information Sheet in case of any ethical concerns. Lastly, as previously mentioned, participants signed a consent form (see Appendix C for an English version) prior to any data collection.

3.8 Chapter summary

Inspired by grounded theory, this qualitative research project utilised in-depth interviews to collect data from 35 participants. The interviewees held a variety of roles relevant to exploring the current state of Swedish penal practices. Suitable participants were primarily identified using extensive LinkedIn searches and then contacted using the platform's messaging function. The interviews were mainly conducted using videoconferencing but telephone or face-to-face interviews also occurred. The audio was recorded and used to transcribe the interviews using an AI transcription service. A thematic analysis was employed to gradually generate themes and theories that offer insight into the participants' lived experiences. All communication with the interviewees was in Swedish. The results are understood to have maintained their integrity due to my language and cultural proficiency. Despite the time constraints that restricted the sample size, the strength lies in the variety of participants and the generously textured accounts. In turn, a conceptual contribution is offered that fills a gap created by a rapidly emerging crisis with little qualitative insight.

Chapter 4: Reflections on a punishment-seeking turn

The following four chapters will elucidate the findings produced from the interviews. By offering valuable context, this chapter paves the way towards the following three chapters that engage with the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's operations. The conceptualisation of a punitive turn is complemented by an exploration of ideas around nationalism, racism and penal populism. Drawing on the study's data, the relationship between punishment and social change is investigated. The discussions suggest that despite Sweden's avid attempts at outward colour blindness and equality, the participants have not been spared from experiences with discrimination or a racist rhetoric. Several participants expertly articulated an advanced understanding of the intensifying sociocultural narratives penetrating Swedish society and the political arena. Seemingly, a national discourse is rapidly emerging that Sweden's social problems originate with immigrants from marginalised neighbourhoods. The ethnonationalist undertones appear to have altered the Swedish penal order and contributed to a shifting outlook on punishment.

Each of the 35 interview participants was asked about their perception of Sweden's repressive trends that seem to deviate from past approaches. The majority were critical of harsher prison sentences and the diminished reliance on evidence to guide policy decisions. A small number of dissenting participants supported longer sentences, particularly if the extensions allowed prolonged treatment access. A situated understanding of punishment is offered by those working directly with the offending population subjected to the sanctions. The chapter builds on the literature presented in Chapters 1 and 2 to further explore the motivation behind the trending punitive inclination and the perceptions of the employed strategies.

4.1 Nationalist tendencies and racist outputs

According to Barker (2018), nationalism is one of the most influential forces reshaping affluent societies in response to globalisation and mass mobility, which is rapidly transforming our social world. In Sweden, nationalism appears to be operationalised to highlight immigration and marginalised communities as perceived threats to the country's status quo. As previously mentioned, the *folkhemmet* philosophy emphasised equality and mutual understanding. However, '[…]equality was a project that demanded homogeneity, and a diverse nation challenged this' (Branteryd *et al.*, 2022, p. 949). The sentiment essentially suggests that to be considered an equal, conforming to Swedish cultural and ethnic norms is necessary. Building on the earlier discussion about Sweden's complicated history with race, the interview participants discussed the fate of those who do not meet the envisioned Swedish standards. The increased criminalisation and penalisation of those who are 'othered' is central to xenophobic politics, which arguably enables a 'blame game'.

Nationalism appears to have gained traction in part by utilising the mechanisms of criminal justice to penalise and remove problem populations. Some participants felt that penal power is being deployed to justify the control, punishment, and expulsion of individuals considered undesirable or undeserving. An interviewed community activist believed that Sweden was entering a 'dark period' where developing feelings of bitterness was nearly unavoidable as 'you see everything that is happening to marginalised communities, and you see no solution'. Some of the participants self-identified as having an immigrant background or being raised in a marginalised neighbourhood. Their voices and experiences are particularly important due to the project's focus on the politicisation of specific populations and growing ethnonationalist tendencies. These interviewees offered a unique perspective on the ethnic and racial undercurrents that appear to be contributing to Sweden's penal reorientation.

An officer in a large remand prison in Sweden's capital considered the country to be 'blaming immigrants for the problems that exist' while drawing parallels to the racial motivation driving the war on drugs in the USA. She emphasised the dangers of following in America's footsteps, where the approach's failure is clearly visible in the country's unparalleled prison population and racial tensions. An advisor to former U.S. President Nixon famously revealed that the 'war on drugs' was a campaign aimed at criminalising Black Americans (Taifa, 2021). Despite declining racial disparities in American prisons, the harmful outcomes of the strategy are still visible decades later, as Black and Latinx people remain significantly more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts (Ghandnoosh, 2023). As discussed in Chapter 1, Sweden has a complicated relationship with race that has hindered a constructive discourse. Yet, according to a medium-security prison officer, the county maintains a distinct 'focus on ethnicity and people who've grown up in vulnerable neighbourhoods and a stigmatisation of them'. He further added that Sweden fails to look at the whole picture when zooming in on 'them not being Swedish or not speaking Swedish', which results in an 'us versus them society that only pushes some further out.' These perceived ethnonationalist tendencies warrant consideration as pivotal indicators of institutional discrimination and systemic racial biases.

Despite lacking terminology and statistics referencing race, some participants expressed that Swedish criminal justice has become infected with racism. An interviewee who grew up in a marginalised neighbourhood and worked in the community with at-risk youth criticised the focus on criminals' appearance and background:

> They talk about deporting individuals but don't understand that the network criminals are born and raised in Sweden. They are Swedish. But they're not seen as Swedish because they have another skin colour or a different background. There is a strong urge to demonise others.

Carvalho and Chamberlen (2018) contend that punishment generates a form of solidarity based on animosity and the marginalisation of certain groups. An experienced officer noted that the nationalist narrative about what a criminal looks like has infiltrated the prisons and resulted in stereotyping where 'those who start working for the SPPS seem to think that the clients are hairy monsters with claws' and that 'everyone who commits crimes is black or Roma'. An officer in a medium-security prison suggested that 'there is a criminalisation of certain bodies' going on in Sweden. Not just expressing his views, there is reason to suspect that legal reforms disproportionately target certain neighbourhoods and populations.

The current right-wing coalition government has recently implemented 'stop and search zones', despite international evidence that the practice does little, if anything, to reduce crime (Tiratelli *et al.*, 2018; Suss and Oliviera, 2022). What the tactic does do, is disproportionally target racialised minorities, which is well documented both in the U.S. and the U.K. (see Bowling and Phillips, 2007; Carvalho, Mizael, and Sampaio, 2022). Bradford and Loader (2015) suggest that stop and search is about control and about disciplining certain populations, not based on what they have done but due to who they are. A senior prison officer growing increasingly frustrated with the government's criminal justice strategy shared the aforementioned sentiment:

> I think this growing need to punish those not deemed acceptable says a lot about our society. We're too quick to expel people and say that they are undesirable. As soon as the current government opens its mouth, they talk about not being desirable in our society if you have problems or a different skin colour.

In reference to the implementation of the 'stop and search zones', a Swedish policeman turned politician controversially stated, 'Everyone who wears a Gucci cap is not a gang member, but many gang members wear Gucci caps' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024b, my translation). The statement seemingly suggests that stopping and searching a person based on a subjective understanding of what a criminal looks like is warranted, even in the absence of suspicion. The tactic is arguably not much different than racial profiling. The Equity

Ombudsman (2024) agrees and harshly criticised ‘stop and search zones’ due to the practice’s significant and unacceptable risk for discrimination and profiling. A prison officer with her own experiences of police profiling argued that the approach is not new:

> Racial profiling has been something normal in Sweden. We don’t use the expression ‘race’, but the police have been working that way for a long time. So, the criminalisation that is happening now has gone on for a long time, but we’re only now putting it in writing.

In other words, what has been obscured in discourse has been visible in practice. Documenting and elevating these accounts is essential to highlighting Sweden’s growing inequities.

One participant provided particularly insightful commentary on the evolving criminal justice landscape due to her personal experiences in marginalised neighbourhoods as a Swede with an immigrant background, prison officer, and criminology student. She suggested that ‘Covert racism is built into the structure. When it comes to criminals, I think people accept racism in a different way because “they are criminals after all” and they are looked down on.’ As previously discussed, theorising and conceptualising race is made difficult in Sweden due to the country’s banishment of the Swedish equivalent of the term ‘race’ and dedication to a colourblind rhetoric (McEachrane, 2018). An interviewee noted, ‘We say that we don’t see colour and think we’re spared by that, but it’s only made it worse.’

Swedish scholars are playing catchup as the racial dominance trajectory moves further towards the foreground. A junior prison officer in a remand prison said, ’This storm has been brewing for a while. There is such a white hegemony, and we’ve never been able to own our role in structural racism and what we’ve done to maintain such a neutral and peaceful nation.’ As previously stated, hegemonic whiteness was established during the growth and development of the welfare state, which recognises whiteness as the norm while ‘foreclos[ing], silenc[ing] and exclude[ing] experiences of everyday racism among non-white Swedes’ (Hübinette and

Lundström, 2014, p. 426). The suppression and rejection of certain realities have likely contributed to Sweden being able to maintain a superiority complex where an obsession with symbolising a beacon of equality has muted any contradictory evidence.

In the collective consciousness, 'Swedishness' is associated with the belief that Sweden is renowned worldwide in matters of equality and justice (Lappalainen and Lundgren, 2004). This cognitive mechanism is believed to be closely related to the growth of nationalism and the discursive construction of national identity (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006). A treatment facilitator who was born in another country but immigrated to Sweden as a child believed that 'Sweden is one of the most equal countries in the world, but right now there are extreme right-wing winds blowing' which he suggested have led to Sweden experiencing a period that symbolises 'anything but equality'. A dual process is taking place where features associated with the national identity are glorified while negative characteristics are projected onto those not associated with the national identity (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006). The unity of the national identity is cemented through internal fellowship and an outwardly projection of tight-knit solidarity. The roots of this construction of identity can be traced back to colonial ideologies and the exploitation of foreign individuals.

The discussed Swedish cultural heritage has likely imprinted on political parties' xenophobic agendas that are casting a net over those with a foreign background and demanding harsher penalties. A manager at a home for at-risk youth with his own experiences with crime and marginalisation reflected on the recent trends of selective penalisation:

> I think the current political strategies are grounded in xenophobia and racism. There are thousands of people in vulnerable neighbourhoods, but let's say 100 who are hardcore criminals. So why are we letting a small number define a whole neighbourhood? Those remaining are also immigrants with the same circumstances, and they are not breaking any laws. They are citizens and they are trying.

Kamali (2005) describes the otherisation of perceived outsiders as vital to the creation of Sweden's homogeneous collective identity. De Giorgi (2018) emphasises that even countries with comparatively low prison populations can point to penal excess through an overrepresentation of marginalised social groups. Put differently, penal selectivity serves as a robust indicator of penal severity. Thus, the seriousness and urgency motivating the punitive reorientation in Sweden are invoked through penal trajectories targeting non-white and non-European immigrants.

A probation officer whose work focused on young offenders and who had previous experience working in marginalised communities as a social worker suggested that rather than looking at particular individuals to understand why crime is occurring, 'We should be looking more at political questions to understand why society looks like it does.' He highlighted the demands that are placed on individuals that become unrealistic when they are not given 'the appropriate circumstances to succeed'. Subsequently, he suggested that these expectations may contribute to the stigmatisation and shaming of certain individuals or environments. Stigma perpetuates social inequity by upholding group hierarchies (Clair, 2018). In turn, individuals who experience stigma may avoid or exhibit caution when interacting with those who lack similar stigmatised identities (Goffman, 1963), which likely functions to further distance groups from each other while opening up for additional misunderstandings and demonisation. Evolutionary explorations of stigma reveal its sociobiological function in ostracising individuals who could potentially endanger a community through their perceived social upheaval (Clair, 2018).

As previously noted, the public's heightened social fears and anxieties have contributed to an increased desire to cordon off those deemed undesirable (Tham, 2018). Criminals are 'good enemies' on which to blame society's ills and mobilise the public for political gain (Christie

and Bruun, 1985). The more dangerous the 'enemy' is perceived, the more legitimacy is garnered for the measures initiated to combat their existence. Interestingly, while the political process of demonising immigrant communities and making them scapegoats for Sweden's societal ills is taking place, a surprising willingness to defend Sweden seemingly remains. A participant with strong ties to marginalised neighbourhoods suggested that 'if you ask people in vulnerable neighbourhoods if they would defend Sweden in a war, the majority will say "yes"' despite 'still not being accepted by Swedes as Swedish'. A survey confirmed this notion by concluding that 51 percent of those in marginalised neighbourhoods with a foreign background were somewhat willing or very willing to fight for Sweden in a war (Järvaveckan Research, 2024). The figure represents a larger percentage than that of those who do not reside in areas of urban relegation, of any national background, who responded to the same survey. So, while some ethnic Swedes continue to regard immigrants as 'not Swedish enough', there is evidence that immigrants from marginalised neighbourhoods may be more willing than ethnic Swedes to defend the country. The discussion illustrates the disconnect and misconceptions that exist between different populations.

A participant commented on the complexities of being a non-white Swede. He runs an organisation that seeks to stop gun violence, and through his advocacy work, he comes into contact with people outside his marginalised community who make him aware of this heritage. He identified as a 'third culture kid' who felt like 'in many Swedish people's eyes, I'll never be Swedish, even though I was born here'. He reflected on the concepts of belonging and membership:

> When I go to my father's country, they see me as Swedish. But in Sweden, I'm not Swedish enough. In my neighbourhood, my vulnerable neighbourhood, I'm accepted for who I am. […] We all just want to belong to something, even if it's to a criminal organisation.

The comment offers insight into why vertical integration becomes a comfort in a country that repeatedly signals that certain populations are unwelcome and should be relegated to ethnoracial enclaves. Sweden's marginalised and segregated communities are continuously reminded of their positions as outsiders. An example was offered by another community activist who recounted a time when he was at a library in central Stockholm and the librarian addressed him in English, making an ignorant assumption that someone who looked like him could not be Swedish. He shared that he reprimanded the librarian before hurrying back to his immigrant-rich neighbourhood, where he felt safe from microaggressions and uncomfortable interactions with ethnic Swedes. These accounts showcase the conflicts that exist in Swedish society and evidence the view amongst participants that racism and ethnonationalism are motivating the recent rise of penal populism.

4.2 Permeating penal populism

Next, the interview participants' perspectives on the country's political direction are explored. What is important to note is that the interviews were conducted in the months following the controversial election that ended with a right-wing coalition back in power and the far-right party, the Sweden Democrats, receiving the second-most votes. At the time of the data collection, the country was dealing with the aftermath of the Tidö Agreement, the ruling coalition's proposal of radical measures expected to significantly impact the SPPS and marginalised communities. Consequently, emotions were running high and the interview data exceeded my expectations. While I hoped for rich accounts about the practitioners' professional experiences, the intense concern about populism and the departure from evidence was not anticipated. The majority of the participants came across as extensively knowledgeable about the complexities of the criminal justice debate. The cognisance may be the result of relevant university degrees, a natural interest in their professional field, or due to Swedes' high ranking

in international surveys measuring news consumption (YouGov, 2023). Regardless, the participants' concerns seem valid in light of the evidence presented in earlier chapters, which illustrates the growing popularity of penal populism and punitive strategies that increasingly oppose the expert-led policymaking Sweden has traditionally prided itself on.

As the public and democratic influence on the crime policy debate has historically been limited in Sweden (Andersson and Nilsson, 2017), experts have dominated the discourse. In the process of amplified alarmism and the politicisation of crime, cultural changes have occurred that may have altered mainstream society's shared beliefs (Tham, 2018). As political actors call out social changes, repressive agendas are legitimised, and the weight of evidence is devalued. Some of the participants had taken notice of the emerging trend and expressed their dissatisfaction with the political direction. A prison officer who was also a law student stated, 'When it comes to criminality, politicians suddenly get to make decisions completely without looking at the research and solely based on the will of the people' and exclaimed, 'Imagine if we used the same mentality in health care'. The participant continued reflecting on the way that Swedes looked to experts during the recent pandemic to guide the country through the life-altering event, and the oddity that the adherence to expertise is becoming nearly inexistent within crime policy. Clearly riled up, he added, 'Imagine politicians telling surgeons how to operate! But because it's about criminology, suddenly personal values trump scientific evidence.'

A probation officer who had also worked in prison was equally frustrated with the current political approach and added that she does not 'understand why politicians have opinions when there is research that indicates the opposite'. Penal populism speaks to the perception that criminals and prisoners have been prioritised over crime victims, as well as the law-abiding

public. Anger, dissatisfaction, and loss of faith in the criminal justice system feed the illusion. However, penal populism frequently relies on simplistic measures and perceptions of public sentiment rather than seeking a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the public's stance on criminal justice policy (Green, 2006).

Evidence of the misconceptions about punishment in Sweden can be observed through Jerre and Tham's (2010) public sense of justice study that was reviewed in a previous chapter, which concluded that the public grew less punitive the more knowledgeable they became about prevailing sentencing practices. The unawareness of sanction severity may lead to assumptions that the government is not doing enough. The populist agenda taps into public fears of victimisation and crime, coupled with a limited understanding of the criminal justice system and its procedures (Roberts *et al*., 2003). Consequently, a 'fertile ground [is created] for the seeds of penal populism' (Koning and Puddister, 2024, p. 225). An adherence to a punitive public mood without a nuanced understanding of prevailing criminological discourse can lead to a misguided focus on simplistic and punitive measures, which the U.S. offers an example of.

As previously discussed, Nordic criminal justice policy has historically been protected from political influences (Hinkkanen and Lappi-Seppälä, 2011) and portrayed as resisting penal populism (Demker *et al*., 2008). However, a senior prison officer argued that personal convictions and morals are now guiding the discourse, which was evident in the political debates leading up to Sweden's most recent election. The participant called out the political grandstanding that occurred prior to the election as 'a race between parties about who can back the harshest punishments' while exhibiting 'no grounding in research'. A prison governor in a

medium-security prison pointed out the lack of diversity across the parties' stance on punishment:

> There is no political party right now that is speaking out against the political direction we've been headed in the last few years. They've all gone in the same direction towards longer sentences and tougher approaches. There is no counterforce, which is so sad because there is no debate.

The penal practitioners expressed that the impact of the shift in the ruling coalition from one side of the political spectrum to the other was already becoming evident in the correctional facilities, which was likely contributing to the perceived frustration towards the political landscape. Many of the interviewees were thereby left disheartened by the dearth of constructive dialogue.

According to Garland (2021) in reference to the Anglo-American context, public opinion used to act as a limitation on policy proposals but is now seen as an influential factor, which can be seen happening in Sweden. A downgrading of empirical research and criminological expertise is occurring while the spotlight is reoriented towards popular experience and common sense. I observed the dismissal of expert opinion during a televised political debate leading up to the recent election when a number of criminologists were invited to join the programme during a discussion about Sweden's escalating street violence. With the political party leaders all present in the room, the experts diligently unpacked research findings about the weak evidence and harmful consequences of punitive measures and increased incarceration. As if the politicians were unable to comprehend or did not hear properly, they one-by-one responded with different versions of 'yes, but…' while completely disregarding the scientific evidence that the researchers had just presented.

One of the interviewed prison officers with a criminology degree said that the dismissal of expertise makes her feel like what she studied 'is bullshit if no one cares about it anyways'.

She questioned how politicians can ignore evidence disputing the effectiveness of long sentences and still increase the penalties when the research is clearly in opposition to their policies. This reflection is a clear indication of Sweden's history of evidence-based approaches and the strong reactions that a departure from this philosophy is causing. However, expert opinions should not be protected from scrutiny. Garland (2021), while agreeing with the problems associated with penal populism, raises the question of what entitles criminologists to be the expert authority in a democracy when it goes against the public's preferences. He answers the question by highlighting researchers' obligation to counter ideological distortions or false information shaped by sensationalism and political deceptions. Garland argued that the problem lies not in the popularity of policies but rather in the lack of access to criminological evidence. So, instead of dismissing an ignorant public, criminologists may benefit from seeking to improve public understanding.

Another display of Swedish politicians' disregard for criminological evidence could be observed in Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's explanation for the government's decision to go against expert advice and implement the use of anonymous witnesses. He said, 'There are always experts who are against almost every change, but we can't have it like that anymore in Sweden. If there is to be a change, changes must be implemented' (Cited and translated by Edman, 2023, no pagination). The statement illustrates how expert testimony may be regarded as a hindrance to policy implementation if the findings do not align with the party's political agenda. Instead, contradictory evidence is viewed as another obstacle that needs to be overcome in order for change to occur, not as a cause for revaluation. A senior prison officer who recently returned to university to pursue a degree in criminology expressed concern about the politicians' dismissal of expertise:

> The politicians don't listen to researchers, and they don't listen to residents of vulnerable neighbourhoods because that is not as popular or a way to win votes. They get votes by saying that a network criminal should get life imprisonment.

Due to the populist dedication to appealing to voters rather than adhering to criminological findings, the policies may be highly symbolic with limited measurable effectiveness in deterring or addressing crime. Thus, a political short-termism appears to be permeating Swedish criminal justice practices.

When the development of correctional policies by experts is hidden or poorly explained to the public, policies can lose political credibility (Garland, 2001). Loader and Sparks (2010) characterise criminology as a 'successful failure' that has expanded significantly as an academic area but has not made a significant impact on modern crime and punishment policies. Researchers face the challenge of communicating complex insights and evidence-based strategies to politicians, whose thinking is commonly characterised by dated and repressive approaches to crime. Schlyter (2024) suggests that academics' use of technical jargon complicates politicians' receptiveness. Consequently, the dichotomy of good and evil overtakes the political debate and leaves little room for the nuances and complexities of criminality. Security is strongly linked to repressive interventions but needs to be redefined to consider the relevance of preventative, restorative, and rehabilitative approaches. If penal populism maintains its stronghold, finding an equilibrium between expert opinion and a punitive public mood will be essential for effective crime control.

A probation officer with a degree in criminology whose work focused on network criminals was alarmed by the trajectory of the current criminal justice discourse. She concluded that Sweden is:

> […] heading in the wrong direction. We're moving towards the American mentality of punishment. Europe is moving towards decriminalising narcotics because that's what

> the research says. But we're moving in the opposite direction. We're only doing it because we're in a crisis. I'm not against democracy, but the information we're operating on is wrong to the point that it's impacting politics negatively.

Christie and Bruun (1985, as cited in Joutsen, 1993, p. 12) discuss the moral panic stemming from drug use in the Nordic countries and suggest that Sweden 'prides itself on being a "cradle-to-grave" social welfare society. Drug use is an embarrassingly flagrant sign that this is not so, and so it is dealt with severely'. The same logic may be applied to the upswing in deadly violence and crimes associated with criminal networks. The rise in offences related to organised crime does not fit the image that the country wants to portray to the world, and therefore deals with the disruptors severely.

Another probation officer who previously worked as a prison officer was troubled by some political parties' sweepingly advocating for 'locking everyone up' as a way to win votes. He understood how the approach may appear appealing for voters who accept a simplified tactic without having to dedicate significant time to perform any due diligence. The interviewee raised the Swedish Democrats as an example, who are known for their one-dimensional stance on crime that focuses on immigration. He remarked on the party's 'clear agenda in which they pretty much think immigrants are always criminals who should be deported and the borders closed'. The ideological stance of populist right-wing parties is commonly significantly influenced by deliberations pertaining to matters concerning immigration and multiculturalism while pursuing a nativist agenda (Koning and Puddister, 2024). As previously discussed, one of the parties in the current coalition government are founded on nationalist, anti-immigrant beliefs (Messina, 2007) with roots in neo-Nazism (Ekman and Poohl, 2010).

Anti-immigrant parties can be considered the most frequent manifestation of populism in the West, and any dissent towards such ideologies is construed as stemming from an elitist and

cosmopolitan preoccupation with diversity (Koning and Puddister, 2024). Mudde (2019, pp. 33-34) suggests that the radical right is obsessed with security and insinuating that 'crime is rampant and increasing because of immigration'. Subsequently, during a time of high crime rates, populist right-wing parties' electoral performance is generally higher (Smith, 2010), which the most-recent Swedish election can attest to. The current era of crime policy in Sweden will likely be remembered for its shift towards penal populism, as there is a clear contrast to the previous reliance on correctionalist ideas. A time of expert control may be in the past as Sweden seems to be experiencing similar forces observed in the Anglosphere where penal policy is 'brought out into the open, politicised, subjected to media scrutiny, and increasingly controlled by legislatures who no longer delegate sentencing decisions to others' (Garland, 2021, p. 265). While politicians and an increasing portion of the Swedish public are seemingly in agreement regarding the punitive direction, the interviewed penal practitioners and community professionals were nearly unanimous about its delusions, which is explored next.

4.3 Problematising harsh sentences

In response to Sweden's punitive reorientation that has already manifested in extending frequency and length of incarceration, the participants discussed their perceptions of these trends. Except for three participants who dissented or were unsure, there was an echoing disapproval for the growing penalisation and tougher sentences. What became clear was that while some participants stood firm in their opinions about the penal reconfiguration, the question was not as straightforward for each interviewee. The internal conflict stemming from balancing professional experiences with private observations of alarming social trends was palpable. Consequently, some struggled to align with a position. An experienced probation officer that previously worked in high-security prisons discussed her stance on longer sentences:

> I'm torn. My professional and personal opinions occasionally clash. Practically speaking, longer sentences are a headache because it means panicking about how we're going to solve this. […] However, in my opinion as a civilian, I'm also concerned about all the sentence reductions that serious crimes are receiving. There is a mix of thoughts in my head because my personal opinion is one thing, but I know the consequences of that opinion are a nightmare for us in practice.

Despite a criminal justice discourse that vastly polarises and simplifies a topic that demands nuance, holding conflicting opinions appears natural in response to a complex question that is challenging to answer in binary terms.

An interviewee who lived and worked in a smaller Swedish town that is not considered a marginalised neighbourhood seemed sure of his position. He reported that he 'watches the news like everyone else', which had led him to agree with the punitive political direction due to a fear of the country's escalating street violence. His opinion made him a minority among the participants but seemingly reflected the wider public perception. A national study regarding Swedes' fear of organised crime shows an increase across the country (Öhberg, 2022). Interestingly, the most fearful are those who live in rural or smaller towns. The least worried are those from Sweden's three largest cities, which is where much of the organised crime takes place and most marginalised neighbourhoods are located. This showcases the power of the media narrative. While there is no denying that Sweden is experiencing an alarming rise in shootings and explosions, the media can paint a narrow picture by sensationalising a highly intricate issue. As previously mentioned, the media has the power to construct a version of reality, even if that is not an accurate depiction (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). Consequently, the media becomes the co-author of a vastly complex situation that is often misunderstood and underdeveloped.

The media's role in creating a narrative about danger and social disruption that encourages punitive social control seems clear. What is more obscured is the public's insight into the

correctional authority tasked with managing those subjected to the punishment-seeking agenda. The interview participants were asked about their perception of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service portrayal in the media, and the responses varied. Several interviewees shared that they knew very little about the authority prior to employment. A common impression seemed to be that there is not enough media coverage of prisons that would offer the public insight into the realities of the industry. Other participants reported seeing media coverage of the SPPS, but that the portrayal was inaccurate and often presented an overly flattering image. The skewed perspective is plausibly the same rendering that gave birth to the complimentary Scandinavian Exceptionalism thesis. I recall my own perspective of Swedish prisons prior to any academic endeavours, which developed in the first year of school when rumours were circulating about prisoners being served better food than pupils. From that point on, the impression of a comfortable Swedish prison was established among my peers. An interviewed prison officer from a country well-known for its harsh prison climate shared the perspective that Swedish prisoners are fed food that is 'too good, better than school lunches'. The narrative may have contributed to establishing a perception that humane prisons undermine punishment.

The above sentiment was familiar to the interviewed prison governor who frequently encountered similar opinions during his community outreach engagements. He explained that he often interacted with a public that considered Swedish prisons to be 'too easy and comfortable'. His experience suggested that 'the public gets upset when criminals receive benefits because that goes against the type of society that the current government wants in which we punish rather than treat. That is a very short-term perspective that is very American'. Although the Swedish public is increasingly presented with headlines that expose the deteriorating state of the SPPS, prison conditions commonly elicit little sympathy from the

public (Boardman *et al.*, 2006, as cited in Bierie, 2012, p. 341). Instead, the declining circumstances may be exactly what proponents of a punitive direction are after. A senior officer commented that the era of 'doing easy time' is over, due to the declining conditions. Advocates for penal harshness who are well-versed in the intricacies of penology unlikely deny the literature that highlights the negative side effects of punitive policies but instead prefer to frame the consequences as necessary outcomes to reduce recidivism by making inmates 'think twice' before reoffending (Bierie, 2012; Lenz, 2002). In turn, poor prison conditions may be motivated and justified as crime-fighting tactics.

On the other hand, the imagery of a humane and exceptional prison system could also be seen as maintained in the public eye. A nationally televised 2023 documentary titled *Prison Project: Little Scandinavia* was released while the interviews were conducted, and received some harsh feedback from the participants. The film focuses on a collaborative research project led by academic teams at Drexel University and University of Oslo that investigates the applicability of Scandinavian penal practices in U.S. prisons. As American correctional staff visit Norway, Denmark and Sweden, utopian prisons are showcased where humanitarian values permeate every facet. The Swedish public may watch the documentary and assume that Swedish prisons continue to represent superior practices. In turn, the reliance of prisons may appear justified. However, a treatment facilitator with extensive experience, interviewed for the current project, commented that she watched the documentary and concluded, 'Yeah, this is what we were taught in training, but do we follow it? No!', adding that she 'thought it was pretty comical that they showed both Norway and Denmark, but they barely even entered Swedish prisons'. I share her perception that the limited coverage of Swedish prisons in the documentary was very telling and indicative of the operational crisis discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

Moreover, several participants reflected on the infeasibility of a penal expansion from the perspective of the penal estates. A probation officer with previous experience as a prison officer felt panicked thinking about the ongoing situation, a feeling she said many of her colleagues shared. She emphasised the intense shared concern about how the SPPS is going to manage the growing influx of clients. Another participant suggested that 'the only thing harsher sentences will do is increase overcrowding and workloads', which the next chapter explores. There were several mentions of the SPPS being unprepared to accommodate a growing prison population due to the lack of space. A senior prison officer and long-term employee of the SPPS shared that while she thought that punishment in Sweden was too mild, she simultaneously worried that, 'There isn't room for everyone. The more clients we get, the worse it gets. It's just warehousing. The clients just sit and wait, and that's not good.' Sweden's punitive turn is motivated by a heightened belief in the efficacy of imprisonment and longer sentences in crime reduction (Al Weswasi *et al*., 2023, p. 972). However, based on Swedish traditions, the reliance on incarceration seemingly assumes two things: That prisons can continue to rehabilitate and that there is empathy for the 'criminal other', two matters that are no longer certain. Instead, based on the literature and interview data, the repressive approach is less concerned with transforming offenders into law-abiding citizens and more occupied with removing those deemed undesirable, with nominal consideration for where they end up.

A participant who continuously emphasised Sweden's growing inequalities raised concerns about the sudden motivation behind the punitive reorientation. He theorised that if the gun violence was exclusively occurring in marginalised neighbourhoods, then longer sentences would likely never have been introduced. He felt that 'since the problem is spreading into neighbourhoods where they [ethnic Swedes] live, something suddenly needs to be done'. According to Lappi-Seppälä (2011), fear, coupled with the absence of trust, leads to a rise in

calls for punitive actions. Fukuyama (1995, p. 11) calls high prison rates 'a direct tax imposed by the breakdown of trust in society'. Degrees of repression are interconnected with the social aspect of trust. A decreasing trust indicates weakening social solidarity and unity, which suggests a readiness for more stringent measures. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a profound social anger and resentment can lead to urban policies that function as social catharsis for venting perceived threats (Atkinson, 2015) and 'search[ing] out culprits' (Young, 2007, p. 10). A senior prison officer at a medium-security prison stated that prisons receive undue credence by assuming that imprisonment solves social problems. She was under the impression that a punishment-seeking society falsely believes that widely incarcerating offenders will magically heal marginalised neighbourhoods riddled with crime.

Destroying or altering the spaces that the socially marginal hold is seen as reassuring ways of settling those in fear of social falling (Atkinson, 2015). The prison officer with a criminology degree highlighted the seemingly heightened desire to punish those who act in a manner that is deemed unacceptable by the previously homogenous population. She suggested that the punitive inclination was particularly pronounced when the ill-perceived conduct occurred in spaces primarily occupied by ethnic Swedes. Amster (2004) proposes that by assigning certain areas or populations as targets for anger and designating these sites and groups as beyond repair, policy intervention is warranted. In turn, voting for or supporting repressive policies not only releases fears and anxieties but also offers hope for a future without threats to the status quo. Another officer in a remand prison remarked that longer sentences create a false sense of security. On the other hand, she added that despite her concerns about the increasing penal severity in Swedish prisons, 'protecting the public comes before individual freedom'. However, she questioned if the Swedish Prison and Probation Service can live up to the expectations that society is placing on the function of imprisonment in combatting Sweden's

growing issues with crime. This line of questioning will be explored in the next chapter as the SPPS' operations are investigated.

The participants who did not work for the SPPS but held professional roles within the community offered valuable perspectives. Due to their direct contact with individuals operating within the criminal sphere, some of whom have never been convicted, the participants were asked about their understanding of their clients' perception of longer sentences. Based on their professional experiences, the community professionals unanimously agreed that criminals do not care about harsher sentences. Put differently, longer sentences may not be the deterrent that politicians assume. Nagin (2013) determines that the certainty of punishment is a much more potent deterrent than the severity of the punishment. Considering that only 33 percent of the cases related to deadly shootings in criminal environments are closed (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2023a), punishment is not certain.

The interviewed prison officer who was in the process of obtaining a law degree stated:

> It's a really naive thought that longer sentences function as a deterrent. It assumes that criminals have the same values and consequential thinking as you and I. They don't think they'll ever get caught, so it doesn't matter how long sentences are.

Another prison officer, who had just resigned from the SPPS due to reasons that the next chapter will elucidate, recalled discussing longer sentences with clients associated with criminal networks and noted their indifference. In his opinion, clients associated with criminal networks, who appear to be the main targets of the recent legal amendments, 'will do what they want, regardless of the consequences'. He continued, 'Even a life sentence won't deter crime as long as there is money involved.' He explained that due to the volatility of criminal environments, some clients will consider prison 'easy time. Like a vacation where you can recharge and make new plans. A time to meet other criminals and learn from them', which

makes potential offenders unmoved by the threat of longer sentences. He emphasised his opinion that the political direction is misguided.

The disconnect between policymakers and criminal offenders was highlighted by multiple interviewees who suggested that emerging legal decisions are not grounded in a shared reality. For example, the Swedish Prime Minister spoke about the major legal reforms that his party was in the process of enacting and suggested that while the implementation had been procedurally successful, 'criminals don't seem to care at all' (Shimoda and Shimoda, 2023, no pagination). So, while legislators assume that longer sentences function as deterrents and continue to implement punitive measures, the participants emphasised that the intended targets of penal harshness are likely unfazed. The perception seemingly supports the argument that the recent policy initiatives are more about satisfying a punitive public than solving Sweden's amassing social problems.

A community professional who works with at-risk youth divulged that the shared sentiment among his clients is that young offenders 'would rather do life [in prison] than lose [their] honour'. In contemporary societies, honour primarily pertains to a type of social standing related to strong moral character. In a more dated understanding, honour can lead to violence. This is particularly true in contexts where men see honour as the unhesitant use of physical force to defend themselves or their group's status (Cooney, 2015). Unlike dignity, which is more stable, honour can be lost or gained. According to Uskul and colleagues (2024), honour is a core value in Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and South Asian cultures. In other words, honour is not a traditionally Swedish value, which may be contributing to the disconnect between the policymakers and communities with rich immigrant backgrounds. Nonetheless, from a psychosocial perspective, the honour mentality, in combination with the

constant threat from rival criminal networks amidst an unstable environment provides some insight into why the threat of incarceration is unlikely the deterrent imagined.

An interviewee who works for an organisation that supports network criminals leave a life of crime stated that expanding sentences is completely out of touch with reality because 'these guys already don't feel any hope. They are completely unpredictable and lethal because they feel like they have nothing to lose.' Another participant, who had previously worked for both the SPPS and as a social worker but now assists with 'gang exits', said that network criminals' 'limits have been pushed. They don't care. Yeah, it's not fun to do 14 years, but they expected that. They also expected to die. They are completely shut off emotionally and mentally.' As stated in a previous chapter, nihilism and fatalism may emerge as prevalent coping strategies amidst environments marked by tragedy (Gerell *et al*., 2020; Tolleson, 1997). Furthermore, showing signs of fear towards the potential fate is viewed as weakness (Storm-Mathisen, 2025).

Subsequently, mental exhaustion can be understood in milieus marked by constant threat from rival networks or the police. Individuals are expected to suppress fear and anxiety in order not to be ostracised by fellow 'gang' members (Melde, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2009). A deteriorating mental state may not only contribute to an indifference to harsh sentences but may also lead to a conceptualisation of imprisonment as a place for refuge. A participant who worked closely with at-risk youth expressed:

> The crazy thing is that many of them will say, 'Damn, it's good to do time' because the way things are out in the streets, they don't know who they can trust or what's happening. Many can finally exhale when they're in prison.

The participants describe a situation where, on the one hand, the street culture has contributed to an environment where maintaining respect and honour is vital and outweighs any fear of a long prison sentence. On the other hand, the same street culture has established a setting that

is so volatile and deceitful that a prison sentence may be welcomed as a place for asylum. Either way, the threat of longer sentences is unlikely to be the deterrent that policymakers intend. The duelling realities between policymakers and the policies' targets undoubtedly highlight the complexities facing the sentencing discourse while illuminating the importance of including qualitative criminological research.

In addition to the assumption that increased sentence severity can function as a deterrent, participants discussed the incapacitative function of imprisonment. Incapacitation theory posits that declining crime rates are attained through higher rates of imprisonment, as the incarcerated offender is rendered unable to perpetrate further crime (Males, Macallair, and Doyle Corcoran, 2006). A Swedish study found that imprisonment has a modest incapacitation effect (Al Weswasi, 2024). The governor of a medium-security prison considered the incapacitating effect a valid reason to imprison offenders for longer. However, he simultaneously emphasised that longer sentences do not automatically equal 'better citizens'. In other words, incarceration may function to hinder crime while a person's freedom of movement is limited, but once released, criminal conduct may resume.

A community professional with strong ties to a marginalised neighbourhood outside of Stockholm argued, 'There is a little bit too much faith in the role of a prison sentence' and that 'just putting someone in prison solves the problem and the hood heals itself'. He believed that the heightened demand for incarceration has erased the focus on social interventions, which has halted long-term change. The participant further added that 'they can imprison all of Rinkeby [a marginalised neighbourhood in Stockholm], but as soon as they are released, the problems will return', emphasising the short-term function of custodial sentences. A senior officer at another medium-security facility, shared a similar outlook. Her impression was that

incapacitation has the ability to temporarily reduce crime in high-crime areas by removing major offenders, but the police and social interventionists need to maintain a stronghold in order to prevent crime rates from re-escalating. She referenced a city in Sweden that was renowned for its rampant crime and network criminality but stabilised following intense police efforts and a myriad of arrests that resulted in life sentences. Unfortunately, the peace did not last long and the criminal justice interventions could be seen having adverse consequences. In Sweden, power vacuums have resulted in multiple bloody conflicts that have contributed to unprecedented gun violence (Khoshnood, 2019). Power vacuums can occur when significant players are removed, through imprisonment or otherwise, from a neighbourhood with rivalling alliances.

A participant with his own experiences with crime had witnessed a power vacuum firsthand. He said that if 'you remove one from the street, 10 step in to replace him', signifying that new recruits swiftly replace incarcerated individuals. In the U.S., Blumstein and Beck (1999) found that incarcerating a member of a criminal organisation unlikely functions to successfully eliminate crime but rapidly replaces that offender with another. Although imprisoning organisational leadership may have some destabilising abilities for a criminal network, arresting lower-level members could function to only provoke further violence. Sharing this notion, the previous interviewee argued that imprisonment does not solve the real problems, which is why his professional focus is on supporting young network criminals choose a different path. He added, 'You can lock up more people and use harsher punishments, but the tougher the police, society, and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service become, the tougher the crimes will become as well.' A complete outcome evaluation of Sweden's punitive reconfiguration remains premature, but evidence from other countries suggests a grim future.

If the operational challenges revealed in the forthcoming chapters are of any indication, Sweden is poised for a turbulent trajectory.

Further indicating the discrepancy between populations, an intervention facilitator at a probation office expressed concern about the general public's detachment from certain realities in Sweden. She said that many Swedes fail to understand the misery endured in the country, where 'people do not have food on the table'. A generous welfare state has plausibly protected many Swedes from these harsh truths and created a reality in which crime is seen as a choice, not a means of survival. The same participant recalled a conversation she had with a client from a marginalised community who experienced extreme poverty growing up. The client shared that he 'just wanted to be like the Swedes because they drive cars to school' and that his desire to be like the country's native population led him to commit crimes just to 'fit in and belong'. The participant argued that because majority of the Swedish public is not privy to the criminogenic conditions that encourage crime, they become blinded by the news coverage of yet another shooting in a marginalised community. The result is further disconnect from the realities facing certain populations and a narrow insight into a vastly complex issue that contributes to fuelling misconceptions and punitive sentiment.

Crime and punishment often become emotionally charged fields, and emotions can be linked to elevated levels of punitiveness (Loader, 2011). According to Millar and Burke (2012), punitiveness is defined by its emotional expression rather than its rational approach. Garland (1997, p. 203) calls this *expressive punitiveness*, which is 'taken up by populist politicians who seek to (re)present this cultural current and put it to political use'. When crime policy is redirected towards taking account of the public's emotions rather than solely focusing on the realities of crime, the reach of the criminal justice system can be seen expanding (Bauman,

2000; Garland, 2001). Swedish culture has a complicated relationship with emotions as strong emotional outbursts are seen as deviant and warrant restraint (Wettergren, 2013). Yet, emotional expressions are evident on both sides of the debate. What the participants had in common were strong emotional investments in matters of crime and punishment, where most agreed that increased penalisation and longer sentences were not the answer. Emotional outburst included references to feeling physically sick when thinking about the harshly sentenced young men, claims of being brought to tears by the recent success of the radical-right, and considerable anger that the government is blatantly ignoring expert advice.

At the same time, some participants stressed the significance of morality in punishments. A senior prison officer emphasised the importance of using severe sentences to clearly indicate to criminals that 'we don't think what they're doing is acceptable'. Retributivists regard imprisonment as an intrinsically suitable response to transgressions against collective values. According to the retributive theory, punishment should be in alignment with the moral magnitude of the harms deliberately perpetrated (Carlsmith and Darley, 2008). Shelby (2022, p. 61) argues that wrongdoers 'cannot reasonably object to the unpleasant and coercive treatment their own wrongful conduct has called forth' because they have been forewarned by legal doctrines and received ample opportunity to avoid criminal conduct. Consequently, governments can be understood as morally permitted to introduce policies aimed at protecting the public from harm.

A probation officer in a smaller Swedish town agreed that prison needs to function to protect the public while also acting as retribution for the harm caused to the victim. He perceived that Swedish punishments often lack morality, which fails to acknowledge the long-lasting impact on the victim. Reducing punishment to vengeance for victims is arguably an insufficient

justification for imprisonment. Political activist and philosopher Angela Davis objects to the notion that convicted criminals' despair should have intrinsic value or could be regarded as justice in itself (Shelby, 2022). Nonetheless, the victims' experience and retributive ambitions have come to serve as a powerful tool to justify a more punitive stance towards offenders (Tham, 2001). Deering and Smith (2014) contend that while punishment may be deemed necessary for restoring the status of the victim, there exists a broader social obligation to rehabilitate the offender as an integral component of any strategy aimed at reducing recidivism. This social order rebalancing is not only concerned with the offender's moral state but also supports desistance.

While some participants were alarmed by the disregard for victims and their right to justice, other participants were concerned about the diminished focus on the offender. A prison governor with a long career in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service raised the point that 'it seems to be all about the victims' perspective and about inflicting punishment on the offender'. Millar and Burke (2012) argue that a rebalancing of the criminal justice system has taken place in recent years that emphasises the interests of victims and public protection. The Swedish Minister for Justice, Gunnar Strömmer, stated that the focus needs to shift from the offender and onto the victims' right to justice and society's entitlement to safety (Swedish Riksdag, 2022). Walklate (2007) notes that a victim-focused perspective is used to add momentum to punitive policy formation. In the process, the offender loses the primary focus, which may offer additional insight into the motivation behind Sweden's punitive reorientation and dismissal of criminological evidence.

Disappointed in the discourse, the prison governor stated:

> It feels like the public doesn't give a shit about what happens to the offender. They just care about ensuring that he isn't free to roam the streets. Few consider how the offender

> will be rehabilitated. They just want to see the offender locked up. Most seem to not be bothered to think any further than that.

The elevated demand for harsher punishment has quickly become entrenched in the Swedish criminal justice debate. A SPPS employee who worked in a low-security prison commented:

> The debate about longer sentences is too emotionally charged. It's just 'out with them' or 'take them away'. Now the offenders are just getting younger, and we're punishing younger people. The logic is so weird.

As the interviewed penal and community professionals unlikely encounter the victims, unless there is a victim-offender overlap, their concern about the diminished focus on the offender can easily be understood. Their unique insight into the lives of criminals situates their apprehensions towards the increasingly punitive policies and justifies the frontier of viewpoints opposing the government's changing approach.

Another example that illustrates how a difference in reality impacts perspective can be observed in an annual report of a joint task force comprising 12 Swedish government agencies tackling organised crime, in which the National Police Commissioner commented on the great successes of the year (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023c). For him, success meant offenders receiving the highest total number of prison years in the task force's history. Once again the discrepancies between criminal justice enforcement and criminological expertise are highlighted as the evidence supporting prolonged periods of imprisonment is either weak or contradicted by research. A seasoned police officer who spent the last decade facilitating 'gang exits' remarked that desistance is occurring at a younger age, regardless of prior incarceration. She said that at the beginning of her career, those wanting to leave criminal networks were usually around 25 years old. More recently, she has noticed that the average age has decreased to 20 years because the street violence has escalated and 'they want out'. In combination with her suggestion that network criminals are recruited at a younger age, which the Swedish Police

Authority (2023b) confirms, there may be indications that criminals are peaking and then desisting at an earlier age, irrespective of a prison sentence.

Several participants shared the above outlook, which appears to be supported by research. Not only do punitive interventions risk disrupting an already downward-trending slope of criminal conduct (Kazemian, 2021) but long sentences do not function to reduce the age-crime curve (Loeber and Farrington, 2014). So, while law enforcers celebrate the incapacitation that imprisonment provides, there may not be a direct correlation to desistance. On the other hand, although imprisonment may not expedite desistance, a custodial sentence offers some distance from a criminal lifestyle, which could offer new perspective. A probation officer focusing on network criminals remarked on her experience with parolees:

> I absolutely see clients who have benefitted from prison. Typically, those who are over 30 and sick of being criminal. But in those cases, I don't think it's the imprisonment itself that was the deciding factor. Rather, it's age and being sick of always stressing. We can see that in younger clients as well. They know that they have a target on their back, which means that they won't live much longer if they don't change their life. That can become the motivation.

Paradoxical in its increased susceptibility and then gradual abandonment of a criminal lifestyle, the age-crime curve remains one of criminology's most established facts (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Loeber and Farrington, 2014).

Moreover, participants were asked about their opinions on some of the recent legal reforms likely to impact the prison regime. One of the most critiqued policy amendments was a 2022 reform that abolished sentence reductions for offenders between 18 and 20 in cases where the penal value exceeded one year (Swedish Riksdag, 2021). Previously, reductions of up to 50 percent could be applicable for the age group. The revision was likely motivated by the police increasingly encountering younger associates of criminal networks exploited by senior members avoiding exposure to the criminal justice system (Swedish Police Authority, 2023b).

As clearly distinguishing between victims and offenders can be challenging, and there is frequently an overlap, some participants were critical of the decision to more harshly punish younger offenders.

In addition to concerns about the morality of extending periods of incarceration for increasingly younger clients, one of the interviewees who worked for an organisation that facilitates 'gang exits' was convinced that removing the reduced sentences will not make any difference because prison is not a deterrent. A senior prison officer called the policy change 'the most bizarre thing [she's] ever heard' because longer sentences have the power to ruin young people's lives and turn them into lifetime criminals. Conversely, there were also penal professionals who agreed with the abolished sentence reductions. A junior officer backed the policy reversal and expressed general support for longer sentences. A more senior officer shared the sentiment and emphasising that 'if you're of legal age, then you should be punished accordingly'. An experienced officer with a criminology degree highlighted that policymakers need to be mindful when increasing sentences in order for the strategy not to backfire and have the opposite effect. In his experience, longer sentences can intensify feelings of contempt for authority, which pushes offenders further towards the criminal underworld.

4.3.1 Pains of imprisonment

As discussed, Nordic criminologists appear unified in that moderate and humane penal regimes cannot offset the inherent harms of incarceration. Similarly, the interviewed practitioners expressed concern about the negative effects of longer periods of incarceration. Nagin (2013) found that prolonged periods of incarceration may exacerbate recidivism by increasingly subjecting individuals to criminal influences within correctional environments. According to the campaign group Howard League of Penal Reform (2016, no pagination), 'Cramming more

and more men into these dangerous institutions is like throwing them into a fast-flowing river, to be swept away into deeper currents of crime.' A prison officer noted that prior to employment at the SPPS, she was under the impression that longer sentences do not work because they do not benefit the individual or society, but now, after several years working directly with the imprisoned population, she is even more convinced. Her conviction was grounded in her own observation of 'how long sentences negatively impact people'.

Another prison officer in a high-security facility expressed gratitude that she is not in prison because she has 'seen what long sentences can do to people'. A supervising officer who had worked at multiple penal estates, exposing her to some of society's most vulnerable populations, said that after three years of imprisonment, the mental toll starts becoming clear. Through conversations with clients, she said that the reality hits them after a few years that 'life on the street has moved on. There are new leaders and alliances, and they're now out of the loop with nothing to offer'. She shared her experience that after six years 'family and friends can't be bothered to come visit or write letters anymore', and that's when the loneliness and apathy become overpowering. The consequent behaviour can come to closely resemble clinical depression, which long-term prisoners are especially vulnerable to (Haney, 2001).

Furthermore, an officer in a remand prison remarked on the particularly isolating conditions in Sweden's criticised remand prisons that offer little social interaction, especially for those with special restrictions. The observation is elevated by the fact that the average time spent in remand prisons has extended, due to overwhelmed courts and overcrowded prisons (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023e). The officer explained that the staff are often the clients' only point of human interaction, which has encouraged meaningful conversations between the parties that reveal physical and mental wounds. In his opinion, the clients' declining self-worth

becomes apparent. Solitary confinement imposes an additional strain of psychological stress, which has been demonstrated to induce enduring alterations in neurological structures and behavioural dispositions (Herring, 2020). Haney (2020) found that the social deprivation can cause a pain that affects the brain similarly to physical pain but with greater suffering due to its longstanding nature. As previously noted, while Scandinavian prisons are assumed to punish humanely, some of the SPPS' detention practices have been criticised by both the United Nations Committee Against Torture and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Holfverberg, 2019). A disgruntled senior prison officer in a remand prison concluded that 'Swedish imprisonment is the way it is and no criticism from the EU is going to change that'. The participant originates from the Anglosphere and took offense to the Swedish perception of operating on moral high ground despite international criticism and growing penal harms.

The changing philosophy that indicates a break with Sweden's welfarist approach to criminals was criticised. One of the interviewed community professionals, who assisted young people in leaving criminal networks, was frustrated that the government has the funds to increase the prison population but not for crime prevention. He shared experiences of working in the community with at-risk youth, but his work being continuously halted by the government's limited budget. He questioned why the government eagerly 'invests in people who are already broken' by frivolously allocating money for prison expansions but is unwilling to equally fund social support initiatives that prevent people from becoming 'broken'. As previously noted, the SPPS' budget has increased by 63 percent since 2018 (Swedish National Audit Office, 2024a). Meanwhile, social protection expenditure relative to GDP was the lowest in 2022 since 1993 (Statistics Sweden, 2024b). However, although the SPPS has some of Europe's highest daily operating costs (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023d), the participants did not object

to these financial demands. On the contrary, the participants advocated for Swedish prisons' comparatively high standards. Nonetheless, concerns about increasingly funding a prison expansion while not equally backing prevention efforts were raised repeatedly.

4.3.2 The prospect of increased rehabilitation

While most participants stood firm in their objection to longer sentences, the prospect of increased access to rehabilitation led some to sway in their stance. As one of the project's research aims is to investigate the Swedish penal system's ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda, the participants' significant interest in rehabilitation was pleasantly received. However, as the subsequent chapters will illustrate, the SPPS' operational crisis appears to be hindering rehabilitation. In turn, longer sentences were described as a potential solution to the restricted access to treatment programmes contributed by the rapid growth in correctional clients. Despite noting her disapproval of longer sentences because they do not 'prevent recidivism in and of themselves', a senior officer in a large prison argued that 'if the circumstances allowed for better rehabilitation, we wouldn't be too concerned about sentences getting longer.' A junior prison officer shared a similar sentiment. She was 'all for it' if longer sentences would mean more access to treatment. An intervention facilitator at a prison remarked that 'it's really difficult to rehabilitate a client that is serving a short sentence. There isn't time to do anything'. She explained that Swedish penality is set up in a manner where time is carved out from the actual prison term:

> The problem is that if a client is sentenced to a year and a half, they will only serve one year as conditional release is granted after two-thirds of the sentence. Then you also have to discount any time served in remand prison. So, if the person was on remand for six months, then they only have six months left of their 1.5-year sentence to serve in prison. On top of that, there could be re-entry interventions or release on temporary license that further shorten the prison stay.

Consequently, she noted her support for longer sentences because she desired additional time to work with the clients and longer sentences may be the only solution.

There was particular support for longer sentences for clients who were involved in organised crime as the altering clientele was perceived to require amplified intervention efforts to deter reoffending. A prison officer who had rapidly climbed the ranks to a supervisory position argued that 'a lot of effort needs to be put into the "gang guys" in order to reach them. So maybe they need longer sentences so that we have enough time to work with them.' She was not alone in this understanding as the idea of certain clients being particularly resistant to rehabilitation was raised multiple times throughout the interviews. Whether the perception that network criminals demand additional support was motivated by professional experience or the ethnonationalist 'othering' narrative penetrating the criminal justice discourse was not determined. The SPPS' current rehabilitative abilities will be discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7. First, the Swedish prison system's operational conditions are explored.

4.4 Chapter summary

The participants' views on a changing Swedish society and political direction have been unpacked and held up against academic literature to gain a situated understanding of the punitive social control mechanisms. An impressive understanding emerged that captured the complexities of crime policy through concerns about racism, white hegemony, penal populism, and the departure from evidence-based approaches. Some participants argued that a narrative about immigrants, marginalised neighbourhoods and crime has activated the criminal justice system as a tool to combat social problems. There was notable contention towards the punitive public mood and repressive turn wherein issues of Swedish identity are socially negotiated. Acknowledging the impact of the interwoven sociopolitical dynamics on policymaking and the public's relationship to punishment is imperative at a pivotal time when Sweden fosters a new identity within the criminal justice sphere.

While the Swedish public and policymakers increasingly display punitive inclinations, the interviewees revealed some opposing views. Although the participants generally disagreed with longer prison sentences, dissenting opinions were also present. Those who opposed harsher sentences referenced concerns about the practical implications and literature indicating the approach's inefficacy. The few practitioners who supported longer sentences primarily emphasised how extended incarceration may offer additional time for treatment, which was assumed to be particularly important for the SPPS' growing clientele of network criminals. Overall, the participants reflect on the general trends within Sweden's political landscape, with arguments that seem to be supported by the wider literature. However, the research does not speak directly to the truth of the political situation in Sweden. The next chapter will focus more directly on offering insight into the current state of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service through the participants' accounts.

Chapter 5: A system in crisis

As past chapters have suggested, Sweden is navigating uncharted domains and experiencing trends that deviate from past practices. Cracks are being revealed in the country's moderate penal order and self-perceived moral superiority as punitive demands overtake the criminal justice discourse. The prison population has been growing since 2016 and following recent policy reforms, an unprecedented expansion is unfolding. A punitive turn has consequences and this chapter is the first of three to unpack the operational implications. The interviewed practitioners shed light on a system in crisis that is stretched beyond capacity and faced with challenging new circumstances. An officer in a medium-security prison with over 15 years' experience expressed that 'seeing the Swedish prison system expand is like watching a slow-motion disaster unfold'. As Chapter 2 illustrated, the Swedish carceral regime is experiencing a historic expansion where conservative projections estimate tens of thousands of additional clients by 2034. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service has already sounded the alarm indicating the risk that the authority may be unable to accommodate the growing demand. This chapter is dedicated to gauging how the interviewed prison and probation professionals perceive the ongoing transformation 'on the ground'. While penal excess and overcrowding are notorious within Anglo-American contexts, the SPPS is charting unexplored frontiers, which is forcing a reimagination of Swedish penality.

The practical implications of a rapidly growing prison population were reportedly significantly affecting the SPPS' employees. The extent of these experiences were not sufficiently considered at the onset of this project but developed into an important cautionary tale about what happens when a regime faces unprecedented conditions that force its employees to desperately call out for help. An officer in a large medium-security prison explained that the authority is not prepared for the demands of longer sentences, neither in terms of knowledge,

space, or staff. All but one of the interviewed practitioners expressed some version of doubt about the SPPS' readiness for a punitive turn and the anticipated influx of clients. The participants highlighted that the authority is making hurried changes in an attempt to accommodate the expansion, which practitioners regarded both positively and negatively. Some of the participants praised the SPPS for being an authority that is constantly evolving and seeking to implement superior practices. However, most participants concluded that the desperate situation is forcing decisions that allow the SPPS to remain operational but are detrimental to the wellbeing and safety of both employees and clients. Overcrowding is an example of a condition that appears to be jeopardising the integrity of the Swedish carceral regime.

5.1 Overcrowding

Since 2019, the Swedish prison population has rapidly expanded from approximately 4,500 clients to 7,500 in 2024 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a, 2025a). As a consequence, the participants unanimously pinpointed overcrowding as one of the main issues facing Swedish prisons. Crowding refers to the spatial density of a prison and the institutional population relative to its intended capacity (Tartaro, 2002). Overcrowding is thereby considered the state where a prison is operating beyond its intended capacity. A prison officer with five years' experience said that the situation is so desperate that 'the mattress doesn't even get a chance to cool down before the next client is placed on it'. As mentioned, the Swedish prison occupancy for permanent beds averaged 131 percent in 2024 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). In 2019, the average was 98 percent (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2022c). The severe overcrowding moves Sweden into a context that criminologists likely never predicted that the famously moderate penal regime would be in.

As will become clear, the significant population growth has had widespread consequences. The overcrowding not only negatively affects prisoners' mental health, impeding re-entry and increasing the risk of reoffending (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023b), but also affects those who are yet to commence their sentence. An experienced supervising prison officer raised an unintended result of overcrowding and overfull estates. When the number of clients ordered to serve custodial sentences is higher than the number of available prison beds, the SPPS has to prioritise among the clients. In theory, those considered the greatest risk of reoffending should be offered prison placement first, but medium and high-security prisons are usually the fullest. Subsequently, reoffending occurs while bailed clients await their prison allocation. In an interview with Swedish Radio (2022), the acting Swedish Prison and Probation Service's planning manager explained that one in five convicted offenders reoffended while awaiting placement.

To rapidly accommodate the growing prison population, the SPPS is employing multiple strategies to continuously make room for additional clients. While transforming its traditional single-occupancy rooms into double-occupancy accommodations is an obvious solution, not all prisons permit cell-sharing due to spatial limitations. Therefore, the authority is employing various tactics. The interviewed practitioners repeatedly highlighted that, although capacity-increasing practices temporarily allow for more clients to be housed, these approaches significantly affect both clients and staff. A prison officer who felt exhausted by the overcrowding sardonically suggested that if the desperate demand for additional beds continues, the next step would be to place temporary beds in the canteen. She laughed at how ridiculous that would be by Swedish standards but believed that similarly unimaginable decisions were becoming increasingly likely. She added, 'It's the Wild West here right now, and things we never thought would happen are now happening, so anything is possible.'

Remand prisons have not been spared from the overcrowding. The repressive policies, expanded police force, and targeting of organised crime have led to a massive influx of clients awaiting trial. The growing number of suspected criminals waiting for their day in court has meant that clients are held in custody for longer. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023e) reveals that pre-trial detention is unprecedentedly long. In 2020, the average time in remand prisons was 69 days, whereas in 2024 the number rose to 98 days (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). The result is a desperate need for an additional 660 spaces, a significant number by Swedish standards. As mentioned, Sweden's pre-trial detention regulations have been the subject of criticism even prior to the recent growth (Holfverberg, 2019). Mathiesen (2012, p. 20) has called the remand policies in Sweden 'painfully embarrassing' due to the number of detainees and the prolonged duration in extended isolation. Building on an earlier discussion, an officer in a large remand prison in one of Sweden's most populous cities had noticed how damaging isolating detention is for the offenders. He explained that due to the growing number of clients, the practitioners were unable to adequately assess the clients' wellbeing and perform 'isolation-breaking interventions', activities that provide social interactions and the opportunity to spend time outside of the cell. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) seemingly agrees with the assessment. Aligning with earlier critique, the prison officer concluded that the current conditions are 'anything but humane, and do not belong in Swedish prisons'.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the overcrowding, a growing number of clients are reportedly forced to remain in remand prison despite being sentenced. All three of the remand prison officers revealed that more clients serve some or all of their sentence in remand prisons. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) confirms the participants' observation and

admits to failing to accommodate the escalating demand. In 2022, there was a 110 percent increase in the number of clients serving their custodial sentence in remand prisons compared to the previous year (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2023b). Due to the Swedish carceral regime's rehabilitative ethos, this trend is particularly worrisome. The practitioners explained that remand prisons are unsuitable for custodial sentences due to the isolation, lack of education and treatment programmes. Once more, the penal expansion is proving to undermine the SPPS' aspiration to 'break the vicious cycle'. To alleviate the overcrowding, the authority has implemented a range of strategies.

5.1.1 Double occupancy

As discussed in the literature review, modern Swedish prisons are intended to operate on the *principle of normality*, which suggests that life on the inside should resemble life on the outside as much as possible. Sweden is world-leading in single-person households (Statista, 2024), and single-occupancy prison cells aim to replicate life on the outside. Nonetheless, there is no legal obligation to offer inmates accommodation that guarantees solitude (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023g). Thus, the recent mass influx of clients has meant that one person per cell is no longer feasible. While the entirety of the current infrastructure is not built to accommodate more than one person per room, the units that permit double-occupancy are now temporarily set up to house two clients. To illustrate how recently the overcrowding has become an issue for the SPPS, the prison governor explained that a prison expansion that began construction in 2022 was not being built to accommodate double-occupancy rooms. However, he reported that more recent building projects were being constructed to permanently house two clients per room.

The prison officers shared that the clients' reactions to these new circumstances varied. Reportedly, inmates serving their first prison sentence, who were unfamiliar with anything other than cell-sharing, were less dissatisfied. In contrast, the practitioners noted that many repeat offenders who had experienced single-occupancy rooms during previous custodial sentences were significantly less content with sharing a small space intended for one client with another person. Three prison officers explained that numerous clients made daily requests to move to a single-occupancy room or change roommates. The transformation to cell sharing had reportedly added pressure on the staff to ensure that clients are matched with a suitable roommate to prevent clients from using the nightly lockdown to plan violent acts. Appropriate roommate-matching and dealing with the complaints associated with double-occupancy are new responsibilities for Sweden's penal practitioners, who were becoming increasingly overwhelmed as a later section will discuss.

Moreover, four officers at different prisons recalled instances when clients were so unhappy about the cell-sharing and desperate for solitude that they purposely committed impermissible acts that would force their transfer to solitary confinement. The tactic not only increases violence but also adds to the practitioners' workload. The double-occupancy has reportedly led to the alarm being pulled more frequently. Compared to the previous year, 2023 saw a 21 percent increase in reported incidents between clients (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023b). While the aforementioned problems associated with overcrowding may be standard points of concern in Anglo-American regimes with long histories of cell-sharing, Sweden is experiencing these growing pains in real time through trial and error.

Several participants agreed that prison leadership has not done enough to safely prepare the penal estates for the expansion. The strained situation gained the attention of the Parliamentary

Ombudsmen (2019), who issued a report that described the transition to double-occupancy as exceedingly fast, which resulted in cells unsuitable for the new demand. The report concluded that the rapid growth led to poorly updated safety protocols and inadequate staffing increases. When a similar transition to cell-sharing was attempted in 2004, there was a growth in attempted and actualised prison escapes, riots, and hostage situations (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2019). As with anything else, the transition to double-occupancy may just be a matter of adjustment, but a governor at a medium-security prison suggested that the change signified something deeper:

> I find it odd that the General Director [of the SPPS] decided that the new normal is two clients per room, and there is no debate or discussion about it. As far as I know, newspapers haven't written about it either. This is a paradigm shift. We've had a system all these years that we're now changing quite significantly. And it's becoming apparent that no one can be bothered to give that much thought.

While international literature and Swedish government reports widely discuss cell-sharing, the public discourse appears devoid of discussions pertaining to the newly implemented practice. A plausible explanation may be that the tactic satisfies the public's punitive sentiment while also enabling more criminals to be confined to prisons, which could be understood as an accomplishment unworthy of interrogation.

Furthermore, the overcrowding contributed by the transition to double-occupancy was described as impacting standard operating procedures. When prison occupancy is lower, as was the case for several years following a downward trend, clients can be moved freely between units or prisons. In contrast, when occupancy is high and rooms are inhabited by two clients, the ability to transfer misbehaving prisoners is reportedly limited. Consequently, numerous practitioners suggested that harmful associations and disruptive behaviours are increasing. Due to the growing number of clients with ties to criminal networks, the diminished capacity to separate inmates increasingly allows for robust alliances to form that can gain control over

prison units. A SPPS intelligence officer who specialises in clients tied to criminal networks explained that finding suitable placement for affiliated inmates is more challenging than ever before. He remarked that the changing character of organised crime in Sweden is further complicating his work:

> Criminal gangs have changed. In the early 90s, the biker gangs arrived. They were very organised and formalised. In the late 90s, the proper prison gangs developed and adopted the same structure as the biker gangs. It's actually pretty recently that these loosely tied networks have come into the picture. They're more tied to residential areas and ethnicity. They're really hard for us to pinpoint as they don't have the same structure as what we're used to. Friends today can be enemies tomorrow. That was out of the question for the older gangs. So, we struggle to know who's with who and who's beefing with who.

The stakes are high, as housing rivals in the same unit or room can rapidly escalate into violent encounters.

Despite the dissatisfaction with cell-sharing, multiple prison officers considered incidents between roommates rare. However, numerous practitioners suggested that the overcrowding had increased overall irritation and frustration between clients. The lack of solitude stemming from the double-occupancy was offered as a highly probable reason. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) similarly concluded that the escalating violence was likely tied to the overcrowding and the double-occupancy. While a culture of violence may appear unavoidable in prison, a problem worth interrogating arises when new conditions promote an escalation. In penal settings, violence is commonly regarded as a legitimate response to disrespect, deprivation, and stigmatisation in order to re-assert status and improve self-esteem (Tew, Vince, and Luther, 2015). Subsequently, the rise in violence observed by the interview participants is plausibly fuelled by the deteriorating environment that fosters elevated levels of anger and frustration. Poor conditions may result in emotional duress, and misconduct functions as an alleviation for the strain (Agnew, 1992; Sherman, 1993). Regulating norms and

behaviours may prove particularly challenging for inmates in prisons that are disordered and overcrowded (Steiner, 2009).

Five officers in medium- and high-security prisons expressed that the overcrowding had also caused the clients to express more anger towards the staff. The intensified emotions may be the result of a frustration contributed by the lower perceived prison quality caused by cell-sharing (Molleman and van Ginneken, 2015). The discontent reportedly compromised the clients' relationship with the staff. Several officers emphasised the significance of fostering close interpersonal connections with the clients, as the bonds facilitated information-sharing and enabled rehabilitative assistance. However, the opportunities for communication had become limited due to the double-occupancy. While international literature suggests that traditional prison culture opposes fraternisation with officers and frames staff as the enemy (Ireland, 2002), Swedish penal philosophy encourages interactive relationships between clients and officers, something the practitioners suggested was widely accomplished in the past. Conversely, the officers unanimously agreed that interacting with the clients had become increasingly challenging due to the new cell configurations.

Molleman and van Ginneken (2015) found that the relationship between officers and prisoners is negatively impacted when another inmate is present in the room. Cell-sharing prevents the one-to-one interactions that take place when officers enter clients' rooms. Two practitioners referenced the figurative masks that clients wear outside of their cells, which could previously be removed when inmates were alone in their single-occupancy room. The cell-sharing forces the mask to constantly remain on. Haney (2001) notes that if a 'prison mask' becomes a permanent fixture, then inmates may experience an emotional flatness that creates an unbridgeable distance to others. The majority of the interviewed prison officers considered the

relationship with the clients more distant. The nightly lockdown used to represent a time when officers could bond with clients away from the watchful eyes of fellow inmates. Finding moments to connect with the clients had become scarce, and the bonds were further weakened by the inmates being increasingly transferred between different penal estates.

5.1.2 Downgrading

While practitioners previously highlighted concerns about the limited ability to transfer network-affiliated or misbehaving clients, interviewees simultaneously criticised the SPPS' elevated use of a tactic referred to as *downgrading* (my translation). This is a standard practice where well-behaved, low-risk clients are transferred from a higher-security prison to a lower-security prison towards the end of their sentence to prepare for life on conditional release. The practice was described as incentivising good behaviour. The lowest-security prisons in Sweden, which are referred to as *open prisons*, have virtually no measures that prevent escape, which is considered the closest resemblance to life on the outside. As explained by Strode (1949, p. 225), 'In the open prisons, guards are not armed, windows not barred, and nothing prevents a prisoner from quietly strolling away.' So, while the motivation behind the gradual downgrading of security classification can be easily understood and aligns with traditional Swedish penal philosophy, a problem arises when the transfers are performed prematurely. Instead of being solely motivated by the clients' rehabilitative journey, several penal professionals explained that the tactic is increasingly utilised in an effort to alleviate overcrowding at medium- and high-security prisons, which the SPPS seemingly confirms (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2022a).

A prison officer who oversaw the transfer process explained that clients should only be downgraded when the authority deems that the risk of escape is low, and that the client is

suitable for less stringent measures of surveillance and control. However, nine participants alarmingly noted that such evaluations are no longer as intensely considered due to the desperate situation demanding that beds be made available for additional clients. Prison officers at medium- and high-security prisons expressed that while they are grateful for the temporary relief from overcrowding that the downgrading contributes, the practitioners were concerned about the potentially grave consequences of these risky decisions. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) acknowledges the conscious risk that the authority assumes through its placements. An officer with 13 years' experience concluded, 'With so many clients in the wrong place, it's going to be trouble. I'm just waiting for something to go wrong.'

The practitioners at lower-security facilities that receive the downgraded clients were equally concerned. An officer who had worked at a lower-security prison in the Swedish capital for three years explained that the facilities are not equipped to care for clients with complex needs, violent tendencies, or substance abuse who should be in higher-security prisons. Subsequently, a rise in violence and more frequent substance abuse was noted. The infrastructure at open prisons does not support solitary confinement and staff are not sufficiently trained to care for more demanding clients. In other words, the tolerance for breaking prison rules has had to increase. For example, a practitioner in another lower-security facility stated:

> Low-security prisons are not set up to deal with several clients under the influence at the same time, which means that we more or less have to let them be high or drunk because we don't have the space to separate them.

Consequently, a supervising officer suggested that staff are frequently forced to 'look the other way' when infractions or violent incidents occur. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) admits that the tolerance for misconduct has had to increase. An intervention facilitator at a lower-security prison explained that clients have become aware that the SPPS' 'hands are tied' and are taking full advantage. She added, 'Five years ago, prisoners were more concerned

about keeping their place at lower-security prisons, but now they know that they can't be [returned to higher-security prisons] due to overcrowding, so they act out.' However, despite safety concerns, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2022a) outlines the intention to expand its use of downgrading practices.

5.1.3 Additional strategies for mitigating overcrowding

To combat the problems arising from the overcrowding, the SPPS has had to implement a variety of changes. The authority agrees that some of the strategies were unimaginable a few years ago, but have now become a reality due to the challenging circumstances (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). For example, prison officers across multiple medium- and high-security prisons reported the issuance of an internal policy that offered prisons the option to temporarily extend daily lockdown from the standard 12 hours to 14 hours. Implementation reportedly varied between facilities. At the time of the interviews, some facilities were in the process of trialling the policy, some were on the verge of forced implementation due to unbearable conditions, and some participants claimed to be unaware of the policy's existence. All participants described an overwhelmed workplace, so the aforementioned difference in operationalisation was likely the result of varying local decisions.

The Parliamentary Ombudsmen (2023) issued a report that reviewed the extended lockdown following a number of complaints. The report stated its notable disdain for the practice and deemed staff shortages and overcrowding to be insufficient reasons to prolong cell confinement. The report details a statement from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service defending the implementation by arguing that the authority had exhausted all other options prior to the policy's issuance. Furthermore, the report summarises a survey offered to clients that received mixed reviews, but those in double-occupancy rooms were the most dissatisfied

with the extended lockdown. Numerous participants in the current study conveyed sympathy for the clients who are forced to be confined to their rooms for longer hours in a restricted space with another person. The compassion expressed by the penal professionals towards the clients radiated throughout the majority of the interviews, which highlighted the desire for a humane prison system while also emphasising how the current conditions deviate from that philosophy.

Another way that the overcrowding complicates adherence to traditional regulations can be observed in the policy changes that highlight the differing realities that politicians and the SPPS operate according to. As noted, current laws stipulate that two-thirds of a prison sentence longer than a month be spent in confinement and the remainder on conditional release (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020b). Prior to 2021, only severe infractions could prevent the automatic granting of conditional release, but a recent amendment hinges the release on participation in intervention programmes and on good behaviour (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, n.d. a). While the justification for reforming conditional release may appear valid, three issues can be observed. Firstly, the amendment assumes access to intervention programmes, which Chapter 6 will suggest is becoming limited. Secondly, as discussed, the overcrowding may stimulate violent behaviour, which hinders the *good* behaviour that the policy amendment warrants. Lastly, the practitioners voiced the near impossibility of motivating delaying conditional release due to the overcrowding. Rather, an officer with over a decade's experience explained:

> There is a constant push to offer clients conditional release to free up space, and the bar to receive it has been lowered. As a result, several incidents have occurred during prematurely granted conditional release.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) reveal a nine percent decrease in the postponement of conditional release since 2022. So, while the rationale for amending the conditional release policy is readily apparent, the ongoing circumstances may not permit the

suggested implementations. Thereby, the distinct realities confronting judicial and executive domains become clear. While prisons are doing everything in their power to push clients out in order to reduce overcrowding, the ruling parties are using their power to keep offenders in.

Furthermore, in response to the desperate overcrowding, the SPPS is reportedly utilising any available space within its prisons. A report suggests that two-thirds of all visiting rooms at high- and medium-security estates are being converted into living quarters to accommodate additional clients (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023h). A supervising officer at a medium-security prison shared that the visiting rooms at her facility have not been available for visits for a year due to clients being housed there. Four other practitioners revealed similar circumstances at other prisons. The practice is particularly alarming in prisons where clients typically spend most of their time outside their cells, as visiting rooms are reportedly not designed to provide a communal space for inmates to move freely during the day. Consequently, the clients housed in visiting rooms are restricted to these confined spaces for the majority of the day.

As discussed, extended isolation has not only been criticised internationally but also goes against Swedish prison philosophy that emphasises normality and rehabilitation. A senior prison officer expressed concern for the clients housed in visiting rooms, but also for the practitioners who have to work particularly hard to manage the inmates who are ‘acting out because they are locked up like maximum-security prisoners despite being in prison for low-level crimes’. The SPPS has been criticised by the Parliamentary Ombudsmen (2021) in the past for placing clients in units with the highest level of restrictions without proper cause. Further straining the conditions, a prison officer stationed in the visiting area explained that even the visiting rooms have been turned into double-occupancy rooms, and some clients have

to sleep on sofas or on mattresses on the floor. However, the clients' reduced quality of life is not the only consequence of the transformed visiting rooms. Access to visitation is reportedly significantly reduced, which not only affects the clients but also their visitors.

An interviewed representative from an organisation that advocates for children with incarcerated relatives stated that there has been a noticeable difference in access to visitation over recent years. While she highlighted that the SPPS has made a commendable effort to allow children to visit their incarcerated parents, the overcrowding has significantly reduced visiting access. The aforementioned officer stationed in the visiting area explained that her prison used to offer overnight apartments suitable for families and specific rooms equipped with toys for children to play with their parents. However, both of those options have become a distant memory as inmates are now housed there. The Parliamentary Ombudsmen (2024) have ruled that the SPPS needs to make considerable improvements to visiting access in the near future. Both the aforementioned officer and the children's advocate agreed that the overcrowding is affecting family bonds. The imprisoned parent benefits from receiving regular family visits as the client is considered less prone to breaking prison rules or reoffending (De Claire and Dixon, 2017).

The overcrowding is having unintended consequences for the children. According to two senior prison officers and the children's advocate, the overcrowding has restricted the SPPS' ability to take the child's geographic proximity to the inmate into consideration during placement decisions. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Ombudsmen have commented on the insufficient availability of suitable visitation times outside of school hours for children, which is deemed to breach the United Nations Children's Rights Convention (Ombudsman for Children, 2023). A well-maintained relationship with a parent in prison, where appropriate, is shown to be a

strong mitigator of the harmful effects of parental incarceration (Cramer *et al*., 2017). Research indicates that children suffer when parental contact is disrupted (Kobak and Madsen, 2008). While outside the scope of the current project, investigating how Sweden's penal expansion impacts the country's more than 30,000 children with a parent in prison or on probation (Rescue Mission, Erikshjälpen, and Bufff, 2021) seems to be an important avenue for future research.

5.2 Employment challenges

The growing emphasis on criminalisation and penalisation has undoubtedly stretched the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's resources and forced the authority to swiftly resolve challenges presented by the evolving criminal justice landscape. With an expanding correctional population, the size of the workforce needs to follow a similar upward trajectory. Ensuring that prisons and probation offices are sufficiently staffed is vital to the authority's operations. To accommodate the astonishing expansion projected as a result of the Tidö Agreement, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023b) assumes that the workforce will need to increase from the approximately 14,000 full-time equivalent staff in prisons and remand prisons in 2023 to 46,000 by 2033. As a best-case scenario, the report suggests that the authority will only be able to expand by 15,000 full-time equivalents. The discrepancy between the projected staffing demands and hiring abilities is significant. To compensate for the difference, the SPPS suggests that staff turnovers need to be significantly reduced, operations made more efficient, and employment density reduced by 30 percent.

In line with the traditional Swedish penal philosophy described throughout the thesis, the SPPS has valued staffing its prisons with a comparatively large number of practitioners. The motivation behind the practice is not primarily safety, but valuing having a large presence of

pro-social role models to support the clients journey towards desistance. Consequently, Swedish prisons were assigned to the 'very low' category for the ratio of inmates per one staff member (Aebi and Cocco, 2024). The categorisation is likely to change as participants argued that insufficient staffing has become a significant area of concern. The forthcoming sections will discuss an overwhelmed workforce facing escalating turnovers and the use of desperate hiring practices that have resulted in officers with inconsistent competence. All but one of the interviewed SPPS employees expressed feeling overworked due to an increasingly challenging clientele and as a consequence of understaffing. Research by Hudson and Shen (2018) noted the difference between *manpower understaffing* and *expertise understaffing*. The first concept refers to the inability to fulfil duties due to an insufficient number of workers. The second term insinuates that the inability to finish assignments is the result of poor competence. The interview participants revealed that the SPPS is struggling in both areas. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service's (2024b) confirms that the authority's recruitment efforts failed to hire enough additional employees.

5.2.1 Work-role overload

Nearly all of the interviewed SPPS employees described the workload as becoming unbearable. *Work-role overload* emerges when individuals perceive that the demands are so extensive that their time and energy resources are insufficient to effectively meet the requirements (Duxbury *et al.*, 2008). An experienced officer at a large high-security prison explained that while the work shift remains the same length, practitioners are expected to care for more clients and perform additional duties in the same amount of time. Swedish law mandates that clients take part in occupational activities while imprisoned, and full-time participation is considered 30 hours per week (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2015). During the time when clients are away from the unit partaking in their assigned activities, officers are expected

to perform administrative tasks. However, as the number of clients grows, prisons are reportedly struggling to offer sufficient occupational activities. Subsequently, a surging number of inmates remain on the units throughout the day, forcing the officers to focus on the clients rather than performing office-based tasks. A practitioner with experience from both medium- and high-security prisons expressed:

> Everyone loses when officers are not afforded the time to complete administrative duties. The clients are unhappy because we didn't have time to work on their case, management questions our abilities, and we are upset because we failed everyone.

He described his colleagues as more stressed and overwhelmed than before, especially the less experienced officers and those motivated to support the clients' rehabilitation.

An officer with four years' experience in a medium-security prison complained that she was nearing her limit:

> The load is so heavy that I almost don't have the energy to go to work anymore. More staff are going on stress leave because the conditions are so poor. Staff are quitting because they can't take it any longer. Many are not doing well. It's noticeable.

A treatment facilitator who had dedicated her entire career to the SPPS suggested that 'the image portrayed to the outside is that there are no problems and that we can manage. That's pretty far from reality. I know many of my colleagues agree.' As a consequence of the increasing workloads, several officers conveyed the need to prioritise between tasks, which has led to a focus on only the most essential duties. For many officers, the reported result has been that the more abstract tasks, such as bonding with clients to create an atmosphere conducive to rehabilitation, were the first to go. As a result, the officers who were compelled by the caretaking aspect of prison work were reported feeling dissatisfied with their performance, a perspective covered further in Chapters 6 and 7. Astvik and Melin (2013) highlight how overwhelmed employees are forced to accept lower-quality work performances as a coping

strategy to endure an intense workload. This type of disengagement can manifest as a physical and mental withdrawal from work (Kahn, 1990).

The practitioners' emotional withdrawal could be observed through statements such as 'no one cares anymore because the entire SPPS is in chaos' and 'a lot of staff feel a sense of powerlessness'. These sentiments echoed throughout the majority of the interviews and were further illustrated through accounts of long-established practices that are no longer feasible. For example, in a practice that has persisted for over half a century and is consistent with the rehabilitative principles of the SPPS, prison officers are assigned a number of clients for whom they serve as primary points of contact (Börnfelt, 2006). These so-called 'contact persons' are tasked with holding regular meetings with clients to provide support and guidance throughout their custodial sentence and in preparation for release (Ekbom, Engström, and Göransson, 1999). However, five interviewed officers who were contact persons suggested that the role had become impossible to fulfil. Not only is available office space rare due to the overcrowding, but the clients drastically outnumber the officers. As discussed, the practitioners were under immense pressure to perform the most essential duties, which had allowed other tasks to suffer.

The participants reported that standard procedure is monthly one-to-one meetings with the clients for whom an officer is the contact person, but reality deviates significantly from this protocol. An officer with less than two years' experience revealed that she was only able to meet with her clients two or three times per year. The remaining officers' experiences were not far off. Consequently, three practitioners expressed concern about how the meeting irregularity negatively affects the clients and suggested a likely ripple effect. An experienced officer explained that if clients are not offered the opportunity to communicate their grievances to

staff, they may resort to disruptive behaviour, which places greater strain on the officers. A supervising officer in a large high-security prison concluded, 'Our operations aren't running the way they should right now' and that he found it 'really hard to be a part of this'. Nearly all of the interviewed prison officers perceived that the expectations placed on them were unrealistic, which had exacerbated feelings of dissatisfaction among the professionals. A prison officer who was transferring to an administrative role within the SPPS stated, 'It's not a sustainable situation in the long run, and for the first time I'm becoming slightly bitter and starting to wonder "God, are we going to be able to survive this?"'.

Poor job satisfaction negatively impacts work-related stress (Dowden and Tellier, 2004). Workplace stress is a vicious cycle in which the symptoms may lead to burnouts and stress leave, which in turn places additional burden on the remaining staff, who become increasingly stressed, and the cycle continues (Holmes and MacInnes, 2003; Bezerra, Assis, and Constantino, 2016). However, stress is not uncommon among prison officers due to the demanding working environment (Kinman, Clements, and Hart, 2019). There are even suggestions that prison officers experience some of the highest rates of work-related stress among occupational groups (Dugan *et al.*, 2016; Global Prison Trends, 2016, both cited in Kinman, Clements, and Hart, 2019, p. 365). A prison officer who worked part-time at a medium-security prison described how his colleagues continuously complain about unprecedented stress levels that he noticed 'getting worse and worse every year due to the escalating crisis'.

Conditions related to the duties of the profession can be described as *operational factors* (Duxbury *et al.*, 2015), which may be constant and largely unavoidable within certain industries. This project mainly focuses on the *organisational factors,* which relate to the

structural factors of the organisation. Thus, while the strenuous nature of correctional work can be presumed, the SPPS' current circumstances are exacerbating the demands of an already challenging role. For example, 73 percent of prison staff responded in a survey that workloads are so intense that they are frequently unable to complete duties, which had led to elevated stress (Akademikern, 2023). Moreover, 71 percent of survey respondents perceived that the workload had increased in recent years. A prison officer interviewed in the current study who was in the process of terminating her employment with the SPPS expressed that the intense workload had resulted in a situation where practitioners 'are no longer provided with the circumstances to maintain control'. She added that the stress was increasingly visible among her colleagues and that many were nearing burnout. Burnout can spread like a 'contagion', crossing over among team members within a work group (Bakker *et al*., 2001; Westman *et al*., 2011). In response to experiences of burnout and job dissatisfaction, leaving the position may serve as the clearest solution (Hirschman, 1970). As will become clear, the SPPS is encountering a growing incidence of employees reaching their breaking point.

5.2.2 Escalating turnover

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service is undoubtedly experiencing rapid change. The participants overwhelmingly viewed these deviations unfavourably and highlighted their dissatisfaction with the current state of the authority. A prison officer in the process of terminating her employment with the SPPS after 15 years explained that 'the last few years have been chaos'. She described how the unbearable strain caused by the penal expansion had impacted her life negatively. As she was unable to foresee 'an end in sight for the authority's crisis', she was unwilling to sacrifice her wellbeing and was therefore leaving the SPPS. Her experience was not unique as the sentiment of grave dissatisfaction echoed across multiple interviews and is reflected in official statistics. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service

(2023i) admits that the recent growth has contributed to higher staff turnovers. In 2023, 20 percent of prison officers voluntarily terminated their employment with the authority (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). Furthermore, a survey found that 32 percent of prison officers responded that they are completely unlikely or not very likely to still be employed by the SPPS in two years (Seko, 2023). While disgruntled employees and turnovers are familiar to any workplace, the Swedish prison system is facing deteriorating conditions that seem to be alienating its workforce.

The work-role overload signifies a tremendous failure when the authority's staff are choosing to exit. An officer with eight years' experience in a medium-security prison stated that the 'profession is in serious crisis' and that the chaos is immediately revealed to new employees who are more commonly terminating their employment after a few weeks. A supervising officer acknowledged that numerous colleagues are 'looking for new jobs and want to leave as soon as possible. So, there isn't going to be any good staff left'. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023i) admits that the high turnovers have had multiple negative consequences. In addition to the time and costs associated with the hiring process, high turnovers contribute to the loss of competent staff with valuable experience. A seasoned officer revealed that she is considering leaving the authority because 'the workload is high, salaries are low, and we constantly have to train new starters. The motivation to stay is gone.'

The participants reported that the SPPS has failed to recruit enough officers to safely accommodate the recent overcrowding. A report found that tasks that mandate two staff members are frequently performed by one officer (Seko, 2023), which is a considerable safety concern. An officer with over five years' experience stated that distress used to be a rare emotion, but the recent conditions have caused her to fear for her safety more frequently. The

escalating turnover rate contributing to the understaffing is not only a cause for concern for the employees but also for the clients. The incidence of misconduct is believed to rise in substandard prison environments due to diminished supervision (Bierie, 2012). As previously noted, to manage the high turnovers and understaffing, the SPPS plans to reduce the employment density within the prisons, which could make officers and clients increasingly vulnerable. The intensifying overcrowding in combination with the highlighted workforce complications are concerning trends that further evidence the practical implications of the increasingly punitive direction.

The troubling working conditions seemingly set in motion a negative chain of events. Experienced staff who have developed a functioning routine and repertoire with the clients become overwhelmed with the strained situation and voluntarily terminate their employment. In turn, the deteriorating circumstances are further exacerbated as an additional workload is placed on the remaining employees, who become increasingly stressed and consider leaving the authority. Subsequently, experienced staff are replaced with inexperienced recruits who may jeopardise the working conditions further. As discussed in the next section, the interviewed practitioners are growing progressively more concerned about the competence of new officers. However, in a choice between two unsatisfactory options, wavering competence may be preferred over understaffing.

5.2.3 Inconsistent competence

Over the past two years, the SPPS has managed to increase its workforce by 25 percent (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). However, the eager recruitment has reportedly led to some unintended consequences. Primarily, practitioners raised concerns about the calibre of the incoming staff. A disconnect appeared to be emerging where the

authority's focus on quantity undermined the quality of the workers. The participants unanimously agreed that the new officers were notably less qualified and competent compared to a time prior to the described crisis. An officer with nearly a decade's experience suggested that the authority is 'letting anyone with a pulse become a prison officer these days'. Another officer with a similar length of experience jokingly commented that the SPPS' biggest recruitment competitor is janitorial companies due to the new hires' lack of desirable skills.

According to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023f), prison officers' educational prerequisite of a high school diploma was recently eliminated to expand the pool of eligible applicants. Two practitioners stated that they felt like babysitters due to the reduced educational demands that have led to a growing number of recruits with limited life experience. Participants also reported that some unofficial hiring requirements had been removed, which resulted in younger officers and many who did not speak adequate Swedish. An officer who had spent his entire professional career with the SPPS shared, 'Just two years ago, hiring requirements were different. In the last five years, the changes have been huge. In the last 10 years, the changes have been massive'. The evolution was overwhelmingly viewed negatively. Crewe, Liebling, and Hulley (2011) note that a workforce lacking in quality and experience, along with insufficient staffing levels and challenges with recruitment, training, and retention, is found to compromise the safety and welfare of both prisoners and staff while posing a threat to the institutional order.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024b) admits that the high turnover rate and extensive recruitment have led to an imbalance between senior and junior staff. In many cases, senior staff were a clear minority. An experienced officer who claimed to have a strong

relationship with the clients explained that the inmates are experts at reading people and will take advantage of the declining competence. He added, 'Even the clients are laughing at us because they know they'll be able to run the show. Some of the people they hire are a joke.' When a practitioner's competence is questioned, experienced colleagues may feel a duty to overwork to compensate for the perceived ineptitude (Shen *et al.*, 2019), further contributing to an elevated level of stress.

Moreover, several senior officers recalled observing new officers struggle with how to appropriately approach the clients. Inexperienced prison officers may find themselves in an emotional limbo where they are 'either not enough or coming at you too hard […]. Not enough authority to be accepted and then overboard with aggression' (Crewe, Liebling, and Hulley, 2011, p. 104). Wachtel and McCold (2001) argue that weak authority can result in a lack of supportive limit-setting. An example of the incompetence was observed by a seasoned officer at a high-security prison who had a dangerous experience with recent recruits:

> We had an incident where a colleague was in a physical altercation with a client, and five new officers just stood by and watched because they did not know what to do. I'm not scared of the clients, but I'm scared because of the lack of trust I have in other officers' competence.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) acknowledges that similar scenarios have become more common. Fear, which may stem from inexperience, can be linked to strained interactions with inmates that can affect the environment's safety (Gordon and Baker, 2017). The same study found that fear experienced by male correctional officers is in part driven by lower education, which suggests that reducing the hiring requirements for prison officers is likely a mistake. Furthermore, when staff negatively view clients as 'dangerous, unreliable, and abnormal', prisoners are influenced by the perception, which generates a matching negative view of staff as 'untrustworthy, unhelpful, or indifferent' (Ireland, 2002, p. 84).

Consequently, the prison environment is compromised, calling into question the practitioners' training.

5.2.3.1 Training insufficiencies

Interviews with SPPS employees involved with the training of new recruits allowed insight into the training of incoming staff. The training officers also had extensive experience working in prisons, offering a broad perspective. The consensus between these participants was that the training had undergone unfavourable modifications in recent years. At the time of the interviews in 2023, both officers revealed that the training was due to be further compromised. Beginning in 2024, the training was reduced from 16 to 11 weeks to more rapidly address the authority's urgent need to expand its workforce (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024c). The prison officers' union had already expressed concern over the short length of the 16-week training prior to it being shortened further. Preceding 2012, the in-service training was complemented with a ten-week university-level course, and its removal created a point of contention between the unions and the SPPS (Bruhn, Nylander, and Johnsen, 2017). Thus, complains about additional reductions to the already reduced training duration can be expected.

The interviewed training officers agreed that the SPPS' level of ambition had been lowered to accommodate the authority's desperate demand to bolster employment. One of the officers stated, 'We've had to simplify the material and remove some sections. Training now needs to be quicker and easier to pass. We give passing grades more often, which is concerning'. For a heavily burdened work force, training is a 'catch-22'. While prisons require capable and competent officers who have completed training, the months spent in learning centres is time away from the prisons that are painfully understaffed. Consequently, two newer officers reported having had to postpone their training because their presence was urgently needed in

the prisons. Both officers explained that the lack of training made them unsure of the role and their authority. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023i) reports that 28 percent of prison work was performed by officers without full training.

However, a more experienced officer offered a different perspective. In her experience, delayed participation in training had benefitted the prisons. Not only was more staff available quicker, but officers were provided the opportunity to gain practical experience before acquiring more theoretical skills in training. She suggested that the practice had become a valuable tool to 'weed out those who have no business working in prisons', which saves the SPPS money, but also swiftly eliminates individuals who may not be appropriate for the correctional setting. She highlighted how unsuitable many of the recent employees were, stating that 'there is no amount of training in the world that could make some of these new recruits compatible for prison work'. Multiple officers urged the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to implement more stringent hiring criteria. However, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, the SPPS is experiencing serious operational constraints, making the plea seem unlikely.

As noted by the training officers, there is increasing pressure to rush officers through the training and to provide passing grades. Officers who were tasked with training new officers within the prison setting agreed. An experienced officer was growing increasingly concerned about the quality of recruits and the strained situation requiring that the SPPS hires 'almost anyone'. She said:

> I've flagged certain individuals as inappropriate, but I know we can't afford not to hire them […] I feel the pressure to give them a passing grade because we need staff. I don't want to flag someone as inappropriate because I know there's a crisis and my colleagues are desperately calling out for help.

A training officer in a high-security prison expressed that he also experienced pressure from his superiors to 'essentially look the other way' when a recruit was underperforming. He

explained that ‘we now need pretty significant evidence that a staff member is unsuitable, and even then, we often get told by management to give them another chance.’ He concluded that the SPPS is doing the new employees a disservice by hiring them despite being inadequately qualified. In his opinion, the simplified training that is easier to pass is a considerably negative development during a time when correctional work is becoming increasingly challenging.

A supervising officer argued that the reduced training was particularly untimely as the SPPS was experiencing an evolving clientele, which is discussed in a later section. He claimed that the training insufficiently prepared the practitioners to work with clients with long sentences and those with ties to organised crime. The increasingly complex clientele may place additional demand on officers being adequately trained due to the sensitive and intricate nature of affiliation to criminal networks. For example, one of the participants who worked with ‘gang exits’ recalled an incident that showcased the importance of sufficient training. She recalled visiting a client in prison when a young officer shouted across the units that the inmate was due for this meeting with the ‘gang exit organisation’. She said that ‘this is a surefire way for a client to be assaulted or even killed’ and that the incident opened her eyes to the crisis that the SPPS is experiencing.

The concern about incompetence may have been particularly heightened at the time of the interviews, in the months leading up to summer. Every year the SPPS recruits thousands of seasonal workers who provide cover for the permanent staff’s annual leave. The anxiety about the upcoming summer was palpable among some participants, and several experienced officers stated a strong dislike for the period. The main arguments were that the temporary workers jeopardise the prisons’ safety and disrupt the rehabilitative work. The primary cause was believed to be the limited training. Temporary workers are only required to participate in a

short introductory course. However, in a positive development, since the time of the interviews, the introductory course has been extended from two to three weeks (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024c). The authority reports that the decision was based on feedback from an employee survey.

While requiring the seasonal staff to partake in the regular 11-week training is understandably not feasible, a problem arises when officers are not sufficiently trained to be considered a resource and not a burden. An experienced officer complained that 'there is no way I can offload some of my duties on temporary staff. Quite the opposite. I have to hold their hand and explain everything over and over, which just adds to my workload'. Furthermore, Crewe, Liebling, and Hulley (2011) established that a lack of knowledge hinders the officers' ability to establish relationships with the prisoners. A participant who started as a temporary worker but transitioned to permanent prison officer recalled how unsafe he felt and unsure about dealing with the clients in a high-security prison after the short introductory course. Echoing an earlier account, he shared that the prisoners would occasionally laugh at the temporary workers, which made him fear interacting with the clients and opted to keep his distance. The seasonal workers' distant approach was raised as detrimental to the interactive prison climate that permanent staff work strenuously on maintaining.

5.2.4 Probation perspective

Moving beyond the prison setting, probation officers and intervention facilitators provided insight into the state of community corrections. The interviews revealed that probation offices are experiencing many of the same challenges discussed throughout this chapter. Despite not directly housing clients, the prison overcrowding was impacting probation offices. The SPPS is experiencing an expanding cohort of clients on probation and conditional release but is also

increasingly tasked with supporting prisons with re-entry interventions and programmes (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023a). As previously noted by a prison officer, penal practitioners are feeling pressured to grant clients conditional release in order to reduce overcrowding and to make room for additional clients. While the strategy rids prisons of clients, probation offices are on the receiving end. Although the recent policy amendments demand that clients complete participation in treatment programmes and showcase good behaviour prior to release, the officers reported on the pressure to recommend clients for parole regardless of satisfying the stipulations. The intentional oversight seemingly undermines the clients' rehabilitative journey and creates a potentially dangerous situation for probation officers dealing with prematurely released offenders.

A majority of the interviewed probation officers were former prison officers, several of whom requested to transfer to community corrections upon observing the worsening conditions facing prisons. Unfortunately, the rapidly evolving circumstances outpaced the officers who reported that probation offices were increasingly experiencing some of the same challenges. Like the penal estates, the probation facilities have had to make rapid adaptations to manage the punitive turn. Five out of six probation officers reported that their respective offices have had to extend their business hours to nights and weekends to manage the growing number of clients. The practitioners nearly unanimously complained about mounting workloads. A probation officer with two years' experience commented that her office is 'pretty far above the number of clients we should have, and they're serving longer sentences with us. Last year, I averaged 35 clients at a time; now it's 61'. Research from the U.K. suggests that more than 50 cases per probation officer likely compromises the quality and aim of the work (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021), a sentiment shared by an experienced probation officer. She remarked that as a result of the growing workload, the quality and length of scheduled meetings with clients have suffered.

She said that she has had to ‘space out and shorten meetings in order to have time for everybody’ and consequently ‘the quality is unquestionably compromised’. Burnett and McNeill (2005) highlight the importance of supportive relationships between offenders and officers in encouraging desistance, a point often overlooked in the pursuit of efficiency.

A report by the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) confirmed that the growth in clients on parole or probation has resulted in a decreased meeting frequency for clients. A probation officer in Sweden’s capital explained that she is so overwhelmed that she has started questioning the authority’s ability to perform its supportive role. She complained, ‘There is not enough time for each client. I don’t have time for long talks, only quick check-ins. Probation does not fulfil its intended function the same way anymore’. Caseloads are identified in numerous studies as a significant organisational stressor (Norman and Ricciardelli, 2022). A lower caseload not only limits staff stressors, but research suggests that smaller caseloads produce lower rearrest rates (Jalbert *et al*., 2011; Taxman *et al*., 2006) and reduced rates of probation violations (Cox *et al*., 2005; Manchak *et al.*, 2014). Overwhelming workloads can cause probation officers to shift their focus away from rehabilitation and clients’ re-entry needs towards ‘moving offenders through the system’ (West and Seiter, 2004, p. 51). Chamberlain and colleagues (2018) found that a perception of disengagement and a lack of support from officers increase clients’ risk of reoffending. However, in contrast to some of the prison officers who came across as resigned due to the overwhelming circumstances, the majority of the probation officers appeared consistently engaged. Although, there was undoubtedly concern about how the growing caseloads would affect both clients and staff. Several participants forecasted that the strained situation is going to get significantly worse before getting better.

Despite the rapidly increasing case load, community corrections benefitted from its less complex infrastructural demands, which permitted probation offices to expand in size with greater ease than penal estates. The majority of probation practitioners, who were spread across the country, reported either recently moving or being in the process of moving to larger offices. Nonetheless, problems remained. According to a senior probation officer, the authority is preparing for a significantly larger volume of clients, which presented accompanying challenges:

> We're gearing up for higher pressure on the probation side. We know a lot of clients are due. We're concerned about how we're going to have time and space for everybody. I know several probation offices are having logistical issues getting everyone to fit. We need so many officers that it's becoming difficult to find offices.

The SPPS is aware of the challenges related to expanding its operations and is reportedly taking steps to address the evolving security demands (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023a).

Three probation officers from varying geographical locations reported that more stringent security measures had been introduced in response to the altering clientele. An officer who transferred from prison to probation due to her values aligning more closely with the latter shared her concerns about the SPPS deploying prison officers at some probation offices to enhance security. She suggested that the strategy was a response to community corrections dealing with 'more hardcore criminals than before'. However, she explained that many of her clients were dissatisfied with the sudden presence of prison officers. A few of her clients had even started refusing to enter the premises since the implementation. She believed that some clients were traumatised from past interactions with prison officers and their presence triggered a PTSD-like response. In her opinion, there is a stark contrast between the prison and probation officers' approaches towards clients. She described prison officers as overly concerned with control and respect, whereas probation officers are generally more focused on re-entry needs and developing a working relationship with clients.

The interviews revealed that the probation officers regarded themselves and their work as superior to the prison officers. A probation officer with a degree in sociology argued that the contrasting perspectives were due to differing educational backgrounds. She explained that her probation colleagues commonly have degrees in social work, sociology, or criminology. Unlike the declining education requirements for prison officers, the authority requires probation officers to hold a bachelor's degree. Millar and Burke (2012) consider probation work to be imbued with more morally and intellectually intricate matters, which may explain the need for higher education. Three probation officers perceived that the academic prerequisite had protected probation offices from the fluctuating staff competency that prisons were experiencing. Although, community corrections had not been immune to staff turnovers. On the contrary, several participants claimed that turnovers were high. As a consequence, a probation officer in a large city stated that she has stopped greeting colleagues in the corridors because there were new faces every day.

Moreover, akin to the concerns raised by prison officers regarding the difficulty punishing clients for breaking prison rules due to the overcrowding, community corrections were reportedly experiencing similar problems. A probation officer with over five years' experience argued, 'The legal system gets watered down because, in theory, fairly little should be required to send someone to prison while on probation, but in reality, quite a lot is needed because there's no space'. The sentiment was shared by two additional officers who reflected on how differently practitioners are expected to manage clients due to the current crisis. A probation officer who previously worked in a low-security prison explained that despite the increased punitiveness, the overcrowding simultaneously undermines punishment 'to the point where clients think they can get away with misconduct because they know it takes a lot for us to send

them back'. With this in mind, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's (2023a) intention to rely more heavily on non-custodial sentences to offset the prison overcrowding is concerning.

However, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023a) insists that future expansions of its community-based operations are not about allowing convicted criminals to forego punishment but about the ability to achieve satisfactory community safeguarding through non-custodial alternatives. As discussed in there literature review, there is evidence to support the practice. However, the approach may not be universally advantageous. A probation officer with past experience working in a high-security prison was troubled by the increased reliance on community corrections. She explained that she frequently wrote statements to court arguing against offering a particular client a non-custodial sentence, but that clients are commonly handed a community sentence anyways because the prisons are operating beyond capacity. On the other hand, the majority of the interviewed probation officers, despite being overworked, agreed with the SPPS' plan to utilise non-custodial sentences more frequently. Some practitioners referenced the research opposing prolonged incarceration, which, along with the declining penal conditions, was offered as an argument for non-custodial sentences. Although, like the prison officers, the probation officers requested further training to better manage the altering clientele contributed by the penal reorientation.

5.3 Evolving clientele

All of the participants with several years' experience working for the SPPS argued that a significant shift in the client typology had occurred in recent years. The interviewed practitioners suggested that the change was mainly regarding age and association with criminal networks. An assessment that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) seemingly

agrees with. The Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) reported that between 2018 and 2023, the most resource-intensive crimes (murder, manslaughter, serious drug offences, rape, grievous bodily harm, robbery, and weapons offences) increased by 54 percent. The report also noted that the number of clients between ages 18 and 21 had grown considerably due to the removal of the 'youth rebate', which previously entitled young offenders to sentence reductions. Age and network affiliation, in addition to the types of crimes that clients were serving sentences for, were reportedly contributing to the correctional population becoming increasingly challenging. A security-focused senior officer argued that the situation was particularly vulnerable due to an unprecedented number of high-ranking members of criminal organisations serving custodial sentences.

A prison officer with a criminology degree concluded that the transformed clientele was driven by the surge in street crime and the accompanying political fixation on criminal networks in marginalised neighbourhoods. Three of the most experienced prison officers considered the clients to be distinctly different now, with one of the officers stating:

> There is a really clear age reduction. I come into contact with 15-year-olds who are serious criminals who have killed people. That wasn't the case when I started this job. Then, the network criminals were Hell's Angels or Bandidos. Those guys were over 30 with leather vests and ponytails, and they wanted to keep a low profile. Now, we've had to rethink our whole categorisation of gang members.

She viewed the change negatively, as the 'old-school gang guys were easier and more pleasant to deal with'. Several practitioners asserted that the altered clientele was more challenging due to an intense contempt for authority, presented as a tough attitude towards the practitioners based on the perception that the officers' commands were signs of disrespect. The majority of the interviewees highlighted an escalating 'us versus them' mentality whereby officers are increasingly viewed as the enemy rather than as the rehabilitative tools that the SPPS intends. From an Anglo-American perspective, these arguments may appear

standard and unremarkable. However, within the Swedish context, the findings further evidence a larger transformation that departs from past traditions.

A prison officer with seven years' experience from a high-security prison stated, 'Today's criminality is too rough, and the SPPS can't quite handle that. We haven't kept up with the evolution of street crime and have fallen behind.' Recent police efforts have resulted in the imprisonment of a large number of individuals with ties to criminal networks (Swedish Police Authority, 2023b). Several officers noted that the result of these interventions was visible in the prisons. A supervising officer said, 'There was a sudden influx of network criminals who came in and took over. The clientele is noticeably different compared to a few years ago.' Following the imprisonment of significant leadership characters, the police is observing a trend where increasingly younger individuals are recruited, which is understood as a deliberate strategy aimed at avoiding penalisation and police interference (Swedish Police Authority, 2023b). In response, as noted, sentence reductions for those aged eighteen to twenty were abolished, and life sentences were introduced for the same age group (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021). The policy amendments, in combination with the declining age of membership in criminal networks, have led to an influx of younger clients. An officer at a remand prison expressed that the facility 'suddenly has a bunch of 16-year-olds in custody who are crying into the arms of staff and missing mum'.

The age reduction and growing number of clients with ties to criminal networks was becoming increasingly strenuous for the practitioners. An experienced officer in a medium-security prison argued that younger clients associated with criminal networks were the most challenging:

> Older clients want to serve their time in peace and quiet, but we've now received a lot of young people, and they want to be seen and heard. We used to try to mix the units

> so that the older clients could positively influence the younger clients, but the problem is that young people have no respect for their elders anymore.

The central legal-penological discourse inscribes convicted offenders' identity as belonging at the bottom of a hierarchy of evaluation, in which inmates are expected to accept the conditions of the sentence (Huspek and Comerford, 1996). Within prison culture, a counter-discourse is formed in which the hierarchy is reversed and those willing to break the rules earn respect from fellow inmates. Accordingly, in a 'hierarchy of badness' violent offences are performed to maintain a place at the top of the hierarchy, which ensures respect (p. 351). An officer with a degree in social work considered the network criminals a difficult group to work with because 'many have a target on their back while also perceiving themselves to be immortal'. He highlighted the increasingly complex nature of the evolving clientele, which he argued the SPPS was not equipped to deal with. In other words, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service is encountering a clientele that has existed in Anglo-American regimes for decades but is comparatively new in Sweden, which is resulting in considerable challenges. The influx of clients with ties to organised crime was indicated as a contributing factor to the penal estates' deteriorating security (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a).

Furthermore, the penal professionals highlighted nationality, ethnicity, and race as additional components in the perception that the clientele is changing. The previous chapters may be used to justify the assumption that the xenophobic tendencies that are underpinning the Swedish criminal justice debate exist in prisons as well. Several participants agreed. Six officers recalled troubling experiences that indicated the presence of prejudice or discrimination towards clients who did not speak or appear ethnically Swedish. The topic appeared to be equally cloaked in the misguided governmental colour blindness that previous chapters have suggested exist in Sweden. Similar to the lack of data related to race and ethnicity in Sweden's population census, prisons neither collect the information. Consequently, no official determinations can be made

in regard to racial inequality in Swedish prisons. However, data related to nationality suggests some disproportionality. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2023j) reports that 29 percent of the clients are not Swedish citizens. The number constitutes an overrepresentation, as official statistics suggest that about 8.2 percent of the Swedish population are foreign citizens (Statistics Sweden, 2023).

Moreover, four participants suggested a recent overrepresentation of non-ethnic Swedes in Swedish prisons. A junior prison officer said that the perception of a prison population with a foreign majority was a disappointing development that had resulted in some officers treating those with an immigrant background differently. He had 'seen with [his] own eyes that officers are not nice to clients with an immigrant background. Even if they are Swedish citizens, they are treated in a racist way'. A young officer in a low-security prison commented that 'there are a lot of older, middle-aged supervisors who have a lot of negative opinions about foreigners. They treated those clients quite badly. That's why I stopped working there'. An officer with a degree in criminology suggested that the SPPS is struggling to address these discriminatory practices 'that are becoming more commonplace' because 'they are terrified of being labelled as racist if the problem comes to light'. Prisons are often described as mirrors of society, and Swedish prisons are seemingly dealing with the same problems observed in society.

As previously mentioned, the clients' strong contempt for authority was a recurring theme in the majority of the interviews. A prison governor who had spent his entire career in the SPPS suggested that the attitude was common among those from 'vulnerable neighbourhoods', due to troubling experiences of being excluded from traditional society. He understood the new generation of clients to view shame differently:

> They want to withdraw from and not be a part of traditional society. They don't display any shame about being in prison or being viewed as criminals. Particularly not those

> from vulnerable neighbourhoods. That's not how it used to be. The shame prevented those in my generation from committing crime. I don't perceive that to be the case today.

The discussion about shame has occupied researchers for a long time. Shaming wrongdoers can satisfy society's need for retribution by penalising individuals who violate moral norms, thus reinforcing the standing of those who adhere to them. However, the consequences of shame are associated with numerous maladaptive behaviours, negative psychological outcomes, and heightened recidivism (Tangney *et al*., 2011). Dichotomising offenders from non-offending society unsurprisingly causes resentment (McCulloch and McNeill, 2007), which participants reported was particularly noticeable when interacting with the new generation of clients.

While there were several negative comments about the changing clientele, there were also numerous practitioners who highlighted that the clients are rarely the problem. Two experienced officers commented that despite an increasingly complex clientele, the clients are the least problematic aspect of working in a Swedish prison. One of the aforementioned added, 'Incidents happen in every prison, and we expect clients to act in an anti-social manner. That is something we can control. The current conditions, on the other hand, make our jobs exhausting and unsafe'. An officer with a background in social work likened the clients to children of divorce who are caught in the middle of two conflicting forces. One side is a prison system in survival mode that is forced to sway from its core principles, and on the other side is a workforce in tumult with many choosing to escape before the situation deteriorates further. The clients, for whom the system exists, are forgotten among the chaos. An intervention facilitator at a medium-security prison suggested that 'the clients have become an afterthought, rather than the focus'. In other words, the growing prison population with more complex needs clashes with the declining officer competency, reduced staffing ratios, and mounting

workloads. In turn, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's ability to continue to deliver on its promise to 'break the vicious cycle' is called into question.

5.4 Fearing the future

This chapter can be summarised as an exceedingly discontent workforce that voiced significant concern about the SPPS' recent developments. The project set out to investigate the practical implications of a growing correctional population for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service and the findings were alarming, revealing a rapidly deteriorating situation. Accordingly, the participants echoed sentiments of disappointment, anxiety, fear, and anger. An officer who took a leave of absence due to stress said that she was 'so angry before [she] went on leave' because she could see how 'everything was just getting worse and worse'. An officer who had terminated his employment with the SPPS days before the interview referred to the authority as a 'sinking ship with a thousand holes'. A fear for the future was evident by several participants who assumed that the conditions were likely to decline further and have detrimental consequences. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) admits that the boundaries are continuously pushed and that the risk of a serious incident was further heightened in 2024.

A concerned officer in a high-security prison shared:

> There are severe security concerns right now. I think something horrible is going to happen, and then there'll be change. If things continue as they are, there will be more prison murders. It's going to keep going until it's a complete catastrophe.

Four officers referenced a former SPPS prison officer named Karen, who was brutally murdered by an inmate in 2011. The tragic incident reportedly occurred following months of union demands to end lone working. The participants uttered fear that more officers were going to be killed if the challenging conditions continued. A prison governor at a medium-security

prison agreed that ‘the SPPS isn’t an agency that is good at looking ahead. We keep going with an old approach until something happens and then make changes.’ The perspective was shared by an officer who assisted with prisoner transports. She recalled a recent incident where a client escaped while being transported to a dentist appointment outside the prison. She explained that the staff had repeatedly complained about the inferior transportation system that made the procedure susceptible to outside interference, but the authority ignored the feedback. However, within a day of the prisoner escape, the system was rectified. She believed that other serious incidents would have to happen for the SPPS to change its policies and practices.

Another participant who was considering leaving the authority stated, ‘The future scares me. If it continues like this, I think it’s going to be pretty catastrophic. The changes have come crashing down. I think it’ll be harder and harder to maintain safety and a quality operation.’ A survey of SPPS employees found that 25 percent of respondents did not consider the authority to be fulfilling its obligations to society or upholding the security (Akademikern, 2023). The project’s most experienced participant predicted that ‘we need to look 10 years ahead before we’re through the situation we’re dealing with now. It’ll be tough, and it’ll take time’. Offering a more positive outlook, a supervising officer highlighted that ‘a period of crisis like we’re experiencing right now also brings on positive change’. While the SPPS deserves praise for its attempt to rapidly adapt to a changing sociopolitical landscape, the next chapters will reveal how the immense pressure has forced the authority to fall short on its rehabilitative agenda.

5.5 Chapter summary

The punitive turn encouraged by penal populism and escalating crime does not end at policy reforms but has real consequences for the authority managing the correctional population. Practitioners in prisons, remand prisons, and probation officers reported on a grim reality with

an overcrowding that is negatively impacting both clients and staff. The rapid expansion has forced the SPPS to make decisions that undermine its normalisation principle and humane philosophy. The transformation from single-occupancy to double-occupancy rooms marks a significant change for the SPPS. The clients are placed in settings that challenge their desistance and staff feel increasingly vulnerable. The growing penal population demands a larger workforce, but hiring is proving challenging. To rapidly expand the workforce, the training is reduced and hiring requirements lowered. The participants indicated that staff competence has decreased remarkably, a concerning trend as the clients are evolving. Not only are there more clients, but the demographic has changed to include an increasingly challenging clientele that is younger, more commonly affiliated with criminal networks, and has more complex needs. Consequently, the employees are overworked and the turnover rate is amplified. Several practitioners called the situation a crisis that has forced the SPPS to revert to performing only its most core duties. Even so, the practitioners were fearful of their working conditions and anticipated terrifying consequences.

Chapter 6: The shifting rehabilitative agenda

The literature review in Chapter 2 introduced the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's rehabilitative aim and humane philosophy. This chapter explores what participants are labelling a 'break' with the carceral ideals and treatment focus that Sweden and its Scandinavian neighbours have been known for. As explained by an experienced officer in a low-security prison, 'We may be famous around the world for rehabilitation, but in reality, that's no longer the truth'. Accordingly, the focus here is on investigating the current state of rehabilitation within the SPPS and assessing what happens when 'what works' intersects with an operational crisis. The participants own understanding and interpretation of correctional rehabilitation is emphasised. This discussion is particularly relevant during a time when Swedish penality is arguably reverting back to the ideological seesaw that weights rehabilitation against punishment, a debate deeply rooted in the criminological discourse (Logan and Gaes, 1993). While contemporary Swedish correctional practices have been clear in their rehabilitative emphasis, the next two chapters will evidence a penal regime struggling to balance rehabilitation with punishment.

The current director-general of the SPPS, Martin Holmberg, stated that the Swedish penal system has 'a strong focus on rehabilitation' (Justice Trends, no pagination), and the former director-general Nils Öberg said, 'Our role is not to punish' (James, 2014, no pagination). However, the participants reported an increasing abandonment of the rehabilitative agenda due to a growing emphasis on security. Although rehabilitation and control are intended to work in dynamic tandem in Swedish prisons, reality reportedly sides with the latter. Giallombardo (1966, p. 73) argues that a conflict between competing goals disturbs the equilibrium of the system, which 'jeopardize[s] the successful performance of their functions'. As Craig (2004) highlights how counterproductive control is for offenders' treatment needs, a review of the

practitioners' perception of a more control-focused philosophy is warranted. Concerningly, the changes appear as forced adaptations to an operational crisis rather than conscious choices guided by research and experience.

In Swedish prisons, rehabilitation encompasses much more than just the time that clients spend in treatment programmes. Instead, it is an overarching philosophy that echoes throughout, from staffing and infrastructure to activities and sentencing. The ideology largely permeates every facet of the contemporary Swedish carceral regime. However, participants voiced concern that rehabilitation is no longer among the SPPS' main priorities. Instead, the authority is seemingly experiencing a historic transformation. A prison officer with decades of experience was convinced that 'when we look back in 50 years, we're going to view this time as a significant shift in how Swedish prisons are run.' Although, interviews with senior officers and prison leadership suggested that the authority is not willingly removing the spotlight from treatment efforts. Rather, the political direction is forcing their hand. As the prison population continues to expand at a rapid pace, and with an increasingly challenging clientele, the authority is struggling to evolve swiftly enough to accommodate the growing demand. As previously mentioned, the participants reported that the focus has switched to ensuring that the most vital functions of imprisonment are maintained. A high-security prison officer explained, 'There is so much focus on making sure that the daily core operations can run that we've lost a lot of focus on prioritising the clients' needs', which was a sentiment shared by several of his colleagues. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) seemingly confirms the participants' perception but stated in an earlier report that the authority is able to maintain a quality operation and that the rehabilitative focus is preserved (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024d). The literature and interview data suggest otherwise.

6.1 Swaying treatment focus

As indicated in Chapter 5, the SPPS' rapid growth has generated a strained staffing environment where officers face difficulties in fulfilling their responsibilities. These challenges are affecting the authority's ability to maintain its rehabilitative mission. For example, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) reports significant delays in establishing sentencing plans for new clients. The wait forces inmates into a holding pattern where they are not working, accessing education, or receiving treatment. Consequently, numerous prison officers raised concerns that the SPPS' priorities are being misplaced. There seemed to be a nearly unanimous perception that rehabilitation efforts are not sufficiently prioritised and sliding further and further down on the priority list. A recent survey by the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) found that 72 percent of responding prison managers perceive that treatment remains decently or highly prioritised within the SPPS. However, among treatment facilitators, the percentage was only 55. 22 percent responded that treatment is a fairly low or very low priority. The surveyed treatment facilitators indicated that prison leadership needs to be better educated about the realities facing the treatment programmes so that rehabilitation can remain a priority. Some of the current project's participants similarly argued that those in leadership positions are out of touch and unaware of the realities 'on the floor', offering an explanation as to why the surveyed prison managers perceived that treatment efforts were more prioritised than the treatment facilitators did.

A senior officer at a medium-security prison suggested that the authority is experiencing a 'situation that is all about filling available beds', making her concerned that 'we're moving more and more towards warehousing' and 'not quite in the right direction regarding prioritising treatment programmes'. A junior officer at a different medium-security prison agreed that security is prioritised above rehabilitation, which has changed the treatment climate. The

Swedish National Audit Office (2024b, no pagination) acknowledged the deviation and stated that '[s]ecurity issues are very important, but they must not force aside work on preventing reoffending'. The aforementioned officer believed that the authority was taking sufficient steps to ensure that treatment is not overlooked because 'the SPPS is aware that the security focus is a little overpowering right now.' Interviews with participants in positions of leadership within the SPPS suggested that the authority is cognisant and concerned about the altering focus, which appeared to be the result of the repressive political direction rather than a calculated philosophical shift. During a time of rapid expansion, the SPPS is reportedly struggling to maintain control, which has meant reverting back to ensuring that the most basic duties of imprisonment are maintained. In other words, the focus appears to be on keeping the inmates alive, fed, and inside the confines of the prison. Everything else, according to some interviewees, was deprioritised.

While the concern about the declining rehabilitative focus was palpable, several practitioners spoke proudly about the wide range of programmes that the SPPS offers. However, in the next sentence, they rapidly condemned the insufficiently use of the praised programmes. The inability to maintain a focus on rehabilitation had led some interviewees to question the legitimacy and purpose of imprisonment, echoing an earlier discussion. An officer with over 15 years' experience at a medium-security prison stated, 'No one seems to want to consider what kind of person we want coming out at the end of a prison sentence. That's where I think treatment is important because that is the only thing that can make a difference.' Another officer with nearly the same length of experience highlighted the importance of quality sentence content by commenting that practitioners 'need to do this job to protect society because when the clients get released, we want them to be better people'. The discussion echoes the SPPS' philosophical assumption that humans can change (Scott, 2017). Likely due to the unanimous

belief in human reform, the majority of the practitioners were firm in their rejection of Sweden's political direction that was interfering with the rehabilitative agenda.

A junior prison officer expressed her view that the rehabilitative efforts have become a victim of the political climate. A supervising officer stated that she felt like 'the system craves more prisoners but has no intention of rehabilitating more'. She continued:

> We're moving further and further away from care and treatment towards warehousing, but that has less to do with the SPPS and more to do with the political winds that are blowing right now. The SPPS is impacted by political decisions that we have no power over.

Foucault (1977) argues that warehousing becomes a weakness of imprisonment that fails to fulfil its task, namely, to transform the individual. Sweden has been able to flaunt comparatively low recidivism rates for many years (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2024), suggesting that the authority was doing something right. However, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024a) reported its highest reoffending rate in 2023 since 2010, which may be a consequence of the departure from an already established methodology. Although, an evaluation of a possible correlation is premature. A systematic review by Loeffler and Nagin (2022) found that rehabilitative efforts influenced recidivism-reduction while criminogenic effects were noted in penal contexts where treatment interventions were absent. As noted, Roxell (2024) also highlighted the importance of treatment interventions in reducing the risk of recidivism among Swedish offenders.

6.1.1 Treatment access

According to the participants, yet another consequence of the rapidly growing correctional population is reduced access to treatment programmes. The practitioners expressed a noticeably declining availability in recent years, which was described as the result of rehabilitation being forced into the background as the authority fights to maintain its most core

functions. The change was particularly apparent for an intervention facilitator with decades of experience who remembered a distant time when the SPPS offered virtually no treatment interventions and feared returning to a similar situation. The participant voiced considerable pride in the authority's rehabilitative philosophy due to his first-hand experience seeing the difference that the programmes make. He believed that treatment is a vital part of imprisonment, which elevated his concern about the ongoing trend that hints at a return to an era that does not prioritise treatment. Like the other participants, he highlighted the importance of maintaining the belief that humans can change. In his opinion, the reduced focus on rehabilitation was 'a way to tell ourselves and our surroundings that humans can't change and that our job is pointless'. He reflected over the punitive political climate that increasingly indicates that prison is less about treatment and more about punishment. He feared what the sentiment would mean for the SPPS long-term.

In contrast to an increasingly punishment-seeking Swedish public and political direction, the practitioners' belief in the value of the SPPS' rehabilitative philosophy remained steadfast throughout the interviews. What was less resolute was the participants' faith in the current state of the treatment agenda. Despite a slightly raised programme completion rate for medium- and high-risk inmates, only 25 percent of custodial and 17 percent of non-custodial clients completed a programme in 2024 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2025a). Overall, clients only spent two percent of their time in treatment programmes, a three percent reduction since 2019 (Swedish National Audit Office, 2024a). While the decrease is seemingly marginal, participants claimed the drop was noticeable. The interviewees reported that the capacity of the treatment programmes had not increased at the same rate as the correctional population, which had hindered access. The Swedish National Audit Office concluded that not enough inmates

are accessing treatment programmes and that insufficient resources are dedicated to these interventions.

As department resources are spread thin, the rehabilitative ambitions may be lowered as the SPPS is forced to select who receives the targeted interventions. The selection process analyses which clients are perceived to be receptive to treatment. So, those who appear unmotivated may not receive the necessary interventions (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2019). A probation officer perturbed with the declining treatment access and the growing waiting list explained, 'Only specific groups will receive treatment, typically those who are really motivated to desist, which means that those who are not there yet will not get access to the programmes'. While an experienced treatment facilitator explained that motivation is important to be successful in the programmes, some clients may need to be pushed into a treatment context in order to be 'cracked open and become susceptible to change'. In other words, reserving treatment access for a decreasing number of clients likely threatens the underlying rehabilitative agenda and Sweden's comparatively low recidivism rate.

On the other hand, a senior prison officer remarked that the forced prioritisation of who attends programmes was not inherently negative as treatment is not suitable for everyone, especially not those not ready or receptive to intervention. She added that a failed attempt at treatment can have the opposite effect, in which the client's self-esteem takes another hit. She continued, 'Due to the overcrowding, the client may not get another chance at a re-do, and if he does, a treatment resistance may have developed.' Consequently, in her professional opinion, a client should be receptive to treatment before being forced into a programme. This is where the prison officers come in. As mentioned, the rehabilitative ideology extends past treatment programmes and a treatment facilitator explained that she relies on prison officers to work on the inmates'

motivation to desist throughout their daily interactions. However, the changing prison culture was said to be jeopardising the practitioners' ability to work motivationally with the clients, an argument discussed further in Chapter 7.

The growing number of clients with more intense criminogenic needs and a higher risk of recidivism complicated the situation further. The observation was highlighted by the participants and confirmed by SPPS data. The authority estimates that 75 percent of the clients were considered to be at a high or medium risk of reoffending, according to the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) instrument (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023k). The report suggests that these clients need treatment interventions multiple times per week to reduce the risk of recidivism, which understandably presents a challenge for the overwhelmed authority. As the vast majority of incarcerated individuals are ultimately released back into the community, supporting the clients towards desistance is essential. The SPPS' motto, 'better out', reflects the ambition that any client who comes into contact with the authority should leave in a better state than when he entered (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2007). According to the participants, this is a tall order, now more than ever.

The interviewee who had the longest career in the SPPS, with much of it conducting various treatment programmes, expressed concern that the authority was not doing enough to sufficiently prevent reoffending. He referred to research suggesting that a certain number of hours in treatment are needed to reduce the risk of recidivism, which he did not believe the SPPS was living up to. He said, 'You need a huge number of hours. I think it's like 200 treatment hours to reduce recidivism by 10%. Our programmes are about 40 hours.' Bourgon and Armstrong (2005) found that high- and medium-risk offenders need about 200 hours of treatment to decrease recidivism rates from 44% to 30%. For high-risk offenders, a treatment

duration of 300 hours resulted in a reduction of recidivism from 59% to 38%. The same study found that a 100-hour treatment regimen was inadequate to achieve a significant reduction in recidivism for this cohort. Makarios, Gentry Sperber, and Latessa (2014) revealed similar findings, in which the most substantial reductions in recidivism were observed in medium- to high-risk cases that received between 200 and 249 hours of treatment. According to the participants and the literature, the SPPS seems unable to consistently offer such extensive treatment access. As mentioned, the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) found that the majority of medium- and high-risk clients are not offered treatment at all. Again, from an Anglo-American perspective, the limited participation in rehabilitative activities may appear unremarkable, but based on the participants' accounts, the ongoing trends represent clear deviations from past practices.

Numerous prison and probation officers reported that they had observed a significantly reduced access over the last few years. A treatment facilitator with 10 years' experience said that the waiting lists to participate in treatment were longer than ever before. Her opinion was shared by practitioners across multiple prisons and probation offices. Long waiting times were not only a concern because clients could complete their sentence before accessing treatment but also because of inmates' oftentimes capricious motivation. Another treatment facilitator with decades' of experience highlighted, 'We have to understand that the treatment window is not open all the time. It's only open for short periods, and we need to be available at that time. We can't tell them to come back in a year when space opens up.' Needless to say, even without the overcrowding, the administration of treatment is undoubtedly complicated.

Returning to the point raised above, a visibly perturbed supervising prison officer expressed hope that if a client is unable to attend a specific programme in prison, then they would be able

to do so while on conditional release. However, she quickly realised that may be wishful thinking as the probation offices are nearly as overwhelmed as the prisons. A junior intervention facilitator in a probation setting who felt like she was thrown in at the deep end when she commenced her employment with the SPPS expressed frustration that clients were not accessing the prescribed programmes in prison, as this placed an unrealistic burden on community corrections to ensure treatment access. As discussed, probation offices are experiencing mounting caseloads. Consequently, practitioners disclosed that more clients' conditional release terminates before they access the programmes that their sentence plan dictates. In other words, the programmes that clients were unable to access while imprisoned were also commonly unavailable while on conditional release. Paired with the above findings by the Swedish National Audit Office, the revelation that some clients are exposed to Swedish correctional institutions but completely foregoing treatment suggests that the SPPS may not be the rehabilitative authority assumed.

Multiple probation officers and treatment facilitators at varying locations shared similar accounts of reduced treatment access. On the other hand, there were also two probation officers in separate smaller towns who argued against the existence of any problems with access. Reportedly, the larger offices in some of Sweden's most populous cities were the most impacted. Three practitioners explained that the rising demand had culminated in supervised probation occasionally being extended to allow clients to participate in certain programmes. According to an experienced probation officer, 'Some clients will have their supervision extended simply because they haven't had access to a programme yet because we're so short-staffed. I don't really think that's fair if they've behaved otherwise.' In Sweden, the minimum probationary period is currently one year (Swedish Courts, 2021). However, in the year following the interviews, a government report concluded that the minimum probationary period

for parolees was due to be extended to two years in 2026 (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2024). Whether the amendment is the result of the punitive inclination or the challenges voiced above is unknown, but the same moral seesaw is presented of balancing prolonged supervision with the prospect of additional treatment access.

The practitioners reported that the SPPS is trying its best to adapt to the challenges that the authority is facing, which could be observed through accounts of adjusted treatment strategies. Similar to the mentioned tactic where the officer's introductory training was reduced to expedite completion, a recently-certified treatment facilitator revealed that the SPPS is reducing the length of some of its programmes to ensure that more clients are able to participate. Subsequently, he expressed concern about the authority's ability to maintain the quality of the content. At the same time, he was comforted by the shorter programmes' potential to reach more clients. Another practitioner reported that the content of some of the programmes had become more generalised to address a wider set of criminogenic needs. She worried about the consequences, especially as the clientele was changing and presenting specific needs that the SPPS was unfamiliar with.

Furthermore, an additional strategy aimed at improving the treatment access was shared by an intervention facilitator at a low- and medium-security prison who was instructed by her superiors to prioritise group sessions over individual sessions. However, in her decade-long experience, group sessions only scratch the surface and are hard to make personal enough to be impactful. The significant changes observed over the last few years made her feel resigned. She contended that the authority undermined the significance of her role. While she clearly understood the challenges that the authority was facing and appreciated the SPPS' attempts to

continue delivering rehabilitative content, the progressively restrictive selection criteria for treatment allocation was a hard pill for her to swallow. Demoralised, she said:

> I feel like we're on a life raft and initially you think that everyone is going to survive, but then you realise that you have to pick who to save. I feel sad about how tough life is for some clients and how hard it is to find the time to help everyone. That feeling is unbearable sometimes. Imagine a client desperately calling out for help, but I have to tell them that they're not a priority because their risk assessment did not rank them high enough. I consider suggesting that they transfer to another prison, but then I realise that the situation will be the same, or worse, there.

As research shows that interventions administered to high-risk offenders demonstrate greater efficacy compared to those offered to lower-risk offenders (Bourgon and Armstrong, 2005), the need to prioritise among intervention recipients appears justified within this specific context. Regardless of the rationale, several participants indicated that they had adjusted their view of what a successful prison sentence looks like as a consequence of the ongoing challenges. A treatment facilitator at a large medium-security facility who felt the burden of an overwhelmed prison system said that 'many of us have the mindset that if we can just help one person, then we've done a good job. That's what we have to aim for right now'. The practitioners wavered between blaming the SPPS for the declining treatment climate and empathising with the challenging circumstances that the authority faced.

Due to the sociopolitical circumstances, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has undoubtedly been dealt a bad hand. As the authority diligently endeavours to respond, some operational decisions appear to undermine its objectives. For example, as the SPPS transfers clients between facilities to liberate resources, treatment participation is occasionally disrupted. An experienced intervention facilitator had observed that her clients are increasingly being pulled away from his programmes as they are transferred elsewhere. He argued that the overwhelming client influx had led to desperate decisions that neglect the SPPS' mission to 'break the vicious cycle'. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) confirms that the

unprecedented demand on the authority has resulted in clients being transferred based on the demands of the prison rather than the clients' needs.

The spatial restrictions stemming from the rapid population growth are not only noticeable in the residential units but also in the spaces dedicated to treatment. All the interviewed treatment facilitators reported that the lack of space to conduct treatment programmes was a significant factor in the battle for treatment access. The problems appeared to include both prisons and probation offices but were particularly apparent in the former. The penal practitioners explained that while the estates are continuously expanding to house more clients, the treatment facilities appear disregarded. A treatment facilitator felt overwhelmed by the seeming demand that she should treat more clients in the same confined space. As the participants involved in administering the rehabilitative programmes reported feeling overlooked, the SPPS appears aware of its failure to supply appropriate treatment facilities. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024b) admits that they were unable to keep up with the spatial demands of treatment programmes due to the rapidly increasing clients.

As a consequence of the numerous changes that the SPPS is undergoing, a seasoned officer at a medium-security prison voiced increasing pessimism. She explained that throughout her career with the SPPS, she had taken enormous pride in the rehabilitative work that the authority does. The perception was based on the clients' successful personal reformations that she had witnessed throughout her career. Conversely, the weakened treatment climate had negatively changed her view of the clients' ability to be rehabilitated. According to the Swedish National Audit Office (2020), the occupational activities that are deemed most useful in reducing the risk of reoffending are the treatment programmes and the educational programmes. Yet, as noted, clients are spending less of their time in occupation activities (Swedish Prison and

Probation Service, 2024b). The same report notes that the growing number of clients under 18 in remand prisons has limited the adult clients' ability to partake in education as the children's continued schooling is prioritised. Subsequently, a senior prison officer at a maximum-security prison argued that the present situation is not sustainable. She contended that the more restrictive the access to activities and programmes becomes, the more dangerous the situation gets. Another senior officer, who expressed her strong belief in the power of treatment, stated, 'It's important to offer clients a space to vent their frustrations. Otherwise, someone might end up with a frying pan in the head or a knife in the side. It feels like we're moving more and more in that direction'. In other words, treatment interventions are not only intended to reduce reoffending but may also assist in discouraging violence during the custodial sentence.

Moreover, the previously discussed understaffing reportedly included treatment facilitators, which had contributed to further restricting treatment access. Participants in both prisons and probation offices overwhelmingly agreed that there is a desperate need to hire and certify more staff who can competently administer the programmes. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024b) confirms the authority's difficulty recruiting and retaining employees capable of conducting the treatment sessions and maintaining the rehabilitative agenda. An experienced treatment facilitator at a probation office in a larger city perceived that the understaffed programmes signalled that rehabilitation is no longer a priority. The perception was not shared by a prison governor at a medium-security prison who explained that the estate he managed had hired more treatment facilitators than the budget allowed in order to maintain treatment access. A report by the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) determined that the funding earmarked for treatment programmes was insufficient for hiring enough staff to satisfy the clients' treatment needs, seemingly confirming the treatment facilitator's argument about a deprioritised treatment agenda.

Despite hiring attempts, the abovementioned prison governor reported that treatment sessions were occasionally forced to cancel due to significant understaffing. Multiple participants frustratedly remarked that despite an insufficient number of treatment facilitators, the shortfall of prison officers took precedent. Consequently, programmes were frequently cancelled due to treatment professionals being required to cover for understaffed prison officers, evidencing a previous point about the focus on maintaining core operations. A treatment facilitator at a high-security estate revealed that prison leadership instructed him and his colleagues to pause all their sessions over the summer as the practitioners covered for the understaffed prison officers. He expressed notable anger regarding the situation and explained the impact of the decision:

> The intervention facilitators need to be allowed to focus on treatment. I lose the alliance I've created with my clients if I'm doing programmes one day but then have to force a client to give a urine sample the next day as a prison officer.

Blomqvist (2002) found that clients' relationships with treatment facilitators are an important indicator of how a client views treatment and how much rehabilitation is valued. Similarly, Yalom (1985) considers a proper therapeutic relationship to be an indispensable requirement for a successful treatment outcome. Thus, a negative relationship may have the power to jeopardise treatment attendance and success.

The decreased access to rehabilitation and the understaffed intervention facilitators have inspired creative solutions. To ensure that more clients can partake in programmes, a treatment facilitator explained that she had teamed up with colleagues at nearby prisons to deliver programmes across the region. Normally, treatment facilitators stay at one location. However, the programmes are often cancelled due to the requirement of two practitioners per group session and fluctuating staffing levels. As a result of the collaborations across facilities, seven treatment facilitators had started covering four prisons and delivering a range of programmes.

While the solution generated greater coverage and access to group programmes, the time spent away from their assigned prison meant a decline in access to one-on-one sessions. Consequently, she explained that 'there are clients who have not had a one-on-one session in six months', which undermined some clients' treatment plan. The development aligns with a previous discussion that critiqued the increased focus on group sessions while sacrificing individual programmes.

Another transformation that was repeatedly criticised was the removal of dedicated treatment units offering the renowned 12-step programme. The treatment initiative was introduced in Swedish prisons in the 1990s and originates from Alcoholics Anonymous (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2009). The authority found that the programme showed success in reducing recidivism and supporting clients to recover from addiction. Numerous interviewees also shared positive experiences with the programme's format and were consequently angered by the SPPS' decision to eliminate the treatment units a few years ago. Holmberg and Öberg (2012) concluded that the 12-step programme was effective in reducing reoffending. While Mitchell, Wilson, and MacKenzie (2012) found that the programmes were only modestly effective in decreasing recidivism, they noted that therapeutic communities are strongly supported in the reduction of recidivism and drug use. Similarly, multiple prison officers argued the programme's success was due to its conducive environment, where clients felt comfortable being forthcoming about their treatment desires as the entire unit participated in the same programme.

An experienced treatment facilitator argued that nothing had worked as well as the 12-step programme, which 'generated nice results and aided relationship building'. He further explained that 'when they made the decision in 2019 to phase out the 12-step programme, it

was an indicator that changes are coming'. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) explains that the programme had to be shut down to make room for more clients. The authority sees no possibility of reintroducing the treatment initiative in the next 10 years due to the projected population growth. While the decision can be understood from a capacity standpoint, the removal of a cherished treatment practice serves as another marker of the authority's declining ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda.

6.1.1.1 Longer sentences and rehabilitation

Chapter 4 discussed the practitioners' views on longer prison sentences and found that most participants viewed the increases negatively. However, when the prospect of extended rehabilitation was considered, the responses differed slightly. The practitioners nearly unanimously contended that they did not oppose longer sentences if the result was more access to rehabilitative initiatives. While potentially problematic, the outlook cements the interviewees' strong support for rehabilitation. An experienced treatment facilitator at a medium-security prison remarked that 'the most important thing is to find a balance between short sentences that prevent long-term negative effects but are still long enough to allow time for interventions'. She highlighted the challenge of providing treatment access to some clients serving shorter sentences, particularly when significant reductions are made. As previously mentioned, conditional release is normally granted after two-thirds of the sentence (Confederation of European Probation, 2017). Any time served on remand is discounted and re-entry interventions, such as release on temporary license, will further shorten the prison stay. Consequently, an intervention facilitator said that planning treatment attendance has become an art form, and timing is everything. She explained that there are many moving parts, and having space in a treatment programme at the same time that a client arrives is uncommon. As a result, the client either has to move to another facility or wait until the start of the next round

of programmes. So, if a client is serving a short sentence, he may not have time to attend the programme that his treatment plan mandates.

In contrast to earlier discussions, some participants argued that the issues related to treatment access have more to do with excessively short sentences than the authority's ability to offer rehabilitation. A prison officer with experience in all three security classes said:

> The situation that we normally end up with is that we get clients who have large criminogenic needs, and we have a lot of treatment options for them, but their sentences are too short to complete the programmes. This means that they get released without having received the support they need due to time constraints. So, in that sense, *longer* sentences are desired, but not *tougher* sentences. We just want the opportunity to treat the clients so that the sentences are not just about warehousing.

Another prison officer claimed that the authority has had to prioritise rehabilitating those with longer sentences because 'they are the only ones we'll have enough time to work with. If you have less than two years, you won't even make it onto the waiting list'. A senior prison officer concluded that 'there isn't much that the SPPS can do for clients with short sentences', which is why she supported sentences that are long enough to offer adequate treatment access. An experienced treatment facilitator had a different experience. At the facility where she worked, any sentence over a year was considered sufficient enough to make a difference. In her experience, it takes her about four months to complete individual treatment with a client and then four to six weeks in group sessions, 'So, if everything works out, they could attend both in a year.'

A more pessimistic colleague argued that longer sentences will not mean more access to treatment as the authority is 'too overwhelmed to offer clients the appropriate resources'. An experienced treatment facilitator had a different opinion and considered longer sentences to be beneficial from a treatment perspective as 'healing is not a quick fix'. He added:

> Those who are sentenced to short sentences struggle because they're halfway in and halfway out, which causes stress. I think that clients think long sentences are really tough, but from a treatment perspective, I think they're better. But that demands that sentences contain quality content and do not turn into warehousing. If there is no beneficial content, then we become like the U.S., and that is significantly more negative.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) agrees that extensively investigating and planning the content of each client's sentence is verging on unethical when the authority is unable to adequately address the clients' criminogenic needs.

While the practitioners passionately defended and advocated for the SPPS' rehabilitative philosophy, two participants raised the important point that assuming that the clients are as outraged about their diminished treatment access as the practitioners would be a mistake. Many clients were described as hesitant to undergo the emotionally laborious interventions. A practitioner with a long career in the SPPS contented that 'in all [his] years as a prison officer, [he's] never been asked if therapy is available'. Similarly, the prison governor stated, 'It's very rare that the clients complain that they don't have access to treatment'. He wished that clients would take greater responsibility for their treatment journey because a demand for access would benefit the prisons by forcing the rehabilitative agenda back into the spotlight. While appreciated, the sentiment is likely implausible considering that the reduced treatment focus is seemingly not the result of researched decisions but forced choices due to an overwhelming expansion.

Deviating from the above perception, a treatment facilitator's experiences suggest that clients want to participate in the programmes. However, she argued that the inmates are frequently deterred from taking part due to a heightened fear of judgment by fellow inmates. As a consequence of the forced implementation of double-occupancy rooms and the removal of dedicated 12-step treatment units, clients reportedly feel less comfortable being forthcoming

about treatment desires or attendance. She considered the changing clientele along with its brutal street culture another contributing factor. Reflecting on an earlier discussion, she explained that because clients think 'being tough is much cooler than rehabilitation', overcrowding has forced clients to wear their 'mask of badness' continuously. Breaking character to reveal a willingness to address criminogenic risk factors was understood to have dangerous consequences.

6.1.2 Perception of the programmes

As noted, the past years' changes have resulted in the practitioners growing increasingly sceptical of the authority's ability to rehabilitate its clients. The participants' strong affection for the treatment ethos has likely contributed to the elevated scepticism of the authority's continued abilities. Numerous interviewees commenced their critique of the SPPS by reiterating their support for the carceral dedication to rehabilitation. A senior prison officer stated that she wholeheartedly believes in the power of attending treatment programmes but that the authority no longer had the tools to prevent recidivism. Another participant agreed that 'the current conditions don't allow us to do preventative work', which was a common perception. Others outright stated that they did not believe that any treatment was taking place within the SPPS. The outlook appeared to differ between different prisons and probation offices. Practitioners at higher-security prisons, where the majority of those deemed a priority for treatment are housed, seemed to have the least flattering views on the SPPS' rehabilitative abilities. In contrast, an intervention facilitator at a medium-security prison expressed confidence that 'the system is working as it should'. Although, he was seemingly an outlier as the statement 'I don't believe in the SPPS' current ability to prevent recidivism' was repeatedly declared in various forms.

As previously discussed, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service's vision is for clients to be 'better out' and their goal is to 'break the vicious cycle'. When asked about how the recent overcrowding had impacted the interviewed practitioners professionally, many contended that there is no 'better out' or vicious cycles broken. A prison union reports that a survey found that 65 percent of responding prison officers deemed that the SPPS has a low likelihood of succeeding with its mission to reduce reoffending and protect society (Seko, 2023). That number was 35 percent in 2017, indicating a significantly declining faith in the authority's rehabilitative abilities. A senior probation officer for the current project suggested that the current state of operations contradicts the authority's mission. He questioned how the SPPS can pretend to have a rehabilitative mission when they are limiting access to treatment.

An intervention facilitator at a medium-security prison argued that the authority was 'headed in the wrong directions regarding prioritising "better out"'. Even the participant who previously claimed that the system was working as intended also admitted that the authority is 'not effectively breaking any vicious cycles right now'. A participant with decades' experience working in a remand prison where she frequently encountered repeat offenders said, 'It's a joke that they think we can "break the vicious cycle". This is a crisis.' Lastly, a prison officer revealed her internal struggle to work for an authority that was not prioritising treatment or operating according to its mission. Her intense concern had resulted in her intention to leave the SPPS and seek employment somewhere that better aligned with her humanitarian values.

Regarding the clients' perceptions of the treatment programmes, a probation officer with previous experience as a prison officer suggested that the opinions vary greatly. She said that many of her clients expressed that the SPPS has not 'done shit' to prevent reoffending or that they feel hopelessness after attending multiple programmes but still reoffend. The majority of

the community professionals that worked with offenders outside the carceral arena disclosed that their clients commonly share negative impressions of the penal system's treatment initiatives. Similarly, while many of the interviewed SPPS employees conveyed that they fundamentally believe in the rehabilitative ideology, the authority's failure to sufficiently prioritise treatment was negatively affecting clients' risk of recidivism. In contrast, an experienced probation officer in a medium-sized city reported that she regularly received positive feedback from her clients who claimed to have benefited from prison. Over half of the inmates interviewed in a large-scale study conducted by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2015) indicated that the treatment programmes offered at Swedish prisons reduced their risk of reoffending. Considering that the study was conducted during a time when Sweden was not experiencing overcrowding, an updated study would help assess how the current circumstances affect recidivism.

6.1.2.1 Inadequate adaptation

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service has undoubtedly implemented a significant number of changes in recent years to adapt to the challenging demands. Nonetheless, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with the SPPS' failure to evolve rapidly enough to keep up with the changing clientele. While the majority of the authority's adaptations were negatively received by the participants, there was one particular area that the practitioners were sure needed the authority's attention. Most of the penal professionals urged the SPPS to swiftly address the knowledge gap related to treating network criminals. As mentioned, Sweden's escalating street violence has contributed to a significant growth in clients serving sentences related to organised crime and these clients were perceived to carry more significant trauma. A treatment facilitator at a high-security prison explained that she increasingly encounters

clients who, from a younger age, have inflicted serious harm or been seriously harmed themselves due to their involvement in criminal networks.

Signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were more commonly noticed among the clients, which was understood as an underdeveloped area of expertise for the SPPS. A practitioner with decades' experience working with treatment programmes contended:

> We haven't really kept up with the developments in society when it comes to PTSD and similar effects associated with street violence. Posttraumatic stress is hard to treat, takes a long time, and requires expertise.

A prison officer who previously worked with asylum seekers and who considered herself a self-proclaimed expert on PTSD similarly said, 'The SPPS has no idea what they're talking about when it comes to clients with PTSD. They haven't kept up with the developments in that area'. She continued:

> It's hard for the SPPS to handle clients who are so fundamentally broken. We handle people who have been broken and put back together repeatedly. They're bursting at the seams. They are broken beyond repair. They have so much PTSD and so much anxiety. They're so traumatised. I'm used to working with PTSD but this is on a whole other level. These are people who have operated under the radar and been subjected to things we didn't know existed in Sweden.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2022b) is aware that mental illness is widespread among Swedish inmates, and PTSD is among the noted diagnoses. However, the exact prevalence of the condition appears unknown. The SPPS highlights the demand for further data on PTSD as the authority acknowledges its likely presence among the growing number of clients tied to deadly conflicts and environments involving 'gang' activity. PTSD is linked to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and aggressive behaviour (Facer-Irwin *et al*., 2019), which are conditions that may complicate both offenders' rehabilitation and practitioners' work environment, emphasising the urgency to gain a working knowledge on how to support the affected clients.

An intervention facilitator at a medium-security prison answered both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ when asked if the treatment programmes had kept up with Sweden’s changing society. She believed that some programmes were slightly dated but that others were continuously updated and improved. While the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) expressed concern about the SPPS’ ability to treat an altering clientele, the report commends the authority’s continuously evolving treatment programmes. However, an unintended consequence of the amendments is the constant retraining of treatment facilitators. The aforementioned treatment facilitator who collaborated with colleagues across several prisons said that out of their group of seven practitioners, all of them were in the process of being certified for new programmes, which had delayed treatment access. Despite the hurdles, she claimed that once you get an individual with ties to network crime to attend a programme, ‘They usually do surprisingly well’.

As highlighted throughout, the clients associated with criminal networks represented a notable source of concern among the participants, particularly related to the prospect of successful rehabilitation. As a consequence, a significant number of practitioners declared that they lacked faith in the SPPS’ ability to treat the evolving clientele, which is a sentiment also reported by the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a). A community professional facilitating ‘gang exits’, where many are former inmates, argued that the SPPS’ treatment programmes are not updated rapidly enough. He called the increasingly younger inmates a ‘Tik Tok generation’ who demanded instant results. He added, ‘Five years ago, the clients were in their 30s when they wanted to leave the gang life. Now we’re dealing with 18-year-olds who have taken three lives. They think the programmes are too slow and outdated’. Likely influenced by his own negative experiences stemming from a past incarceration, he considered the SPPS clueless and unable to make any difference in the offenders’ lives.

A majority of the respondents seemed to agree with the above claim. A prison officer at a high-security prison maintained that 'the programmes don't work at all on those with gang ties. If they don't come back to prison, it's probably because they're dead or better at hiding'. This pessimistic outlook was shared by a recently-certified intervention facilitator at a probation office who conducts a programme geared towards network criminals. She said:

> They're hard to work with. There is a sense of powerlessness. I've been scared because I feel like there isn't a lot to work with. Even if I get a hook into someone, what kind of options do they really have? If they disappear, they may kill or be killed. It's not like society has an abundance of resources to support them and their families. Many clients have people around them who are killed all the time, and that becomes everyday life.

A probation officer insisted that the SPPS needs to look at the research to develop more expertise to deal with the criminals attempting to cope with the devastating aftermath of a violent lifestyle. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2021b) research strategy notes a knowledge gap regarding how to prevent reoffending in clients with ties to organised crime.

Multiple practitioners expressed concern that the authority's insufficient knowledge had led to a reduced focus on the treatment of network criminals. A treatment facilitator at a large probation office explained that when she started working at the SPPS five years ago, the only treatment programme specifically geared towards organised crime had eight intervention facilitators conducting the programme. Since then, the demand is more significant than ever, and yet, there were only two practitioners offering the targeted sessions. A senior prison officer agreed and added that 'the sad reality is that the network guys have the highest risk of reoffending and yet receive the least support'. A sense of hopelessness was echoed among multiple participants, and a treatment facilitator defeatedly expressed that there is 'nothing that the SPPS could do that would work on the network guys'. With the challenging situation that the authority is facing in mind, the pessimistic outlook can easily be understood. However, the practitioners' overwhelming support for the rehabilitative philosophy and the SPPS'

withstanding dedication to evidence-based approaches offer a glimmer of hope that the former glory can be restored. Albeit, that time is seemingly not now.

6.2 Chapter summary

The chapter narrows in on correctional rehabilitation in Swedish prisons using the practitioners' understanding of the practices. The participants showcased strong faith in the clients' ability to change, the treatment programmes, and the authority's overall rehabilitative philosophy. These perceptions motivated the disappointment and concern that the authority is failing its treatment agenda. While the circumstances may stem from the authority's metaphorical hand being forced, the results are the same. The SPPS is aware of the challenges facing the treatment ideal and is making adjustments by generalising and shortening the programmes. The participants were torn by these changes, as they celebrated that more clients would access treatment but were apprehensive about whether the quality could be maintained. A questioning of the objective of imprisonment percolated among the practitioners as the rehabilitative abilities were observably diminishing. The participants were also growing increasingly concerned about the SPPS' ability to treat a changing clientele with more complex needs. The authority was accused of not evolving rapidly enough to adequately address clients with significant traumas stemming from the horrifying realities facing criminal networks.

As prison sentences become longer, some participants saw an opportunity for additional treatment access. However, most participants were clear that due to the deprioritisation of rehabilitation, longer sentences would not mean more treatment. The numerous ways that rehabilitation is perceived to become a secondary objective have resulted in some practitioners increasingly questioning their willingness to remain employed by the SPPS. Many were attracted to the role due to the rehabilitative philosophy, but as the authority struggles to

maintain access to programmes, address a changing clientele, and provide a constructive treatment climate, the practitioners are left wondering about their future. As the treatment focus appears to take a backseat, a culture clash is developing between penal professionals with alternative outlooks.

Chapter 7: Occupational culture clash

The past chapters have illustrated how Sweden's sociopolitical conditions have infiltrated the carceral arena and demanded that the SPPS make significant changes. As the authority transforms to adapt to its new normal, the implementations have inadvertently had wide-ranging impacts, including on the occupational culture. As stated in the literature review, occupational culture can be defined as:

> […] a reduced, selective, and task-based culture that is shaped by and shapes the socially relevant worlds of the occupation. Embedded in traditions and a history, occupational cultures contain accepted practices, rules, and principles of conduct that are situationally applied, and generalized rationales and beliefs (Manning, 1989, p. 360).

The forthcoming chapter is dedicated to dissecting the subcultural trends facing the penal practitioners amid a period described as a paradigm shift. Aligning with the literature introduced in Chapter 2, the participants highlighted the continued formation of two subcultural camps of officers who are either focused chiefly on rehabilitation or security, with little overlap. The first group was described as concerned with fostering healthy relationships with clients, spending time on the units, and supporting the inmates' journey towards desistance. The latter represents a more Anglo-American version of prison officers who come across as authoritarian, distance themselves from inmates, see themselves as superior, and largely focus on the security aspects of prison work. The reconfiguration defies the authority's desire for dynamic security that balances the two values and indicates a break from past arrangements. The intensifying polarisation is pinning personal views on punishment against operational demands, leading to a redefined occupational culture with intensifying professional dilemmas.

The dichotomy between the objectives of control and rehabilitation has long represented a fundamental area of interest for penologists. In Sweden, the two perspectives have operated in tandem, limiting disagreement. However, the growing prison population and operational

consequences have enhanced the dilemma of balancing rehabilitation with security as the overcrowding places greater demands on maintaining control (Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2010). The heightened security threat and strained conditions appear to have forced the treatment agenda into a secondary position. The previous chapter revealed exactly how dissatisfied the practitioners were with the evolution. While this project failed to locate a participant who strictly identified as security-focused, the group is reportedly expanding rapidly. Subsequently, the unifying sentiment intended to define occupational environments has instead come to represent two distinct in-group identifications. The incompatibility of the subcultures has resulted in an occupational culture clash. As the penal professionals' culture significantly impacts prisoners' quality of life (Liebling, 2007), the new trends are worth investigating.

As previously noted, a series of high-profile prison escapes in 2004 served as a catalyst that accelerated the *securitisation* of prison policy in Sweden (Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2016). The *security turn* encouraged more specialisation in security among officers. However, a simultaneous amplification of the SPPS' treatment ambitions promoted a symbiosis of security and rehabilitation (Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2012). The emphasis on a dual focus likely prevented the security turn from deprioritising the rehabilitative ideal. In contrast, the participants are now reporting that the authority has been unable to withstand an overpowering focus on security. The trend is particularly noticeable against the backdrop of Swedish penality's traditional dedication to rehabilitation. Two of the most experienced practitioners called out the reconfigured philosophy for creating an unrecognisable SPPS with a jeopardised treatment climate.

As discussed, Sweden takes pride in a prison philosophy that accentuates normalisation. A prison officer with experience from three different prisons said, 'The punishment should only be the loss of freedom, not a significantly inferior life.' What underscores the Swedish penal philosophy is an 'emphasis on positive staff-prisoner relationships, prisoner agency, and a prison climate in which security is not always the overriding concern that trumps all others' (Pratt and Eriksson, 2011, as cited in Pakes and Holt, 2017, p. 85). Pratt and Eriksson (2012, 2013) identify enduring traditions of homogeneity, egalitarianism, and communitarianism as facilitators of this inclusive approach. However, as the above values appear to be losing their grip on Swedish society, the punitive turn may have set in motion a reconceptualisation of punishment. The evolution has seemingly disrupted the established penal culture and highlighted how an 'incompatibility between the therapeutic organization and the surrounding prison organization militates against the survival of the former' (Craig, 2004, p. 109). This chapter will continue uncovering the seeming reality the SPPS' therapeutic climate is under attack.

The interviewed practitioners' length of employment with the SPPS varied, but they were nearly unanimous in calling the current state of the authority a crisis. 18 of the 29 interviewed SPPS employees had worked for the authority for more than five years. 10 had more than a decade's experience. The more experienced practitioners could clearly identify that the occupational culture had changed, and that prison work was progressing in a new direction. A seasoned training officer who had worked in all security classes contended that the clearest evidence that the prison officer role was changing can be found in the categorisation of the job. He said that when he 'applied to the SPPS, the ad was under social work, but now it's under security. Sure, we work with security, but 90% of our work is centred around social work.' The prospect of doing social work and promoting rehabilitation rather than being adjudicators of

punishment was what compelled most of the officers to the role. A prison officer who had worked in multiple prisons explained that when he first started working for the SPPS, 'there was a more positive outlook and a desire to improve clients and create "better out"' whereas 'the feeling now is that we're there to do a job, not because we want to make much of a difference'.

The ongoing cultural changes appeared to have transpired relatively quickly as officers with less than five years of tenure could also identify a significant shift. A prison officer who worked for the SPPS for three years considered the approach to be tougher and the distance greater between clients and staff. He said that as new officers had joined, clients were more difficult, and the estates were overcrowded, the culture was noticeably different from when he started. The balancing act between security and rehabilitation is not unique to Sweden, but the Swedish prison system's emerging conflict is bringing the philosophical conundrum to a head. While the SPPS' goal that clients should come out better than they went in remains, the overwhelmed regime appears to be deprioritising its mission statement to elevate the security functions of imprisonment. So, what previously functioned in symbiosis is now in a state of disarray, which is causing participants considerable concern about the survival of the Swedish carceral regime's rehabilitative ethos.

7.1 Subcultural patterns

As the thesis has noted throughout, the SPPS is increasingly struggling to maintain its procedures and policies in their intended form. In turn, practitioners are forced to rely more on individual discretion and group identity, which is contributing to conflicting ideologies and practices. Damsa (2023) summarises literature that suggests that officers, who can be conceptualised as *prison wing bureaucrats*, exercise a degree of discretion in the

implementation of policies. The discretion is influenced by organisational goals, institutional rules, available resources, and the practitioners' personal values. As security and control are pinned against rehabilitation, subcultural differentiations have become more prominent in Swedish prisons as the staff adopt diverse approaches to their occupational roles. Despite Sweden's distinct rehabilitative traditions, the polarising occupational culture has situated the rehabilitation-focused participants as inferior to the security-focused practitioners. The trend indicates a departure from past hierarchies and subdues the historical emphasis on humanitarianism.

Despite some Nordic scholars' questioning the humane nature of the region's penal regimes that Pratt (2008a; 2008b) has described, the practitioners showcased why the SPPS may be worthy of some recognition for its humanitarian ethos. The prison and probation professionals' perception of their role, punishment, and the clients formulate points of comparison that pin the harshening occupational culture against the values that have traditionally occupied the Swedish carceral philosophy. While only 29 of the SPPS' employees are represented here, the overwhelming consensus was that the staff are there to help the clients and should be drawn to the profession for that reason. A supervising prison officer with over 15 years' experience explained:

> What doesn't come across clearly enough, which is really important, is that the staff are doing their best to help. We may not be able to help someone in a year, but maybe we can plant a seed that takes root later. We are people who are dedicated to doing the best we can so that the clients will have better opportunities and make better decisions in life. For us, it's not warehousing, and that is not why we applied to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

An interviewee who sought employment with the SPPS due to the authority's promotion of humanitarian values emphasised the importance of 'showing the clients that there are government employees who are kind and genuinely care'. Echoing the *folkhemmet* philosophy,

she perceived that the government had failed many of those who ended up in prison and therefore made it her mission to change clients' minds about government employees.

An officer who was equally passionate about fostering positive relationships with her clients noted that gaining clients' trust and respect enabled working motivationally with the clients and encouraging their attendance in education and treatment programmes. As mentioned, the rehabilitative ideal extends past the programmes to include the practitioners' daily work to inspire clients to reform through pro-social interactions. The practitioners' dedication to humanitarian values facilitates the understanding of why the participants were critical of Sweden's ongoing penal reconfiguration. The penal professionals nearly unanimously expressed their desire to make a difference in the offenders' lives and that the changes were preventing them from doing so. A supervising prison officer stated, 'This is a caretaking profession. It's not just about opening and closing doors and telling clients what to do. It's about conversations and long-term improvements'. The statements represent the well-meaning intentions of the SPPS and the way in which the authority aims to operate. While the participants overwhelmingly shared the outlook, they also declared concern that the rehabilitation-focused practitioners were becoming a minority as the security-focused officers expanded in number.

7.1.1 A new generation of officers

The impact of the SPPS' rapid expansion on the authority's employees has been documented throughout. The growing prison population has urged a hurried recruitment of additional staff. Chapter 5 outlined the practitioners' concerns about a declining competence that is jeopardising the safety and complicating daily operations. The participants reported that the altered

occupational culture has been exacerbated by the hiring of officers with a less humanitarian outlook. A senior prison officer in a high-security prison said:

> I've noticed a paradigm shift in the kind of people we're hiring. It used to be humanitarians with a passion for helping others, whereas now we seem to be hiring more militant individuals with a 'lock them up and throw away the key' mentality.

The sentiment was shared by the majority of the participants. The prison governor contended that while the hiring criteria had not changed significantly, the recruits are likely a reflection of wider society and the increasingly punitive outlook.

A supervising prison officer agreed with the governor's suggestion. He also argued that the evolving officer profile was due to the lack of insight into Swedish prisons, which had led to an import of prison references from other countries. He explained:

> Many new hires have an American perception of prisons and think that the clients are locked up in their cells all day. While that has become more of a reality recently, the core philosophy is that we're supposed to be where the clients are. New recruits were not prepared for that and seem to have a problem doing that.

Another officer who worked in a low-security prison shared a similar reflection:

> Some new hires come in with the mentality that there are fights every day, and they are compelled by that. They are often the ones who have a hard time speaking to clients. They escalate situations and trigger the clients rather than deescalate and model pro-social behaviour.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025b) admits to increasingly observing practitioners escalate inmate interactions into becoming violent due to their failing to adhere to established practices.

As noted in Chapter 5, a growing incompetence among the new officers was described as adding to the workload of the more experienced officers. While a punitive outlook does not correlate to incompetence, disrupting the penal culture with a regressive approach could be perceived as ineptitude. For example, a treatment facilitator had observed how the expanding

gap between different outlooks was causing the clients to be increasingly triggered by interactions with staff:

> I wish my new colleagues who aren't treatment facilitators were better at dealing with the clients. The officers are so bad that my clients often take up time during treatment sessions to vent about triggering interactions with staff. In a way, it can be beneficial because they are offered the chance to practice interacting with provoking authority figures, but at the same time, this is not what our sessions should be dedicated to. I'm fed-up.

The intervention facilitator perceived that the emerging disruptive occupational culture was due to get progressively worse.

As Swedish society moves in a punitive direction, the occupational prison culture could be expected to follow. The participants reported observing a noticeable difference in the new generation of SPPS employees' perception of offenders and punishment. Several practitioners highlighted that a growing number of officers struggled to understand their role in preventing reoffending and how a humanitarian approach could be justified as punishment. An experienced officer who worked in high- and medium-security prisons stated:

> New colleagues are choosing not to engage with the clients because they fail to see the importance and would rather focus on the core duties. Instead, they have a tougher approach, which results in a worse relationship with the clients, less awareness of what is going on, and not the same preventative work.

He further explained that he had seen a growing number of officers whose judgement was clouded by political opinions. In response, the officers adopted a harsh attitude towards the clients to indicate that they 'will not accept any bullshit from them'. He consistently observed how that tough attitude backfired as inmates tended to 'respect those who respect them and give everyone else a hard time.' Potentially influenced by political bias and a punitive reorientation, the clients' humanity and moral worth may be increasingly disregarded under the guise of inflicting punishment.

However, not all participants agreed that the approach towards the clients was becoming harsher and less dignified. An officer at a remand prison considered the client interactions softer and gentler. He theorised that his perception was guided by the large influx of new staff who were procedurally inept and afraid to give the clients commands. As discussed, the officers' demographic has evolved to include more young and temporary practitioners who receive less training, which may be contributing to the participant's view. A survey by the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) reveals similar findings and identified a lack of knowledge as a primary reason why the existing prison conditions are not conducive to rehabilitation. So, an overly permissive approach, owing to a lack of expertise regarding effectively engaging with inmates, may be just as harmful to the therapeutic climate as an exceedingly authoritarian approach.

7.1.1.1 Cultural assimilation

As prison officers are not socialised into their professional role through an academic degree, they are increasingly impacted by the culture within the prison (Holm *et al*., 2014). Subsequently, the practitioners' professional identity, representation, and approach are mostly developed through interactions with colleagues. Several practitioners expressed that the co-workers with whom they shared the closest bonds often had the same outlook on prison work and attitude towards the clients. A participant who was very confident in her humanitarian approach due to past experiences dealing with vulnerable populations stated that she instantly gravitated towards peers who shared her mentality. The sentiment may suggest that the approach adopted by new prison officers is largely impacted by the attitudes of the existing officers on their unit. Accordingly, if the security-focused and more distant approach is growing increasingly common, new officers' adhering to a similar strategy can be understood.

Due to discretion being a central part of prison work (Crewe *et al*., 2014), there are many grey areas that are open to interpretation. Consequently, officers, who are often poorly informed about the role they are assuming, are particularly reliant on the occupational culture as a main frame of reference to inform their decisions (Garrihy, 2020). Lombardo (1981) suggests that occupational cultures are particularly important in professional groups who are under threat or facing extreme danger. The practitioners reported feeling a sense of threat coming from multiple angles, such as clients, prison leadership, the public, and the media. The correctional profession is nearly exclusively concealed from public view, which solidifies experiences of social isolation while emphasising in-group identification (Garrihy, 2020). The distinct nature of prison work plausibly explains why officers appear to conform to one of the two suggested subcultural camps. In a socially isolated profession with a notorious 'us versus them' mentality and with the potential threat of inmate violence looming, the urge to pledge allegiance in a polarised professional climate appears understandable. The emergence of subgroups creates a sense of loyalty and kinship that blurs the lines of traditional colleague relations due to the nature of the work. The practice is underscored by the socio-cognitive processes of *social representations* (Moscovic, 1972) and *interaction rituals* (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004) introduced in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, Chapter 5 discussed how a desperate staffing situation has forced the training to be condensed to maximise completion rates. Subsequently, officers have had to rely more heavily on colleagues and on-the-job learning. In other words, the new recruits are reportedly filling their knowledge gaps by observing and following their peers. While the behaviour may seem standard for new employees, a problem arises when officers overwhelmingly replicate security-focused officers' methods that undermine the rehabilitative agenda. Several practitioners argued that the approaches and procedures that the officers utilised more

commonly contradicted what was taught in training. An experienced officer at a medium-security prison explained, ‘The training instructs officers to be caregivers, but that is not something that is actually followed in prisons’. Instead, ‘Some colleagues look down on officers who interact more with the clients and who focus on rehabilitation, even though that’s what we’re taught to do and is a fundamental pillar of our work’. A former prison officer who transferred to community corrections described commonly observing officers initially aligned with a humanitarian approach swiftly becoming distant officers who preferred to sit in the office. She argued that the expanding dominance of the authoritarian attitude was muting new officers’ rehabilitative ambitions. The nature of the profession demands coworker dependency while performing an isolating role from the rest of society, plausibly encouraging assimilation. She contended that regardless of what the training suggests, inexperienced officers in higher-security prisons are frequently peer-pressured into becoming security-focused and stern.

Schein (2010, p. 18) argues that prison officers’ occupational culture is learnt as the professionals solve ‘problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those new problems’. An experienced officer in a medium-security prison officer concluded that there is ‘a new culture that is taking form, and it’s not what they taught us in training’. In her experience, there are two types of new officers: Those who have well-meaning intentions of providing a constructive rehabilitative climate but are ‘bullied into letting go of that philosophy’ and officers who were simply insufficiently trained in strategies that promote client rehabilitation. A training officer confirmed that as the training has been condensed to enable rapid and higher rates of completion, the rehabilitation-focused aspects of the curriculum have been ‘the first to go’. While the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) agrees that the staff’s positive treatment of clients is a prerequisite

for dynamic security and a supportive environment, the authority admits that they are unable to continue operating in the same way.

Prisons are difficult to navigate even without the emerging trends challenging the occupational culture. Four participants in medium- or high-security prisons highlighted that staff and clients rank officers' status differently. For example, officers who have close relationships with the clients are often highly regarded by the clients but simultaneously disparaged or ostracised by fellow officers. On the other hand, strict and distant officers may have a higher status among officers but be disliked by the clients. The contradicting perspectives elucidate an intricate dynamic and difficult environment for new officers to navigate. Tew, Vince, and Luther (2015) discuss the occupational norms that contribute to practitioners avoiding rehabilitative work with clients due to stigmatisation. With the goal of feeling safe and gaining solidarity among colleagues, newer staff members may feel pressured to assert their dominance over clients, perpetuating a culture of *us versus them*.

While working in a prison undoubtedly demands the use of legitimate authority, a punitive approach that causes inmates to experience a loss of autonomy and control can promote prisoner violence, which in turn affects staff-client relationships and compromises the rehabilitative culture (Tew, Vince, and Luther, 2015). Wills (2014, p. 5) argues that 'rehabilitation loses meaning in a culture that teaches violence to nonviolent offenders and aggravates violent behaviour in those already violent themselves.' However, new officers may struggle to understand the consequences of their actions and the complex psychology that underpins penal practices. Numerous officers raised the issue that finding a balance between individual morals, peer culture, and organisational goals can be exceedingly challenging. A prison officer who had worked in all three security classes explained:

> It's really hard to strike a balance in a job where we perform tasks that the clients perceive as demeaning while also having to create a bond with them. So, if you don't have an interest or care to understand how to balance these, you will struggle to find purpose.

An officer with decades of experience in the SPPS said that new officers are more frequently leaving the role within a few months due to failing to find a balance. In her experience, those who enter the role with a 'naïve mission of saving the world are the first to leave' because they are faced with a different reality and a staff culture unsupportive of their outlook.

An officer in a high-security prison described herself as naïve when she started working for the SPPS, which made her gravitate towards the clients who embraced her while becoming distant from her fellow officers who criticised her approach. However, as she acclimatised and became accustomed to prison culture, she understood her colleagues' perspective and created some distance from the clients. Kjelsberg, Skoglund, and Rustad (2007) suggest that daily interactions with prisoners may lead to increasingly negative attitudes towards the group due to engaging in control-focused tasks. An officer who worked in a medium-security prison while completing his degree progressed in the opposite direction. He explained that he never received formal training when he started, which made him unsure of how to conduct himself in the prison setting. Consequently, he adopted a particularly tough and authoritarian approach because 'that's what I thought the role required'. However, he noticed how ineffective the tactic was within a few shifts. He realised that he could 'make a much bigger difference with a different approach' and a more positive attitude towards the clients. While he was excited about establishing a successful method, he was not alone in acknowledging that the polarising occupational culture had made maintaining a humanitarian approach increasingly challenging.

7.1.2 Increasing polarisation

The notion that there were two camps of officers was repeatedly raised by the participants and unanimously agreed upon. The observation has previously been noted by Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008; 2011; 2016), although the polarisation appears to have intensified since their research was conducted. Again, the development is in opposition to the dynamic security that officers are trained in, which is intended to balance security tasks with relationships that benefit the clients' rehabilitative journey (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2005). Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) found that duties in Swedish prisons related to security and repression were considered higher status than the duties that focused on rehabilitation. The current project's participants agreed and revealed that the conflicting aims often cause tension. A prison officer nearing retirement after a long career with the SPPS said:

> Sometimes there is a clash between the security-focused and the rehabilitation-focused officers, which produces some friction. If you have more of a humanitarian outlook, then you get pushed to the side and viewed as soft. It can be alienating sometimes.

According to a supervising officer in a medium-security prison, units where the rehabilitation-focused philosophy had managed to maintain a stronghold were condescendingly referred to as 'squash and cinnamon bun units' (a Swedish version of milk and cookies). Similarly, the prison officers interviewed by Bruhn and colleagues (2008) used disparaging names such as 'softy units' and 'the diaper' in reference to the units that emphasised a humanitarian outlook.

Despite the participants' repeated descriptions of security-focused officers increasingly becoming the majority and self-characterising as superior, no interviewed officer directly identified as distinctly security-focused. One reason may be the code of silence that some associate with the role, perhaps particularly those with an authoritarian approach (Klang, 2024). Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2010, p. 89) experienced a similar limitation where, despite the large scale of their project, they were unable to interview an officer whose distant and

withdrawn approach they labelled the ‘rigid type’. In response, the authors made the argument that a true characterisation is challenging to establish as officers carefully consider the professional image they project and discussions that take place ‘backstage’ are difficult to uncover. Evidencing the noted challenge, without self-identifying as security-focused, one of the participants in the current project revealed a more detached and less emotionally engaged tone when speaking about the clients. He sternly said, ‘Some colleagues just look at the clients like criminals and emphasise that prisons are not hotels’ but gave the impression that this was his personal view that he did not feel comfortable expressing directly. While the comment may seem insignificant, the statement stood in clear contrast to other participants’ humanitarian sentiment.

The noted duality of prison work is nothing new. Previous research has repeatedly examined the two-sidedness of the profession, which is often framed as the hard versus the soft approach (see Nylander, 2006; Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2008; Nylander, 2011; Barker, 2013; Holm *et al*., 2014; Månsson, 2003). What seems different now is that the two sides are less compatible and the security-focused philosophy is given more room to operate as prisons are experiencing a crisis that has exhausted the authority’s resources. A prison officer who had worked at the SPPS for over 10 years stated:

> There is a massive wedge in the way that we work. On one side there are those of us who are caregivers. Then we have those who are straight-up screws. They are there as guards. We’re doing what we were taught in training, and yet we get questioned about our approach. There is a big divide.

A more junior officer was growing increasingly concerned about the polarisation. He perceived that the staff are more noticeably pulling in different directions, an argument shared by several participants. The observation contrasts Bruhn and Nylander’s (2024) finding that the occupational culture had become more integrated.

Advancing his claim, the aforementioned junior officer highlighted that the consternation between the practitioners' opposing approaches 'had caused conflict that the clients could sense and take advantage of', making staff more vulnerable. Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) noted the danger of having officers with different mentalities due to the prisoners' ability to read personalities and take advantage where possible. An officer at another prison did not regard the differing approaches as a cause for concern. Instead, he considered the duality a functioning dynamic where the different styles complemented each other well. A centrality in the dynamic security that the SPPS seeks to employ requires positive relationships between the clients and staff, which is perceived to be an efficacious instrument in violence prevention (Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2016). The conflicts between the officers and the inmates are partly attributable to the multidimensionality of the practitioners' role that demands performing functions of both care and control, encompassing both punishment and rehabilitation (Sykes, 1957; Kolind *et al*., 2015). However, as the emphasis on peacekeeping through relational work diminishes and the inherent duality of prison work is challenged, tensions are heightening among the officers' subcultural groups and between officers and clients.

7.2 Officers' dilemma

As the conditions within Swedish prisons continue to undermine rehabilitation, a majority of the officers reported fearing becoming 'turnkey jailers' with limited interactions with the clients. Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2016, p. 119) contend that a 'strongly anchored understandings about the importance of relational work built on proximity, and seeing the Other as a unique individual, are now being replaced by a policy of distance and objectification of the Other'. The practitioners reported that prioritising motivational work within the routine interactions between them and the clients was becoming increasingly challenging, which was presenting a significant dilemma and making some officers question their purpose. The

frustration stemming from the restricted opportunities to perform the duties that attracted the rehabilitation-focused officers to the role was amplified by the perception that the security-focused officers' approaches were becoming the norm. Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2016) suggest that the prison climate is damaged due to the disproportionate growth and dedication to the officers consumed by security.

The changing culture was noted to have had significant implications while also indicating a departure from past traditions. A senior prison officer who had worked at both medium- and high-security prisons reflected on how the prioritised security focus has encouraged officers with an alternate view of the penal profession, punishment and clients:

> They are drawn to prison work because they want to exercise power. That gets them going. Some are violent and authoritarian. They think the job demands that, but that's often not true. Some clients have committed heinous acts, but they're still human.

The prison officers interviewed by Holm and colleagues (2014) argued that the security-focus in Swedish prisons had gone too far. An officer with experience from two medium-security prisons said:

> A lot of officers now have a skewed view of humanity and look down on the clients. It's important for them to highlight to the clients that they're above them. Many prison officers abuse their power and choose to degrade the clients. This creates a greater division between us and them, which affects us negatively.

A training officer who previously worked in a high-security prison stated:

> If you're someone who is comfortable using violence, then you can get yourself into dangerous situations and trigger unnecessary conflicts with clients. This can negatively affect their receptiveness to officers and treatment.

She expressed considerable frustration regarding the changing occupational culture in prisons, which had formed part of her motivation for transferring to a role where she could help influence organisational decisions.

While considerably critical of the evolving culture, an experienced supervising officer explained that the harsher attitude may be the result of stress and not poor perception of the clients. Holmes and MacInnes (2003) posit that stress can cause emotional withdrawal and loss of empathy. Regardless of the underlying cause, the apathy was described as detrimental to the objective of supporting the clients' path towards desistance. As the climate was perceived to move further away from its rehabilitative aims, the feelings of exasperation and concern were amassing. The participants were particularly troubled by the growing gap between the security-focused and the rehabilitation-focused practitioners. The officers who had experience working at multiple prisons noted the cultural discrepancies between the estates. An officer who was on loan to a facility dealing with a desperate staffing situation remarked on the distinctly contrasting climate compared to the prison where she normally worked. She explained that at her temporary facility, 'The clients are not the problem, the staff is. Some are horribly mean. I can't explain how terrible it is. I have to write reports on my colleagues because it's not working'. She suggested that as officers with a punitive outlook were becoming the majority, they felt emboldened to treat the clients harshly due to the assumption that their peers would approve. She considered the practice a clear contrast to past eras defined by a humanitarian norm, which had functioned to suppress an excessively authoritarian approach. She believed that Sweden's comparatively 'gentle' penal culture had kept 'the abuse of power at bay'. According to Liebling (2004, p. 218), humane treatment is intended to serve as a 'constraint against cruelty and as the root of compassionate action'.

On the other hand, in line with the punitive reorientation in Swedish society, the security-focused practitioners may be equally striving to establish and validate their unique brand of legitimacy through practices shaped by their occupational cultures. Those who perceive that prisons are overly concerned with placating clients, sense a loss of power, and lack of

discipline among prisoners may feel justified in utilising strategies that address the perceived power imbalance (Garrihy, 2020). While the more experienced officers gave the impression that the authoritarian outlook was a recent development, an officer in a high-security prison highlighted that the tougher approach had always existed in certain parts of Swedish prisons. Understandably, not all clients are suitable for a gentler approach and certain tasks demand a firm hand.

The participants reflected on the harsh tactics that not even Sweden's renowned humane prisons are immune from. A seasoned prison officer in high-security prison said:

> It's extremely hard to see certain things. We work with people, but many of my colleagues don't like people. They shouldn't be in this profession. I've never felt as misplaced as when I worked in the solitary confinement unit. It was brutal. They forget that they're still humans and only look at their crimes. If you question their approach, you get accused of being a 'client hugger'.

Another participant who worked at a different high-security prison shared a similar experience:

> What intrigued me about the SPPS was the way it was portrayed, both in the ad and during training, as having a strong focus on 'better out', the rehabilitation, the humanitarian outlook, and the supportive role. When I started, I was in shock because I was not prepared for the culture there. The tone towards the clients was very harsh. I was shocked at how I was expected to treat the clients, which didn't align with my own values. But if you didn't, you'd be discredited, and colleagues would think you were having inappropriate relations with the clients. You would be called naïve and your ability to ensure the unit's safety was questioned.

The competing philosophies were presumably causing vexation on both sides. As noted, none of the participants outright identified as security-focused, which limited the empirical data of the perspective. However, Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg (2008) contend that while rehabilitation-focused officers consider those consumed by security to damage the relationship with the clients, the security-focused officers consider the rehabilitation-oriented practitioners to be a security liability. The occupational ambiguity was evident and described as impacting established practices.

7.2.1 Compromised interactions

The practitioners are expected to play a vital role in realising the goal of rehabilitation. The function is dependent on establishing conducive bonds with the clients. The current circumstances seem to be undermining that ambition. The participants presented two main aspects through which the relationships with the clients had been compromised. The first was related to the evolving occupational culture, and the second was regarding the disproportionate growth in inmates relative to the growth in practitioners. As noted, the Council of Europe's 2023 annual penal statistics placed Sweden in the 'very low' category for the ratio of inmates per staff member (Aebi and Cocco, 2024). The limited ratio has allowed prison officers to focus on rehabilitation and developing beneficial staff-client relationships. However, in line with other notable changes attributable to the penal expansion, the ratio is expected to increase. A growing prison population is costly and presents significant challenges in ensuring adequate staffing, leading to the SPPS' plan to decrease employment density by 30 percent (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2023k).

The overcrowded and understaffed prisons were described as jeopardising the SPPS' ability to support the inmates' path towards desistance and reintegration. The participants raised concerns about how the overpopulated estates had significantly reduced the time that the officers spent with the clients. Communication had become limited and less engaging, increasingly restricting interactions to routine tasks instead of the motivational support traditionally valued by the SPPS. One of the most experienced participants reflected on the notable difference:

> Since I started in 1999, the changes are drastic. It's a lot more professional and more dehumanised now. We're not as close to the clients anymore, and we're not creating relationships that foster the ability to help them. It's quite surface-level and distant now. In my opinion, it's the wrong direction to go, because in order to change someone, we need to be close to them.

As a consequence of the declining treatment climate, operationalising the evidence-led *Core Correctional Practices* (CCP) that Swedish penal professionals are trained in was reportedly hindered.

7.2.1.1 Core Correctional Practices

Developed by Andrews and Kiessling (1980), Core Correctional Practices are considered among the most established and effective strategies for preventing recidivism (Wikström, Richardsson, and Frimodig, 2020). When the techniques are utilised, the therapeutic efficacy of rehabilitation is enhanced, and some of the psychological and behavioural issues that may hinder successful re-entry can be addressed (Haas and Spence, 2017). The method stresses the importance of strong relationships between practitioners and clients, which may be more effective in reforming inmate behaviour than any single programmatic approach or technique (Council of Europe Probation Rules Commentary as cited by HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020). CCP, with clear grounding in research, illustrate the SPPS' traditional dedication to *what works*. Meanwhile, the seeming inability to operate according to the techniques further demonstrate how the operational crisis and punitive turn is forcing the authority to abandon its established methodology.

The use of CCP was praised by several practitioners who advocated for the approach's success in creating effective relationships with the clients. However, the participants were concerned that the techniques were increasingly less adhered to, despite being a principal part of their training. In addition to the diminished interest in having constructive dialogues with the clients, the current penal conditions reportedly complicate implementation. An officer in a large medium-security prison outright considered CCP impossible due to the overcrowding and changing occupational culture. She explained that the practitioners are required to interact with

the clients for extended periods for the approach to be effective, which the present circumstances prohibited. A junior prison officer at a maximum-security facility described the challenge of fostering meaningful relationships with inmates when the limited interactions primarily involve issuing directives. She said, ‘We no longer hang out with the clients. The SPPS likes to pretend that we do, but the reality is different. It’s an unwritten rule’.

As Chapter 6 suggested, treatment access is becoming increasingly limited. Subsequently, the prison officers’ ability to work according to Core Correctional Practices is more important than ever. As CCP can be considered ‘best practice’ in correctional programming (Haas and Spence, 2017), a treatment facilitator emphasised the necessity for the officers to consider every client interaction as a treatment opportunity. He said, ‘An hour in a programme per week, if they are lucky, is nothing compared to the 12 hours that officers spend with the clients every day’. He expressed that he used to find solace in the fact that despite dwindling treatment access, the officers were trained in CCP and could promote rehabilitation in their daily interactions with clients. However, he acknowledged that the officers are ‘too overworked, understaffed, and uninterested’ to sufficiently employ the practices. A junior prison officer confirmed the treatment facilitator’s begrudged acceptance:

> The work based on Core Correctional Practices that we’re supposed to be doing with the clients in the evenings and during the weekends is essentially nonexistent. There isn’t the same faith in the rehabilitative work. There’s a lot more pessimism now.

The perception was shared across the different prisons. While the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) argues that officers spending quality time with the clients is a continued focus, the Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) echoes the interviewees’ sentiment that a supportive environment conducive for rehabilitation was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2018) highlights the importance of supportive environments with encouraging relationships for treatment to be considered effective. The practitioners were aware of the type of climate required to encourage reform, which explained why the current circumstances received strong emotional responses critiquing the evolution. Mirroring previous discussions provoking similar reflections, the legitimacy and purpose of imprisonment was questioned when the therapeutic setting was undermined. For some, the conditions prompted an inner conflict. Several of the officers who identified as humanitarian expressed an internal struggle to accept a changing culture. An experienced prison officer who was in the process of terminating her employment with the SPPS said, 'I wish I had more time to get to know my clients and the opportunity to better support them. I wish I could do more'. Another officer similarly expressed:

> I don't feel like I'm given the opportunity to do what I'm good at by working closely with the clients to help them succeed on the outside. I don't get the chance to ask them how they're doing and stop to reflect on what they're actually saying.

Just like CCP and healthy prisoner-staff relationships have the ability to lower recidivism, poor fidelity can lead to increased recidivism (Pealer, 2020). In 2023, the reoffending rate in Sweden was the highest since 2010 (Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2024a). However, no explanation was offered and determining if the growth was related to the SPPS' transformation remains premature.

7.2.1.2 Value of relationships

As mentioned, the penal estates reportedly varied greatly in terms of occupational culture and the approach to clients. The officer who was temporarily working at a prison with a desperate staffing situation remarked that developing close relationships with the inmates was of no interest at that facility. There, the officers would frequently express to her that their favourite aspect of their shift was locking down the clients in their cells for the night. She was appalled

by the attitude, which contradicted her philosophy and logic. She preferred working at her former prison, where the occupational culture was notably different and better aligned with her own humanitarian values. In contrast to her temporary placement, her regular facility encouraged sitting down and drinking coffee with the clients for an extended time. In the process, she would develop strong relationships with the inmates, who would warn her if there was a violent altercation pending between inmates. The clients would tell her, 'Don't be here today', when fights were happening, providing her with ample time to remove herself from the situation. In those instances, she recognised that there was nothing she could do to prevent the impending confrontation. Although her revelation can be understood as alarming and raises questions, she felt proud of the work that she had done with the clients, which resulted in a forthcoming and trusting relationship.

A participant who worked as a prison officer and treatment facilitator for over 30 years shared a similar experience:

> I was trained during a time when we used to spend lots of time with the clients and were constantly hanging out on the units. We played cards, cooked together, and ate together. We did everything together. We were a unit. I could tell right away when I arrived in the morning that something was off. I could overhear conversations because the clients forgot I was there.

He was grateful to have experienced a time when the more humanitarian approach was dominant and expressed significant trepidation about the occupational culture moving in a more security-focused direction where positive client interactions are no longer the norm. He feared a future 'where we just sit and press buttons, like in the U.S.' and 'want[ed] prisons back where we spend time with the inmates'. While his perception that officers are spending less time with the clients was reportedly the reality at many prisons, an officer at a low-security estate explained that officers were constantly interacting with clients at her facility, including eating meals together every shift.

While transparent relationships and less hostility between staff and prisoners offer multiple benefits, there is a risk of encouraging 'back-stage violence' (Sparks, Bottoms, and Hay, 1996). The research, conducted in high-security prisons in the UK, concludes that settings characterised by more laid-back forms of policing developed more intricate informal economies and prisoner hierarchies that resulted in more complex and violent issues between inmates. Nonetheless, the majority of the practitioners considered positive client engagement a premeditated tactic that heightens the chance of avoiding victimisation. A treatment facilitator who was a prison officer for over 10 years said, 'For many of our clients, respect is the most important thing. If we respect them, they respect us back. Being nice and chatty is a safety precaution that may spare me from a violent attack'. Another officer at a high-security prison similarly argued:

> If you get the time to properly talk to the clients, you stop being an officer and become a fellow human. That places you in a less vulnerable position where they may be less likely to be violent towards you. If we could encourage more staff to communicate more effectively with clients, we could definitely reduce the violence.

Research indicates that high-quality relationships between staff and offenders can lead to reduced levels of prison misconduct (Bottoms, 1999; Camp *et al.*, 2003).

Kjelsberg, Skoglund, and Rustad (2007) highlight the importance of the penal professionals having a positive attitude towards the prisoners in order to facilitate change. The research describes a positive attitude as a 'view of prisoners as normal persons capable of positive change', while 'negative attitudes signify a view of prisoners as incurably deviant individuals' (p. 1). The study found a correlation between a low Attitudes Toward Prisoners (ATP) score and more punitive views. Thus, prison officers with more negative views of prisoners were more likely to support repressive policies. Among the present project's participants, a positive attitude towards prisoners dominated. An experienced prison officer shared that the SPPS has

a slogan that suggests officers' interactions with clients should be 'close but not personal', which is a strategy that many of the interviewees appeared to embrace.

Despite the challenging climate that impedes a humanitarian approach, a supervising officer perceived that her interactive tactic is paying off as she noticed a difference in clients over time. To her, getting an inmate to respond to a simple 'good morning' or saying 'thank you for dinner' is seen as progress due to the clear boundaries and 'us versus them' mentality observed in prison. While the practitioners' altruistic intentions were clear, it goes without saying that the offenders are not always open to speaking with officers due to the segregated traditional prison culture that pins the clients against the staff. An officer with a year's experience reflected on the shocked look she would receive from certain clients when she approached to assess their well-being or to engage in casual small talk. She highlighted that 'some clients are closed off to us, but I will keep trying and hopefully inspire a change when they see that I have their best interest at heart'. Numerous officers underscored the considerable effort they expended in developing beneficial relationships with inmates that create an open line of communication.

Four prison officers suggested that they rely particularly on communication skills to compensate for a physical inferiority or the complexities of being a female officer in a male prison. Although, the method was not unchallenged. While the practitioners reported that a friendly and approachable tactic was hugely successful, the approach simultaneously complicated the occupational culture as some colleagues considered the strategy a slippery slope that could end in inappropriate relationships. Several of the interviewed prison officers indicated feeling mistrusted or judged by colleagues while bonding with the clients. An officer with five years' experience in a high-security prison remarked that she rapidly developed close relationships with the clients in accordance with her training. However, she faced tenacious

scrutiny from her superiors, which ultimately led to her reassignment to another unit. She felt unfairly treated as her approach had enabled her to develop a constructive rapport with the clients and motivated treatment participation. Her forced removal from the unit, coupled with the persistent questioning and ridicule of her strategy, ultimately led her to take a leave of absence due to work-related stress.

The above practitioner was not alone in feeling alienated due to adopting a humanitarian approach to the clients. A high-security prison officer, who considered the rehabilitative outlook the reason she joined the SPPS, revealed that she frequently overheard colleagues making disparaging comments about her close relationship with the clients. Worth noting is that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2025a) has observed an increase in the number of reports about inappropriate relationships between staff and clients. The trend may provide insight into why some officers were becoming increasingly suspicious of officers who advocate for close proximity to clients. A community activist who was previously imprisoned, said that while a culture where officers and prisoners can comfortably interact is beneficial, officers need to be mindful of the way they are perceived by the clients. He highlighted that if an officer is perceived as 'one of the boys' then they may eventually start crossing the line in order to gain acceptance. He had seen first-hand how officers battled to strike a balance and had observed the officers' internal dilemma navigating client interactions.

While one of the aforementioned officers was impacted by the negative remarks from her colleagues to the point of requiring stress leave, the other officer seemed unbothered by the disapproving commentary. She was more concerned about the opposition to her humanitarian outlook and the growing number of officers who sympathised with a harsher and more passive approach to the clients. However, she maintained that the officers with an opposing mentality

understood the logic behind her approach on a fundamental level. The officer forced to transfer agreed. She explained:

> There were three of us in my old unit who worked in a rehabilitative way, and all three of us are gone now. My former colleagues who still work there call me and tell me that the situation has gotten worse since we left and that there is a massive us versus them divide now. I think that's a safety hazard. We have to interact. Now there is no one who is able to pick up on the signals that we would. We could look out on the unit and tell that something was about to happen because we knew their patterns so well. You lose that when you don't interact with the clients.

Tew, Vince, and Luther (2015) found that providing inmates with greater levels of support, respectful interactions, and chances for personal development correlates with fewer incidents of aggressive behaviour. Conversely, while some officers may assume that maintaining a distance from inmates protects them from violence, the reality may be that the opposite is true. A supervising officer argued, 'Experienced staff place greater importance on establishing a connection with the clients because they understand its role in preventing escalation and violence'.

7.2.2 Unified probation culture

Unlike the polarising climate developing in prisons, community corrections appeared to have avoided the intensifying dilemmas. A treatment facilitator at a probation office perceived that those who work with non-custodial sentences had an unanimously positive view of humanity, in contrast to the prison officers. Accordingly, some probation officers described themselves as superior to the prison officers. A probation officer with a degree in social work explained that her colleagues shared an empathetic outlook, which is what made them suitable for their profession. Most of the probation officers remarked that the role's more advanced academic requirements contributed to a nuanced understanding of offenders and punishment, which underscored their humanitarian approach. The aforementioned treatment facilitator contended that employment within the sector should be reserved for those who believe in humans' ability

to change. She suggested that those who have a rigid conceptualisation of right and wrong should be subjected to more training or an academic course. She understood that demanding all prison officers to be sociologists, criminologists, or behavioural scientists, like the probation officers, was unrealistic. However, she urged the SPPS to seek employees who, at a bare minimum, could act as prosocial role models with the skills to master a low-arousal approach.

The probation officers were clear about how their academic degrees assisted their role. A probation officer in Sweden's capital argued that her academic background in criminology had helped her understand the clients better, which positively influenced her approach. She emphasised how a deeper understanding of human behaviour allowed her to empathise with clients and remain calm when challenged. Another probation officer who had transferred from a past role in prison contended that the move was largely motivated by her dislike for the prison officers' increasingly harsh attitude towards the clients. In contrast, she felt at home in community corrections where her values were shared. She explained that probation officers 'have a completely different view of humanity, and that aligns more with what I thought the SPPS was about. To be that fellow man, believe in people's ability to change and wanting to be a part of contributing to that change'. She concluded that her probation colleagues' continued dedication to a humanitarian philosophy had mostly shielded their client relationships from some of the damage caused by the challenging conditions facing the SPPS.

However, a probation officer highlighted that the relational work had a negative side. She expressed feeling emotionally exhausted by the tragic fate experienced by some of her clients. She shared that three of her clients with ties to organised crime were killed in one year, which took 'an emotional toll because we develop really strong relationships.' The correctional profession involves considerable emotional labour, and those with close client relationships are

particularly exposed (Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindberg, 2011). However, she emphasised that creating healthy relationships with the clients is a must, and she would not 'have it any other way'. Although, she stated that she wished the practitioners were unanimous in sharing her sentiment and passion for facilitating reform because the emerging culture was staining the penal profession and making her colleagues question their choice of career.

7.3 Withstanding change

The past chapters have illuminated the harsh reality of working on the frontlines of an authority undergoing significant change. Yet, despite the growing workload, intensifying overcrowding, and diminished focus on rehabilitation reported by the practitioners, half of the participants expressed some degree of job satisfaction. Nine officers, three in prisons and six in probation, declared love for their profession. However, the enthusiasm for the role was occasionally dulled by a follow-up sentence that proclaimed that the statement was reserved for a time when the SPPS was not experiencing its current crisis. Some participants reminisced about a time prior to the described crisis when their work was satisfying, and they felt like they could make a difference in the clients' lives. Others felt like motivating desistance was still possible. One of the most senior prison officers interviewed remarked, 'It's still damn fun and rewarding to work with people. Getting to see the clients change makes all the work worth it. That's why I stay, despite the tough situation'. An officer with five years' experience shared a similar sentiment by maintaining that he still enjoyed working for the SPPS because, 'Under the right circumstances and with the right colleagues, it's the best job in the world' and he 'wouldn't trade it for any other job'.

While satisfied with her job, a supervising officer in a low-security prison shared concern that if the agency continued to exist in its current critical state, then there was potential that she

could be ‘scared off’. The high turnover rate suggests she was not alone in feeling like the operational challenges were taking a toll. However, despite the declining rehabilitative culture, the desire to impact change appeared to motivate the practitioners to stay. Numerous participants insisted that the hard work and stress were worthwhile in exchange for seeing the clients heal and abandon a life of crime. The practitioners would commonly light up as they spoke about the clients and their rewarding work. A treatment facilitator said that his passion for helping people contributed to experiences of ‘personal satisfaction seeing clients grow and turn their lives around’. Another treatment facilitator at one of Sweden’s largest prisons stated that she had ‘so much hope for these individuals’, which motivated her to stay with the SPPS. She claimed that seeing the clients ‘do well is the best fucking feeling’. A probation officer expressed that her job felt ‘important every day’ and that ‘when I’m not overworked, I love my job. I think it’s amazing.’

Most of the interviewed penal practitioners seemingly belong to a category of officer typology that Tait (2011, p. 444) calls *true carers*. This type of officer is described as empathetic towards the prisoners, willing to offer help, and enjoying building interpersonal relationships that ‘facilitated their ability to maintain order, because prisoners followed their instructions out of a desire to reciprocate’. A second typology that could be identified among participants was the *limited carer,* who are more pragmatic in their approach. This group gains satisfaction from helping prisoners but is quick to back away when working conditions deteriorate. I interviewed participants of varying genders, ages, and ethnic or national backgrounds, but no clear patterns emerged. As mentioned, a common denominator among the interviewed SPPS employees was a sense of pride in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service’s rehabilitative philosophy and a strong desire for the approach to remain a priority. A probation officer expressed that her biggest wish was for ‘the focus on treatment to overtake the focus on security in the future so

that Swedish prisons can continue to symbolise rehabilitation'. As the SPPS continues to experience unprecedented circumstances, the question remains if the declining number of officers with a positive attitude towards the clients and rehabilitation will be able to withstand the mounting pressure and counteract the increasingly punitive culture.

7.3.1 Anticipatory anxieties

As discussed, the rehabilitation-focused practitioners' internal struggle with the evolving penal climate was commonly subdued by their continued desire to be change agents in the offenders' lives. However, for some participants, the growing concern for the future was a load too heavy to bear. While one participant demonstrated nothing more than contractual obligation towards his employer, several interviewees expressed vocational commitment to prison work and had long careers dedicated to the SPPS. For some, the loyalty seemed to be dissipating due to their disdain for the 'new normal'. Three participants had reached their limit and were in the process of leaving the authority, which likely influenced their accounts throughout this thesis. An officer who had worked for the SPPS for nearly a decade expressed, 'It's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. That's part of the reason I'm quitting. I aspire to return to the SPPS one day, but right now, it's not an option.' She was convinced that most experienced officers with a rehabilitation-focused approach would terminate their employment, resulting in inexperienced practitioners and exceedingly security-focused officers 'ruining the SPPS'. Angered, she concluded:

> There won't be any 'better out'. Both clients and staff will be broken down. We won't be able to handle the clients or offer them the rehabilitation that they are owed. So, what's the point of imprisoning more people if rehabilitation is no longer an option?

Cynicism was a consistent undercurrent in the interviews. Whims of bitterness were palpable on multiple occasions. Many wanted to 'do more' but felt crippled by the current organisational restraints and shifting focus.

There were several instances where participants revealed that they were undergoing a mentality shift from dedication and empathy to withdrawal and 'just doing the job and going home'. The emotional withdrawal signifies a momentous failure for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. A supervising officer in a medium-security prison said, 'The shift in officer culture that is taking place now is going to have long-term effects. It's horrific, and it'll take years before we recover from this.' Consistent with the fear for the future that participants overwhelmingly expressed in a previous chapter, a senior prison officer wisely suggested:

> If you want to know what the future will look like, you can look at the past. The past suggests that we're not headed in the right direction but rather that we're quickly moving in the wrong direction. With that in mind, the future doesn't look very bright.

A police officer overseeing 'gang exits' was equally pessimistic about the current abilities of the SPPS. She highlighted that the expanded police force and increased targeting of network criminals 'is not going to make a difference if the SPPS cannot do its part'. She explained that there is a chain of multiple actors who need to cooperate in order to successfully combat the escalating street violence, but 'a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and right now, the SPPS is the weakest link'.

7.4 Chapter summary

The literature and participants are in agreement that the occupational culture within Swedish prisons is undergoing change. The punitive turn appears to have encouraged an intensifying polarisation of professional values, presenting a significant dilemma for the participants. The concealment of prison work from the public view, the social isolation, and the potential dangers may be contributing to the demand for in-group identification. Distinct groups are formed between officers consumed by security or treatment, with little overlap. The elements are expected to work in symbiosis, but the latter is becoming deprioritised. In turn, the practitioners

who identify as more humanitarian are increasingly viewed as inferior and offered less space to perform rehabilitative tasks.

Mirroring a punitive society, the evolving occupational culture may stem from a changing conceptualisation of punishment. While officers with a detached authoritarian outlook have always existed in Swedish prisons, the approach was becoming significantly more common. Subsequently, the client-staff relationships were compromised and the 'us versus them' mentality further cemented. The experienced interviewees reminisced about a time when the rehabilitation-focus was the norm and close relationships with the clients were the standard. While some prisons appear to have been more successful at maintaining an environment conducive to treatment, the majority of the practitioners expressed feeling belittled and sidelined by the overpowering focus on control and security

In Swedish prisons, the frontline workers are considered crucial in the clients' journey towards desistance. When access to intervention programmes is limited, and the occupational culture is increasingly muting the treatment focus, the SPPS' rehabilitative philosophy is undermined. Pessimism and anger mixed with concern and sadness underpinned the discussion about the future of the rehabilitation in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The ongoing challenges led some participants to terminate their employment, while others held out hope that the authority would soon return to conditions that placed rehabilitation back at the heart of Swedish penality.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This final chapter provides a detailed summary of the findings, showing how the research questions and aims have been addressed. Following a constructivist grounded theory methodology, the participants' voices have been captured to gauge their interpretation of reality within the context of their work and to develop theories grounded in the resulting data. The studied phenomena were uncovered through a co-construction of knowledge and truth experienced by the participants and the researcher (Bryant, 2019). The collaborative nature facilitated the elucidation of an understudied situation in demand of investigation. This study does not offer an exhaustive analysis of contemporary Swedish penality but rather seeks to highlight the perspectives of the interviewed frontline workers. The findings serve as preliminary indicators of some participant-identified emerging issues facing the SPPS and Swedish punishment that may not currently be fully reflected in official reports or academic discourse. While the participants who answered the call to research may be understood as a somewhat self-selecting cohort, which potentially influenced the data, the clarity and detail in their articulation of an impending crisis lend credibility to their accounts. The chapter commences with a summary of the findings, first through a general overview and then detailed discussions of the main themes. Next, concluding remarks are made that outline the research contributions and reflect on the research process. Finally, policy recommendations and future research are suggested.

As stated throughout the thesis, the project set out to explore relevant professionals' perspectives on how punishment is employed to govern social marginality in Sweden and what happens when a penal system known for its rehabilitative philosophy faces conditions undermining its objectives. The aims were to:

- Analyse the relationship between punishment and social change.

- Examine the perception of Sweden's increasing punitiveness.
- Explore the practical implications of a growing correctional population for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.
- Assess the Swedish carceral regime's ability to maintain its rehabilitative agenda.

8.1 Summary of findings

Following the research aims, the project has investigated Sweden's evolving penal trajectory and the accompanying ramifications for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The correctional practitioners and community professionals provided insight into penal policy, populist narratives, racialised discourses, and the broader socio-political forces shaping Sweden's criminal justice landscape. The participants highlighted concerns about the increased instrumentalisation of the justice system to manage social marginality, particularly racialised immigrants in areas of urban relegation. The punitive public mood, ethnonationalist sentiment, and the rise of right-wing populism were criticised by the interviewees for contributing to an abandonment of Sweden's historical dedication to evidence-led crime policy. The participants overwhelmingly objected to the punitive reorientation and condemned its efficacy. However, some dissenting views were also recorded, motivated by assumptions that prolonged incarceration enables extended treatment intervention and function as a virtue signal to society that crime leads to harsh punishment.

The punitive shift has manifested in tangible consequences for the SPPS. The primary operational challenge was the overcrowding caused by the penal expansion. In response, cell-sharing has been increasingly implemented, which produced a new range of problems for the authority. The evolving clientele of younger and more complex clients compounded the challenges. Furthermore, the rapid surge in the penal population has aggravated workforce

shortages and resulted in severely overworked employees, prompting additional hiring. The participants reported a noticeable decline in professional competence as the desperate demand to swiftly expand the workforce has led to lowered hiring recruitments and reduced training. As the SPPS deals with overcrowding and more network criminals who require housing in high-security prisons, the authority is relying on downgrading to transfer clients to lower-security prisons. Consequently, the practitioners noted that the inmates are more commonly placed in unsuitable facilities and staff are forced to deal with clients for whom they lack training. The participants expressed fear about their changing work environment and anticipated a significantly more dangerous climate with rising misconduct. The situation was repeatedly characterised as a crisis.

The overwhelmed authority renowned for its rehabilitative philosophy was described as increasingly abandoning its treatment agenda in order to maintain the most fundamental functions of incarceration. The practitioners expressed a sense of disillusionment as the SPPS seemed to deprioritise rehabilitation, a feeling amplified by the interviewees' unanimous belief in client transformation. While the shifting focus was attributed to institutional exigencies, a widespread discontent about insufficient access to treatment interventions remained. The SPPS reportedly responded by generalising and reducing programme duration, which prompted apprehensions about efficacy. There was growing concern about the authority's capability to support the evolving clientele, who were described as having more complex needs. While some participants welcomed longer sentences due to the extended treatment exposure, numerous practitioners outright declared that the SPPS no longer represents rehabilitation.

The participants reported soaring tensions between officers who considered themselves consumed with either rehabilitation or security, underscoring a broader cultural shift. The

rehabilitation-focused officers perceived that the ideological rift had resulted in an adversarial occupational culture that constantly minimised and disparaged their methods. Despite training officers in a dynamic approach that emphasises rehabilitation, the participants described an observably harsher attitude towards the clients, jeopardising working relationships and the therapeutic environment. As authoritarian officers dedicated to security were perceived as becoming a growing majority, a more American conceptualisation of prison work appeared to be established. Subsequently, the aiding role that officers traditionally played in promoting desistance is increasingly replaced with a punitive approach that disrupts the authority's treatment agenda and opposes Scandinavian exceptionalism. The participants expect the transformations discussed throughout the thesis to have disastrous consequences with lasting effects.

8.1.1 Regressive political landscape

There may appear to be nothing noteworthy about a growing incidence of crime leading to an expanded prison population and punitive measures, especially not through an Anglo-American lens. However, Sweden is experiencing unprecedented circumstances that contradict cultural, social and political traditions. Political and sociocultural factors seem to be intersecting to force an evolving governance of social marginality that relies on criminalisation and penalisation. Through an emerging paradox, where crimes typically associated with criminal networks have increased disproportionately to overall crime, the problems are framed as external to Swedish society and the fault of 'an immigrant other' who failed to integrate (Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Elmersjö *et al*., 2020). Powered by a Swedish superiority complex and white hegemony, those whose behaviour and appearance do not fit the narrow national identity are prescribed negative characteristics and otherised, giving rise to nationalism (Swedish Government Official Report, 2006).

In contrast to the *folkhemmet* philosophy, where criminals were conceptualised as 'orphans of the Swedish people's home' whom society should shoulder a degree of collective responsibility for, the contemporary framing of a 'criminal other' appears to rely on social separation and individual responsibility to rescind moral obligation. By foreclosing on the humanity of marginalised populations and employing racist and anti-immigrant tropes, a punitive reorientation can ensue. Penal powers are then yielded as tools for expulsion, targeting those considered undesirable. Participants with an immigrant background or those raised in marginalised neighbourhoods emphasised an amassing concern that racialised populations are increasingly scrutinised and targeted by criminal justice interventions. The punitive approach was considered particularly troubling because welfare approaches were not equally injected. Welfare chauvinism can be detected in Sweden, highlighting a Janus-faced reality where those who fit the national narrative of belonging are generously protected while outsiders are subjected to insecurity and punishment. The traditional socially engineered Swedish crime policy seems to be replaced by a moral engineering where deservedness and entitlement to society are emphasised. Through the identification of an outgroup, punishment is imposed in ways that defy historical patterns.

As ethnonationalist agendas are mobilised to assign blame to immigrants for Sweden's growing social problems, the country's criminal justice discourse appears increasingly infected with racism and xenophobia. Participants highlighted how the country's dedication to colour blindness has fuelled a covert racism, which has become more visible as the defence of white hegemony intensifies. Until recently, the criminalisation of racialised communities has largely been absent from public debates. However, following a period of unprecedented immigration and street violence, right-wing political parties have gained momentum, and a penal populist

discourse has emerged. A punitive sentiment towards a marginalised group may function as a social catharsis for venting perceived threats (Atkinson, 2015) and generate solidarity among the majority population (Carvalho and Chamberlen, 2018). The ethnonationalist sentiment relies on national grief and nostalgic longing for a racially homogenous society. Relegating and casting a net over the perceived disruptors appears as an attempt to save an illusory society based on former glories. Sweden's right-wing political parties seem to have gained traction by successfully framing immigrants as suitable enemies on whom to blame society's ills.

The reviewed literature and participant accounts indicate that Sweden's social challenges have exacerbated a transformation of the political landscape. Parties with anti-immigrant agendas are regarded as clear manifestations of populism in the West (Koning and Puddister, 2024). A reactionary populism has penetrated Swedish crime policy, an arena historically dominated by experts (Andersson and Nilsson, 2017). The public and democratic influences have amplified the politicisation of crime. The practitioners called out the departure from evidence-led policies as penal populism has become a solution to satisfying an increasingly punishment-seeking public. The interviewees expressed concern that the government is redirecting attention away from *what works* and is instead employing the criminal justice system as a method of socially negotiating issues of immigration, ethnicity and Swedish identity. The move towards a victim-centred perspective and the perception that the country's moderate criminal justice system was insufficient appear to have fuelled punitive sentiments. Penal populism employs simplistic measures deemed effective by those with a limited understanding of prevailing criminological discourse. The participants were nearly unanimous in vehemently opposing the political direction. Meanwhile, Sweden's right-wing coalition grows progressively more popular and harsher punishments are continuously proposed. The ideological misalignment between experts and politicians coupled with the public follows an escalating trajectory.

The practitioners expressed concern that there is an overreliance on incarceration that is blindly steering Sweden in the direction of American penality while muting all other methods of intervention. The punitive demands sideline the moderate penal order that Sweden is renowned for to pursue policies that contradict the welfarist philosophy. A significant majority of the participants were steadfast in their determination that implementing longer sentences is a mistake. The primary concerns were related to the strategy's inefficacy and the consequences of a penal expansion for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. While leading politicians and a growing portion of the Swedish public assume that harsh sentences deter crime, the practitioners and the criminological evidence suggest otherwise. The immersive street culture has created a volatile environment where the repercussions of criminal activity are suppressed as a means to survive a milieu with unfathomable demands. Some participants even argued that prison is increasingly perceived as a welcomed refuge during a time of escalating conflict in a setting marked by tragedy. The disconnect between policymakers and the targets of the punitive agenda was continuously noted, supporting the assumption that a repressive regime is less about desistance and more about punishment and exclusion.

The marginal subset of participants who supported longer sentences shared the public sentiment about the demand for morality in punishment, relying on expressive punitiveness to signal disapproval to criminals. The retributivist approach justifies harsh punishment and places an intrinsic value on offenders' despair. In turn, punitive policies gain momentum, and through a social order rebalancing that prioritises restoring the status of the victim and society, the offender loses the primary focus, which was a concern for several practitioners. Thus, while longer sentences satisfy a punitive public, the effectiveness and impact of extended incarceration were significant concerns for the participants who witnessed the realities of

imprisonment. While the majority overwhelmingly objected to prolonged prison terms, the practitioners' support for rehabilitation prompted a caveat to emerge. Some interviewees revised their stance and expressed more favourable attitudes towards longer sentences contingent upon clients' extended exposure to treatment. However, as the SPPS fights to accommodate the growing prison population, the participants argue that rehabilitation is a deprioritised objective. Unprecedented social problems coupled with an increasingly punishment-seeking society seem to be transforming Sweden's political landscape and setting in motion a punitive reorientation that defies traditional penal philosophies and reconceptualises punishment.

8.1.2 Unmanageable penal expansion

The size of a prison population is not a straightforward reflection of crime rates but can also indicate broader punitive sentiment (von Hofer, 2003). While Sweden is undoubtedly experiencing an unparalleled escalation in crime associated with criminal networks, the country is simultaneously exhibiting a level of punitiveness that contradicts traditional patterns. The two conditions, rising organised crime and repressive sentiment, appear to be operating in tandem to propel a vast penal expansion. The reorientation has substantially impacted the Swedish Prison and Probation Service by stretching the authority beyond capacity to reveal an operational crisis. Sweden is navigating unchartered terrain, forcing conditions and policies unfamiliar to the previously moderate regime. The practitioners perceived the changes as overwhelmingly negative and likened the transformation to a slow-motion disaster with potentially calamitous consequences. The policy adaptations appear as panicked responses to the extraordinary demand rather than conscious choices guided by research and experience. While Swedish penality is on its metaphorical back foot, the authority is fiercely fighting back using any means necessary.

Swedish society is highly individualistic, and the country's penal philosophy encourages normalisation and a humane approach. Accordingly, prisons were built to support single-occupancy rooms. However, the recent astounding influx of clients has demanded the implementation of cell-sharing. The policy was extensively critiqued by the participants, who called out the change as a paradigm shift and remarked on the negative implications. The overcrowding revealed security concerns stemming from an increase in violent incidents and an authority insufficiently prepared to deal with the expansion. A changing clientele requiring housing in high-security prisons has forced the SPPS to prematurely transfer clients to lower-security estates to accommodate the amassing demand. The tactic has generated safety issues, posing threats to both staff and clients. The overcrowding made reprimanding clients' misbehaviour challenging due to limitations in expertise and space. Consequently, violations are reportedly more commonly overlooked.

The participants argued that the rapidly growing correctional population had resulted in several questionable practices. Clients spend longer in isolated confinement in remand prisons awaiting trial and prison availability, which has been previously criticised by the UN. Furthermore, some prisons have been forced to extend daily lockdown, a method condemned by the Parliamentary Ombudsmen (2023). Additionally, more visiting rooms are converted to living quarters and clients are more frequently being granted early release to alleviate the overcrowding. The practices accommodate a desperate demand induced by a historic carceral expansion while unintentionally undermining the dignity and rehabilitative focus underpinning Swedish penal practices.

The carceral expansion has required the workforce to expand significantly, provoking novel problems. The interviewed practitioners expressed feeling significantly overworked due to manpower understaffing. Poor job satisfaction and work-related stress were common complaints. Although stress is not uncommon among prison officers (Kinman, Clements, and Hart, 2019), the interviewees described a recent escalation significant enough to warrant reconsidering their employment with the SPPS. The situation signalled a necessity for additional employees. On the other hand, there was prevalent concern about an emerging expertise understaffing, where a declining competence was repeatedly noted. The swift growth propelled a recruitment spree that overlooks previous hiring requirements. The urgent staffing demand has forced the officers' training to undergo unfavourable modifications that compressed and simplified the curriculum. The practitioners suggested that the outcome was an increasingly unreliable workforce that jeopardised the safety of both practitioners and clients.

Probation offices were not spared from the SPPS' unravelling crisis. The punitive reorientation has expeditiously amassed probation and parole clients, leading to unmanageable workloads. The participants reported a declining quality of operations as mandated meetings with clients are condensed and less frequent. The operational restrictions have culminated in the perception that probation services are not fulfilling their intended function. The notion is supported by research highlighting the benefits of smaller caseloads in lowering rearrest rates (Jalbert *et al*., 2011; Taxman *et al*., 2006) and reducing probation violations (Cox *et al*., 2005; Manchak *et al.*, 2014). Despite the evolving organisational demands necessitating additional probation officers, the practitioners indicated being spared from the fluctuating competence reported in prisons. The requirement of a bachelor's degree in a relevant field was offered as a possible explanation. Nonetheless, prison overcrowding appeared to be undermining probation

practices. The overfull estates hinder prison recall when violating parole or probation terms. Thus, breaches are increasingly tolerated.

The strained Swedish correctional practices are further complicated by an evolving clientele. Reflecting the escalating violence in marginalised neighbourhoods and the punitive sentiment towards a criminal other, the clients were described as increasingly younger, immigrant, and tied to criminal networks. The altering demographic contributed a changing culture with a disenable contempt for authority and 'us versus them' mentality, possibly fuelled by the relegation of marginalised communities to the peripheries of Swedish society. The SPPS was considered unprepared to manage a transforming population described as adhering to different social codes. Participants argued that the same xenophobic undertones visible in the Swedish criminal justice discourse were becoming apparent in penal practices. The anecdotal growth in racialised clients had resulted in practitioners witnessing colleagues discriminating against certain inmates. As prisons are described as mirrors of society, the presence of racism is unsurprising considering the ethnonationalist sentiment displayed in Sweden. The discussion marks another shortcoming for the SPPS, an authority painted as a 'sinking ship with a thousand holes'. The investigation into the practical implications of a growing correctional population unveiled an overwhelmed authority desperately adapting to its new normal. As traditional practices appear sidelined and new conditions are introduced, the Swedish carceral regime's identity is unpicked, and the flattering characterisation assumed by Scandinavian exceptionalism seems increasingly muted.

8.1.3 Undermined rehabilitative agenda

The deteriorating penal conditions, extended sentences, and compromised treatment climate suggest that the SPPS' former director-general's statement that the authority's role is 'not to

punish' (James, 2014, no pagination) is no longer an accurate representation of Swedish penality and the broader sociopolitical sentiment. The circumstances have created an institutional ambiguity where a shift toward punitive and security-driven practices has occurred but within a framework that still claims to be rehabilitative**.** The Swedish Prison and Probation Service (2024d) maintains that the rehabilitative focus is preserved but the participants reveal a clear deprioritisation. The adaptations appear as forced modifications necessitated by an operational crisis instead of deliberate decisions guided by empirical evidence and professional expertise. Although the validity of Scandinavian exceptionalism has been criticised since its inception, the concept has firmly situated Sweden's carceral regime as humane and moderate with a permeating focus on rehabilitation. The findings evidence the flattering imagery's increasing inaccuracy. As the practitioners unanimously recognised the merits of the treatment philosophy, there was considerable disappointment regarding the authority's inability to maintain the approach.

The declining rehabilitative agenda was primarily observed through the diminished access to treatment programmes and an increasingly authoritarian occupational culture. The former was chiefly understood as a direct result of a rapidly expanding prison population without a proportionate growth in the delivery of programmes. The Swedish National Audit Office (2024a) concluded that there was insufficient access and resource allocation to the interventions. Participants revealed that the understaffing and deprioritised rehabilitation have culminated in intervention facilitators more frequently being forced to cancel their treatment sessions to cover for prison officers. Furthermore, the programme waiting list has expanded significantly, necessitating the SPPS to further limit participation to only the most motivated clients. The delayed and restricted treatment access has reportedly resulted in a higher occurrence of sentence completion without interventions, undermining the authority's mission

to ‘break the vicious cycle’. While longer prison sentences were overwhelmingly condemned by the participants, some changed their outlook when the prospect of extended rehabilitation was considered. The importance of striking a balance between a sentence long enough to enable adequate treatment access and short enough to minimise the side effects of incarceration was recurrently highlighted.

The fundamental belief in the clients’ ability to reform appeared cemented among the participants. However, the practitioners considered the changing clientele increasingly treatment resistant. Yet, the participants highlighted that the burden to adapt to the new circumstances is firmly placed on the SPPS, which they criticised for not evolving swiftly enough. Appropriate interventions targeting network criminals were repeatedly noted as an alarming shortcoming and raised as an area demanding urgent addressing. While the SPPS was considered slow to accommodate an evolving clientele, the authority had rapidly made some adjustments that expanded treatment access. Programmes were compressed and group sessions were encouraged as opposed to individual counselling. Although the prospect of increased participation was regarded favourably, quality concerns prompted demoralised concessions that the SPPS’ rehabilitative capabilities were becoming a triumph of the past. The response to whether the participants believed in the SPPS’ current ability to prevent recidivism was overwhelmingly negative.

The declining treatment proficiency raised questions about the purpose of imprisonment. Arguments were made that the SPPS was a victim of the political climate and that the prevailing punitive sentiment undermines the humanitarian approach. A prison officer stated that ‘the system craves more prisoners but has no intention of rehabilitating more’. Foucault (1977) posits that warehousing criminals without attempts at transformation weakens the premise of

imprisonment. Hoskins (2013) suggests that punishment appears contemptuous when clients are not respected as moral persons capable of change. Accordingly, the participants' accounts of elevated punitiveness, diminished treatment access, a harsher occupational culture, and an evolving client typology may lead to the assumption that Swedish penality is becoming less about rehabilitation and more about vindictively punishing the criminal other for disrupting the social order.

An increasingly authoritarian occupational culture was called out as a leading contributor to the declining rehabilitative ideal. While security and control appear synonymous with imprisonment, contemporary Swedish penal practices have adopted a dynamic approach that equally emphasises prison officers' role in facilitating reformation. However, following sociopolitical trends and the SPPS' security turn, the bilateral tactic has reportedly shifted towards control while increasingly abandoning the humanitarian elements. The operational crisis has made some traditional policies and practices inoperable, encouraging officers' reliance on individual discretion and group identity. The result is an intensifying polarisation between two distinct subcultural groups focused on either security or rehabilitation. The challenging circumstances have complicated the balancing act between the two objectives, repeatedly tipping the scale in favour of the former. Subsequently, the rehabilitation-focused officers perceive themselves as increasingly becoming the minority while the security-focused officers are rapidly growing in number and transforming the occupational culture.

The participants argue that a humanitarian approach used to be the standard, affording officers an open dialogue with the clients and less contempt for authority. Effective staff-prisoner relationships previously defined Swedish penal practices and the social work aspect attracted humanitarian practitioners. The philosophy reflected the logic of the welfare state, where

criminals were regarded as products of society's failure in need of care and support. As the conceptualisation of criminals seems to be changing and Sweden becomes more punitive, the carceral practices appear to have followed. The penal layers introduced in Swedish prisons were examined to assess how the new institutional arrangements have merged with the old. Although the SPPS has not officially changed its philosophy or completely abandoned past practices, the conditions undermine a welfarist approach while enabling an authoritarian strategy consumed with control. The described crisis facing the SPPS effectively ties the officers' hands behind their backs, minimising their role to 'turnkey jailers'. The experienced practitioners detested the evolution away from the humane and dignified approach that earned the Swedish carceral regime the descriptor of Scandinavian exceptionalism.

While Bruhn and Nylander (2024) argue that Swedish prison officers' role has shifted toward a strict focus on security and control, the present project's participants emphasise their determination to continue building relationships with the clients and supporting their path to desistance. Nonetheless, they highlight that as the relational work based on proximity and humanity is being replaced by distance and objectification, the relationships with the clients have suffered. Increasing disputes and defiance have jeopardised the officers' ability to work motivationally with the clients. The elevated hostility was considered a safety concern for the practitioners who perceived that the adversarial climate made them more vulnerable to violence. Fears about a future where the prison culture resembled the U.S. were repeatedly raised. The practitioners experienced internal conflict as they attempted to reconcile with the transforming Swedish penal culture, leading some to terminate their employment with the SPPS. The experienced officers reflected on the significant changes over the last decade that have culminated in an unrecognisable climate that contradicts core tenets of Swedish penality. While job satisfaction was dwindling, an ambition to see the SPPS through the crisis and return

to its former glory motivated most to stay. An optimism endured for a future reorientation towards a treatment focus that supersedes the current emphasis on control, ensuring that the Swedish carceral regime would remain emblematic of rehabilitation.

8.1.4 Conclusion

The foundational principles that have distinguished the Swedish penal system as a model of compassion and rehabilitation appear to be uprooted to hold space for a systemic transformation reflecting an increasingly punitive society. The findings indicate a break from past traditions and reveal an escalating crisis. Framed against the backdrop of Scandinavian exceptionalism, an ideological reorientation is evident that raises fundamental questions about the legitimacy and evolving purpose of punishment in Sweden. The changing clientele and emerging emphasis on retribution seemingly exposes exclusion as a possible driver behind the punitive turn. Sociopolitical agendas and operational constraints deprioritise rehabilitation, eroding traditional penal objectives aimed at promoting inclusion and equality. The Swedish carceral system increasingly appears as a mechanism for social sorting that considers certain populations more suitable for harsh sentences than treatment. In turn, the repressive penal trajectory arguably looks like a political power play rather than a genuine attempt at crime reduction. Despite clear indications of failed integration and structural marginalisation, the willingness to shoulder a degree of collective responsibility for criminal wrongdoings seems to be an ideal of the past. So, if worsening penal conditions and a sidelined rehabilitative agenda are co-occurring with longer sentences and a changing client demographic, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that the Swedish penal system is increasingly becoming a tool for punishing a diversifying population.

8.2 Contributions to knowledge

Through the project's wide scope, the data is able to demonstrate how a combination of sociopolitical currents, an operational crisis, changing clientele, deprioritised rehabilitation, and a transforming occupational culture is contributing to a changed approach towards Swedish penality. These encompassing insights assist in tracing out the process of penal transformation in Sweden using an 'on the ground' perspective. The analysis of the country's carceral trajectory within the framework of social marginality and political discourse add to criminological debates around the relationship between punishment, penal philosophy, and broader social change. I do not claim to have uncovered new problems or solutions but provide relevant accounts from the frontline workers who engage directly with the discussed topics. The qualitative research assists in rebalancing the focus on quantitative research around the chosen themes.

The research resonates with the longstanding tradition of considering penal realities alongside political and cultural dynamics. While Tham (2019) and Barker (2013) have been critical of drawing parallels between Sweden and the processes outlined in Garland's (2001) *The Culture of Control*, recent developments indicate growing similarities. Sweden's penal reconfiguration reflects wider societal tensions and a growing culture of fear. Crime control appears as a symbolic tool for public reassurance rather than effective crime prevention. While sociocultural anxieties may be addressed, the policies show little evidence of a convincing understanding of how the underlying problems will be resolved. My findings encourage joining Garland in challenging policymakers to reconsider if penal expansion and tougher sentencing will result in genuine crime reduction or if the punitive approaches are more likely to reinforce inequity and social division. This study moves the literature forward by raising and analysing the

cultural narratives that upset long-standing operational procedures within formerly liberal carceral regimes.

The contributions are timely in that they speak on matters currently receiving significant attention in Sweden. Furthermore, the findings address the identified knowledge gaps that have appeared as Swedish sociopolitical and penal conditions have evolved. As discussed in the literature review and throughout the thesis, Bruhn, Nylander, and Lindström have made vast contributions to the discourse about Swedish prison culture. In Bruhn and Nylander (2024), the authors use data from 2019 and acknowledge that the findings may yield different results with more recent data. While my project employs a wider scope and different methodology, a conceptual contribution is offered that builds on previous findings using data collected in 2023. Utilising recent data is of particular interest as Sweden has undergone significant change over the last few years that warrant examination. Denmark is experiencing a similar penal reconfiguration, which prompted Damsa (2023) to investigate how the transformation is perceived by Danish remand prison officers. My project has offered a Swedish version of this study with an extended scope to include a wider range of participants and additional research aims. The 'on the ground' perspective can be used to inform policy and to guide the SPPS towards identifying the problems that need to be addressed.

In line with previous discussions of Nordic scholars' objections to Pratt's (2008a, 2008b) Scandinavian exceptionalism thesis, the current study's participants describe a situation that encourages agreeing with the critique. The findings indicate that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service is currently unable to support Sweden's punitive turn up to par with past standards. Subsequently, the reliance on criminal sanctions appears as superficial solutions to complex social challenges that fail to address underlying factors. In what seems like desperate

attempts at restoring an evolving Swedish society to its former glories, a looming fear emerges that Sweden is replicating penal expansions that have arguably failed elsewhere. Meanwhile, the country diverges from the established penal practices and philosophies that have made Swedish penality a source of inspiration internationally. In turn, the findings seem to support Bruhn and Nylander's (2024, p. 346) assertion that 'there is little evidence that Scandinavian exceptionalism resonates in the Swedish prison system of today. The concept has been slowly emptied of its content'. My research provides further evidence that the Swedish penal regime has undergone a reconfiguration that breaks with past traditions and drives ideological misalignment between punishment and rehabilitation. Consequently, the time is now to change the trajectory to ensure that Swedish penality can continue symbolising humane and evidence-based approaches to crime that place rehabilitation at the heart of punishment.

8.3 Recommendations for future research and steps forward

This research has successfully employed the chosen methodology, and through the application of a constructivist grounded theory, the participants' experiences were brought to the forefront. While the findings are produced from a small sample and can by no means be generalised, the participants' accounts seem to consistently align with official documents. So, although the interview data does not represent absolute truths, the research provides an indication of emerging trends within Swedish penality and contextualises the ongoing criminological discourse. In turn, the advancement of the qualitative research around Sweden's punitive turn has contributed to filling an existing knowledge gap. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from advancing the lines of inquiry further through a project with a longer timeline, more participants, alternative methods, and additional funding.

While the Swedish Prison and Probation Service can largely be considered a victim of the punitive turn, the authority is not an idle bystander. Although the reported operational crisis seems attributable to repressive policies and escalating street violence, the findings also indicate that the SPPS is increasingly aligning with the prevailing political sentiment. The participants remarked on policy changes undermining a climate conducive to rehabilitation. Lowering the hiring requirements and reforming the training reportedly contributed to an occupational culture that overlooked the significance of rehabilitation. Diminished access to intervention programmes and insufficiently accommodating the evolving treatment needs signal that social reintegration is deprioritised. The authority should make a conscious effort to reestablish the rehabilitative agenda by reviewing the policies that have resulted in the deficiencies.

Despite the interviewed practitioners being considerably critical of the sidelined rehabilitative agenda and advocated for its advantages, not questioning the morality of employing individualised treatments to deal with matters that may be rooted in social and structural mechanisms would be a mistake. McNeill (2012, p. 14) highlights that 'rehabilitation is a social project as well as a personal one'. As the literature and participant accounts have revealed, Swedish society is dealing with mounting challenges that are likely contributing to the disproportionate rise in crimes associated with criminal networks and marginalised neighbourhoods. Further research is therefore needed to determine how to best address the growing correctional population of offenders tied to organised crime in a dignified and effective manner using an integrated approach.

The current project has documented some of the realities of working for the SPPS amid a penal expansion. As jobs in prison and probation are commonly obscured from the public, our moral

imagination would be advanced by a more profound appreciation for the complexities of custodial and non-custodial sanctions. My hope is that the findings could be used as valuable insight that exposes the authority's deterioration. Significant safety concerns were raised that need immediate addressing to prevent tragic consequences. Arguably, epistemic harm is produced when information about failed practices is not acknowledged, consequently causing more damage.

In line with Fricker's (2007) epistemic injustice theory that examines how the subordination of some social groups leads to their excluded participation in creating and distributing knowledge, the SPPS' clients should be included in future research. While this project has contributed to highlighting the voices of frontline workers, another obscured group, a gap seemingly remains for an examination of the impacts of a punitive turn on Sweden's correctional population. Hanan (2020, p. 1217) posits that the '[e]xclusion of incarcerated people's voices removes them from the hermeneutical project of defining collective meanings of punishment', hindering knowledge production while creating an unjustifiably prejudiced society. Rather than giving into the growing inclination to exclude individuals deemed undesirable, Sweden needs to be reminded of its historical dedication to egalitarianism and traditional welfarist approach to crime. The steps toward restoring the reputation of Sweden's carceral regime arguably begin with broad and inclusive research of the penal expansion, followed by operationalising the identified areas of improvement in a way that goes beyond satisfying a punishment-seeking public and political short-termism.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment message

Hi,

I'm a PhD student in Criminology at City, University of London. I'm currently doing a study about Swedish prisons, its rehabilitative abilities and Sweden's increased reliance on incarceration. At a time when crime and punishment are at the forefront of Swedish politics and media, the opinions of criminal justice professionals often seem to be missing, and that's why I would like to interview you. The intention of the project is to highlight your perspective and experiences, and to understand the situation from your point of view. If you're interested, I can travel to meet you, or we can speak on Skype/Zoom/FaceTime. Your participation in the study will be anonymous and is not expected to take more than an hour of your time. Would you be interested in participating in an interview?

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix B: Participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

[redacted]
Researcher: Isabelle Magnusson
Responsible Institution: City, University of London
Penal Professionals' Perception of Swedish Prisons

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

During a time of political and social evolution in Sweden, understanding how those who work within prisons perceive the ongoing changes is important. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gauge the perception of the Swedish prison system by those employed within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. More specifically, the aim of the project is to:

- Explore the evolving role of incarceration in a changing Swedish society
- Examine the potential for prisons to rectify failed integration
- Gain insight into the effectiveness of current prison philosophy in rehabilitating offenders from marginalised neighbourhoods
- Identify key themes that emerge from interviews that suggest potential improvements to the prison practice that better suit the current clientele

The interviews will run for approximately 6 months, and the project aims to be completed by 2025. This research is conducted with the intention of being used within a PhD thesis undertaken at City, University of London in the U.K.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are or have been employed by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service or a relevant organisation. Gaining an understanding of the evolving Swedish prisons from your point-of-view is essential for the completion of this project. Your knowledge and experiences of the Swedish penal system are very valuable.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You are free to avoid answering certain questions or topics. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

If you wish to take part, you are still free to withdraw without giving a reason. However, as all data collected will be anonymised, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data once the data has been anonymised. The only exception is if you can specifically identify a statement/quote that you made and wish to remove. Once the study is published, you will no

longer be able to withdraw your data. All data collected will be safely stored on a password-protected laptop. Any data not used will be disposed of securely.

What will happen if I take part?

- If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to take part in one interview with the researcher. This is expected to take 45-60 minutes but may differ depending on the amount of information you offer. There may be a need for a follow-up interview at a later time, in which case the interviewer will contact you to assess availability/interest.
- The interview will be structured by a set of predetermined questions but is also free to take any direction deemed relevant by you and the researcher.
- The researcher will be taking notes, and with your approval and if appropriate, voice record the conversation.
- The interview can take place at a location of your choosing. The researcher is happy to travel to you and to make any arrangements that suit your schedule.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are currently no foreseeable disadvantages or risks to taking part in the study. Your participation will be anonymised, which removes any characteristics that could be used to identify you. Your participation is intended to be made as easy as possible by scheduling the interview at a time and place that suits you, mitigating any unnecessary burdens.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The research project intends to highlight the perspective of penal professionals during a time of increased spotlight on the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The perspective of the employees of the prison system is seemingly rare. Offering your experiences and opinions enables your point of view to be heard, which, in theory, can help inform future decisions in the industry. Sharing your knowledge will contribute to the success of the current research project by increasing the number of participants, which will elevate the study's reliability. Taking part in a research project is a great way to help inform the research community about the industry that you operate within, which can help shape the direction of future research or policy.

Expenses and Payments

No payment is being offered for participation in the study.

How is the project being funded?

The project is self-funded.

Conflicts of interest

There is currently no information about any conflicts of interest held by the researcher.

What will happen to the results?

Data collected during the interviews deemed relevant for the study will be used in the researcher's doctoral thesis. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project. The results will be kept safe on a password-protected laptop and any information not deemed necessary, will be safely disposed of. All data and related records will adhere to strict GDPR and UK-GDPR guidelines. You are welcome to request a copy of the results or completed thesis by contacting the researcher using the details stated below.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been approved by City, University of London Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?
If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone [redacted]. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is *Penal Professionals' Perception of Swedish Prisons*.

[redacted]

Insurance
City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study, subject to the terms and conditions of the policy. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study, you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and I look forward to your participation!

Appendix C: Consent form

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

[redacted]
Researcher: Isabelle Magnusson
Responsible Institution: City, University of London
Penal Professionals' Perception of Swedish Prisons

		Please tick or initial box
1	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information dated 9 **December 2022 Version 1** for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalised or disadvantaged.	
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the point that the data has been anonymised after the interview. The only exception is if I can specifically identify a statements/direct quote that I made and wish to remove. However, once the study is published, I understand that I will no longer be able to withdraw my data.	
4.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded, where appropriate.	
5.	I agree to the use of direct quotes from any statements I make	
6.	I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
8.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

When completed, 1 copy is for the participant; 1 copy is for the researcher.