

# ‘Exceptional’ Open Prisons Under Pressure: Austerity, Instability and Distrust

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This article examines the impact of various challenges on two Norwegian low-security prisons, Bastøy and Leira, during a particularly demanding period. Using ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with 51 prisoners, the article applies the conceptual metaphors ‘depth’, ‘weight’, and ‘tightness’ to explore the severity of control, restriction and psychological burden. Findings reveal a reduction in activities and an increase in restrictiveness in both prisons. Additionally, prisoners at Bastøy noticed reduced staff presence and deteriorated trust, possibly due to the prison’s larger size, workplace conflicts and complex restructuring process, exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions and austerity measures. The results point to a diminishing ‘exceptionality’ in Norwegian prisons, highlighting the importance of stability, institutional autonomy, and smaller prison size in fostering trust and close relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** Open prisons, Nordic exceptionalism, staff-prisoner relationship, austerity, Covid-19

My first day of fieldwork in one of Norway’s reputed ‘exceptional’ prisons began with a sobering statement from a prison officer: *‘You’ve come here at the worst possible time’*. The officer was referring to a catalogue of challenges, accumulating one on top of the other. I was gathering data in two of the most well-known open prisons in the Nordic countries, Bastøy and Leira, characterized by few static security measures, relatively positive staff-prisoner relationships, and plentiful access to natural elements. At the time of the fieldwork, staff and prisoners at both prisons talked about the ramifications of various ongoing challenges. Like most prisons around the world, they were impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, ongoing national austerity measures designed to cut government expenditure created difficulties in continuing some of the practices that have distinguished these prisons. Furthermore, Bastøy was undergoing internal staff conflicts amid a lengthy and challenging re-organization process. Staff and prisoners identified several of these issues as significant. Some issues were described as disruptive and temporary, whilst others had persisted for a while—linking them to the possible decline in ‘exceptional’ prison qualities.

Consequently, these challenges became a natural focal point of my research, despite not being initially part of my fieldwork plan. Originally, my research objective was to explore what constitutes a health-promoting prison—if such a thing can be said to exist. And reviewing the research literature on Norwegian prisons, Bastøy and Leira both stood out as potentially relevant field sites. Bastøy prison has been labelled the ‘world’s nicest prison’ in media portrayals (Sutter 2012), and attracts considerable attention from international media, policymakers, and researchers. In his original two-part article introducing the term ‘Nordic/Scandinavian penal exceptionalism’, Pratt (2008, p. 123) described Bastøy as the ‘shining jewel’ of the Norwegian prison system. Leira prison has so far received far less international attention; however, it shares many characteristics with Bastøy and has similarly been praised as ‘exceptional’ (Lundeberg *et al.* 2018). In a study of Norwegian prisons, the quality of life in Bastøy prison was positively evaluated at 7.43 out of 10, while Leira scored even higher at 8.56 (Liebling *et al.* 2021). However, when participants in my study discussed elements and initiatives believed to positively influence well-being in these prisons, they frequently spoke in the past tense, indicating that some of these ‘exceptional’ attributes were perceived as diminishing or less prevalent.

Several scholars have critiqued the concept of Nordic penal exceptionalism for ignoring the excessive use of pre-trial solitary confinement (Smith 2011), the treatment of foreign national prisoners (Ugelvik 2012), and underestimating the existing pains of imprisonment in Nordic countries (Mathiesen 2012). However, a comparative empirical analysis of prisons in England & Wales and Norway (Crewe *et al.* 2023) found that the more positive outcomes in Norway lend support to the idea of exceptionalism, largely due to the extensive use and distinctive characteristics of open prisons. Through a qualitative exploration of prisoners’ experiences in open prisons discussed in the context of broader trends in the Norwegian correctional services, this study seeks to shed new light on the ‘Nordic exceptionalism thesis’, enhancing our understanding of how various challenges impact the daily life of open prison institutions. I will argue that, if such challenges persist, they may undermine the operational culture of a prison to the extent that it may no longer be regarded as ‘exceptional’ in the ways posited by Pratt.

Drawing on fieldnotes from seven months of ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 51 prisoners, I examine prisoners’ experiences of reduced opportunities in both prisons, and additional deterioration of staff-prisoner relationships and decreased levels of trust at Bastøy. Although COVID-19 was widely recognized as disruptive and challenging, it became evident that austerity measures, internal conflicts and reduced trust and autonomy for both prisoners and staff were of greater, more lasting concern. These findings underscore the importance of stability, institutional autonomy, and smaller prison size in facilitating trust and closer staff-prisoner relationships.

## THE TEXTURE OF IMPRISONMENT

This study employs conceptual metaphors to analyse how the impacts of the challenges were experienced. Crewe and colleagues have, in a series of articles, introduced and developed four metaphors enabling the comparison of experiences of imprisonment: ‘depth’, ‘weight’, ‘tightness’, and ‘breadth’ (Crewe 2011a, 2015; Crewe *et al.* 2014). ‘Depth’, according to Crewe (2020), refers to the relationship between the prison and the outside world—the perceived separation from free society and the feeling of being entrenched in a penal institution. This can involve being surrounded by strict security routines, being years away from release, and feeling far removed from freedom. In other words, it reflects the experience of being at the ‘deep end’ and far beneath the ‘surface’ of freedom (Crewe 2011a).

‘Weight’ conveys the degree of oppressiveness of imprisonment (Crewe 2011a). It refers to the conditions and treatments that are experienced negatively, pressing down on prisoners like

a 'weight on their shoulders'. A 'light' prison feels less oppressive and onerous, while a 'heavy' prison imposes an additional psychological load. However, not all 'lighter' prisons are necessarily 'better' (Crewe *et al.* 2014). When 'light' results from a hands-off approach, it can indicate underpowered staff and a lack of resources. Additionally, a 'light' environment is not always positive if it includes poor organization, lack of boundaries, and inadequate safety, which can lead to a disorganised or even dangerous prison environment. For a 'lighter' prison environment to be experienced positively, appropriate and effective staff power is necessary. Crewe *et al.* (2014) developed the concepts further, creating a framework conceptualizing the experience of penal authority, ranging between light and heavy, and absent and present. Absence and presence refer to the 'availability and visibility of prison staff, the depth and quality of their engagement with prisoners, their willingness and ability to supervise and police prisoner activity, and their competence in using authority' (Crewe *et al.* 2014, p. 397). The quality of prison life depends on the ideal combination of institutional weight and the appropriate staff presence, with 'light-present' considered the ideal. Crewe (2011a) points to a softening of penal power in England and Wales, arguing that this softening has altered, rather than eliminated, the previously identified pains of imprisonment. While penal power formerly 'weighed' prisoners down, modern prisons are often 'lighter', with power now more noticeable on a psychological and informational level.

Crewe (2015) argues that 'tightness' is a useful metaphor for understanding how this power is felt as a force smothering prisoners' psyches, as they struggle to manage their behaviour to avoid sanctions and gain rewards. The nature of pain has evolved into a pain of uncertainty and indeterminacy, as prisoners have far more responsibility for self-regulating their activities and complying with correct behaviour. This 'tightness' envelopes prisoners from all sides, creating tension and anxiety linked to the fear of making mistakes while self-regulating. It is related to both 'depth' and 'weight', as it encompasses psychological burden and a type of control in imprisonment. In the forthcoming analysis, these conceptual metaphors will illuminate how structural and relational differences between Bastøy and Leira led to varying levels of control, restriction, trust, and staff presence, with prisoners at Bastøy facing more severe challenges during the time of the fieldwork.

## METHOD

The article draws on a comprehensive qualitative study examining how the prison as a setting influences the health and well-being of those within it. Data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews. The fieldwork was conducted in Leira prison and Bastøy prison over three and four months, respectively, in 2021, totalling 745 hours. These prisons were selected for their potential to offer more prisoner autonomy and positive experiences compared to high-security prisons. The fieldwork consisted of participatory observation, where I engaged in various activities within the limitations of ethical and security considerations. This included, among other activities, folding laundry, cooking, training, playing cards, watching television, walking dogs, attending staff meetings, and drinking numerous cups of coffee. In both prisons, I walked around unescorted, equipped with a notebook, keys and a communication device with an alarm function. The data consists of field notes produced at the end of each day and transcriptions from audio-recorded interviews.

This article primarily uses interview data from prisoners and comprehensive fieldnotes to explore the lived experiences within the prison environment. While the field notes capture a broad range of insights, including those from staff, the analysis centres on prisoner perspectives, with staff views included to provide additional context. I interviewed 51 prisoners—25 at Leira and 26 at Bastøy—representing 78 per cent of the prison population at Leira at the time and 20 per cent at Bastøy. Participants were selected using quota sampling to capture a diverse range of

perspectives reflective of the broader population in both prisons. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative, but rather to encompass a variety of experiential factors for a more comprehensive evaluation of the selected prisons. This diversity encompasses variations in age, gender, background, and the type and length of sentences. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 74 years, with an average age of 45. Of the 53 participants, only three were women—a reflection of the fact that Bastøy is male-only, while Leira was a mixed-gender facility with limited spaces for women.<sup>1</sup> In terms of incarceration history, 25 participants were incarcerated for the first time, 14 had been incarcerated two or three times, and 14 had experienced four or more prison sentences. The median sentence length was four years and six months, with sentence durations ranging from four months to 21 years.

I spent about a month in both prisons solely conducting ethnographic study before beginning the interview process, thus establishing a foundation of trust and understanding. Most interviews were conducted in empty offices or meeting rooms, while some were conducted in various locations chosen by participants. Being an open prison, this included outdoor benches, the dog yard, and the chapel. An interview guide facilitated structure while allowing participants to speak freely beyond the structured questions. Given the sensitive nature of the data, necessary approvals were obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Written informed consent was secured before interviews, and information about the fieldwork and research project was provided through information posters and verbally at various gatherings. This information was frequently repeated during informal conversations throughout the fieldwork, consistently emphasizing the study's voluntary and anonymous nature.

The data material was transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using NVivo's software. The field notes and transcribed interviews were analysed simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data, identify patterns and highlight discrepancies, thereby strengthening the overall reliability of the findings. All participants have been given pseudonyms from an AI name generator using English and Norwegian names. All quotes were originally in Norwegian and translated to English and have been edited lightly for clarity. Before presenting the analysis, the article thoroughly describes both prisons. By grounding the analysis in a clear depiction of the prison setting, the study will more effectively demonstrate how these different characteristics interacted with the challenges faced.

## LEIRA PRISON

Prisoners arriving at Leira do not encounter fences, walls, bars, or locked doors. It is, in fact, hardly recognizable as a prison. The transition from the outside world to the prison is subtle; the only indication that the big barn-like house surrounded by freshly mowed grass and colourful flower beds is a prison is a discreet sign reading 'Prison area. Unauthorized persons not allowed'. Originally constructed as a boarding school for neglected girls in the 1930s, the institution was later established as a prison in 1986 ([County Governor in Sør-Trøndelag 2007](#)). The prison is located in a rural area with relatively few neighbours, yet is only a short bus ride from the centre of one of Norway's largest cities. The entire prison grounds can be walked across in just a few minutes and houses 31 people. Instead of cells, there are small rooms that the prisoners can lock themselves. Like most areas of the prison, the rooms are simple with some wear and tear, showing signs of being nearly 100 years old. However, as De Vos remarked from her research visit to Leira; 'The first impression of this prison was dominated by its homelike character, not

<sup>1</sup> During my most recent visit to Leira in 2024, I learned that the facility has removed its four places for women and is now a male-only prison.

only in terms of material living conditions, but also in terms of its welcoming atmosphere' (De Vos 2023).

Upon arrival, newly transferred prisoners are greeted by people whose status—staff or prisoner—is ambiguous. Staff do not wear uniforms, and prisoners wear their private clothing. The warden or senior officer typically offers coffee and an informative chat. This interaction might feel unusual, as Jens illustrated when describing his first day at Leira:

I was taken in [to the office] to see the management. [...] Just that, for me, was like, huh, okay. I've never seen the prison manager at [previous prison]. There, you have to make an appointment with the inspector, if at all possible, and then it would be decided whether you had a good enough reason to meet him or her. When you come to Leira, you're suddenly invited in in for a coffee in the office to talk about being at Leira.

During this initial meeting, prisoners are informed about various activities, such as access to pre-set walking routes outside the prison or organized weekly trips to the local supermarket or library outside of the prison. Weekends often entail group outings, such as museum visits, fishing trips, or overnight camping trips. Prisoners are briefed early on about the prison's expectations and rules, including contributing to a positive environment and working Monday through Friday. All new arrivals are initially placed to work in the garden centre, which features several greenhouses filled with flowers and green plants—and customers. The garden centre is open to the public, and many customers are unaware they are visiting a prison. After arrival, prisoners can apply for other occupations. The dog day-care centre is the most popular, where prisoners walk and entertain dogs while their owners are at work. To socialize, people play cards, watch TV, play on the outside volleyball court, or train in the indoor gym. Although not modern, the gym is larger than those in most high-security prisons and allows free weights, an unusual feature in Norwegian prisons.

Since the prison's establishment in 1986, the staff have applied the method of 'consequence pedagogy' in their approach to prisoners. Central aspects of this approach are freedom, choice, action, consequence, and responsibility, with interactions and dialogue as the main tools (Steiro *et al.* 2013). The staff office is easily accessible and rarely closed, and it was common to see prisoners there engaged in informal conversations with staff. Interactions included practical issues and preparation for release, as well as talk of yesterday's football match, personal records in the gym, and confidential, personal dilemmas. Lundeberg *et al.* (2018) found that 82 per cent of prisoners at Leira were satisfied with their contact officers' work, a significantly higher rate than in the broader sample of prisoners where less than half reported the same. The lack of staff uniforms, small prison size, and open-door policy contribute to close staff-prisoner relationships, aligning with what one might expect to find in an 'exceptional' prison (Pratt and Eriksson 2013).

## BASTØY PRISON

Bastøy is a low-security prison located on an island in a Norwegian fjord, accessible by a small ferry primarily staffed by prisoners. The contrast is said to be striking between the strict routines and constant observation in high-security prisons, and the experience of feeling the fresh air on the ferry deck. Upon arrival, people are given a ride to the officer's building, possibly by an officer who makes a dry joke about the old state of the prison cars. One might even spot one of the island's wild—but increasingly tame—foxes, often seen begging for food outside the prisoner houses. Unlike at Leira, a tour of Bastøy is best done by car due to the extensive area it covers. Many prisoners experience aches and pains from the sudden increase in physical activity from walking, making cycling a popular mode of transport around the island. Bastøy is



considered large by Norwegian standards, housing 125 prisoners in several houses with varied capacities, and prisoners have a say in where they prefer and with whom they want to live.

Like Leira, prisoners at Bastøy are expected to work and contribute to the community. Those who enjoy working with animals can work in the stable, barn, or chicken coop. Other jobs are available in the library, kitchen, and cleaning services. Prisoners can also undertake educational classes. In their spare time, prisoners may hike, fish, pick mushrooms, or train in the gym, which, although slightly smaller than Leira's, also offers free weights. When receiving visitors, prisoners can use the visitors' house or stay connected with loved ones using a low-technology mobile phone, which is available unsupervised for several hours each day. As at Leira, prisoners can also travel home on leave, and may receive extra leave for special occasions, such as running marathons or public performances by the prison's blues band. Bastøy is not exclusively the property of the correctional services; part of the island is public and receives visitors by boat. The public and prison areas of the island are separated and fenced off, although most of these fences are fairly standard issue and easy to climb, likely intended to mark the boundaries of the prison and prevent farm animals from wandering off. The fence surrounding the prison's lighthouse is the most traditionally prison-like feature on the island, being tall and topped with barbed wire, supposedly intended to ease the concerns of external visitors using the rentable lighthouse.

Like Leira, Bastøy was originally established as a juvenile institution for neglected boys (Ustvedt 2000). It became one of Norway's most notorious boarding schools, infamous for its brutal treatment and harsh disciplinary methods. In 1988, it was converted into a prison, which, in stark contrast to its past, is now recognized as one of the world's 'nicest' prisons (Sutter 2012). In a book chapter authored by an anonymous former prisoner (John 2018, p. 33), Bastøy is presented as 'the alternative to a high materialistic standard', with furniture from the 1990s and shared bathrooms (John 2018). The author emphasized that the most important aspect is not modern and attractive facilities, but rather the favourable and humanitarian treatment by the staff. He further commented, 'When I came to Bastøy prison, I was given responsibility and shown trust' (John 2018, p. 34). Similarly, studies of Bastøy argue that it goes beyond conventional practices in cultivating trustworthiness (Ugelvik 2021), and that the low-security levels indicate a high level of social trust (Shammas 2014). However, the latter study also points out that the ambiguity created by the available freedom can cause different kinds of prison pains, reminding us that no prison is free of pain.

## A CATALOGUE OF CHALLENGES

Out of the multiple issues that occurred during my fieldwork, COVID-19 was the most visible and immediate. In March 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, the Norwegian correctional services implemented various measures in response to the public health crisis, including efforts to reduce the prison population and suspend prisoners' visitation rights and both unescorted and escorted leaves (Sivilombudet 2020). By 7 April 2021, after three waves of infection in Norway, a total of 137 prisoners and probationers and 147 staff members had been infected, with no reported deaths (Johnsen 2022). This statistic, coupled with the fact that I was able to physically enter and collect data during the height of the pandemic, suggests that Norwegian prisons were comparably less affected by COVID-19 than prisons in many other countries. However, studies show that the measures implemented to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 caused a harsher and more restrictive prison regime, exacerbating the pre-existing prison pains (Suhomlinova *et al.* 2022; Craig *et al.* 2023). During my fieldwork, restrictions included wearing face coverings, frequent hand washing, and testing or quarantine when needed. The fieldwork at Bastøy was delayed by several months due to COVID-19 outbreaks, indicating that Bastøy was more affected than Leira. By October 2021, prisons in Norway began operating as usual again (Johnsen 2022).

In addition to pandemic-related restrictions, prisoners and staff in both prisons described changes that had been occurring over several years. These changes were connected to the so-called 'debureaucratisation and efficiency reform' (the 'ABE-reform'), a nationwide scheme introduced in 2015. This reform mandated that all government agencies increased productivity and reduce operating expenses by at least 0.5 per cent annually (Oppegaard *et al.* 2019).<sup>2</sup> Integrated into almost every state budget since its inception and throughout the governing of the centre-left coalition, this reform has resulted in government agencies being forced to reduce staff and limit services. A report analysing the operational situation of the Norwegian correctional services (Oslo Economics and Agenda Kaupang 2018) suggested that while the reform initially had no significant consequences for prison safety or service delivery, further cuts could affect these areas without broader organizational changes. This report also observed that prison operations had become more demanding due to limited economic resources; demographic changes; political priorities; and an increase in administrative tasks, resulting in staff having less time to spend with prisoners.

At Bastøy, and to some extent at Leira, the problem of limited staff resources was exacerbated by new restrictions on many routines and practices. Both prisons have historically had a lenient approach to routines and security, to align with their rehabilitation-focused ethos. This leniency, normalized partly due to the lower staffing levels in open prisons, and partly due to the perceived trustworthiness of prisoners in a low-security setting (Ugelvik 2021), contrasts with the stricter regimes in high-security prisons. This leniency also garnered political support, as seen in a 2008 report to the Parliament (St.meld. 37 2008, p. 125), which proposed the idea of 'village-based prisons' designed as 'training arenas for life skills'. This involved normal daily routines, work training, and responsibilities mirroring real life as closely as possible, including receiving salaries, paying bills, buying food and participating in meetings.<sup>3</sup> Both Bastøy and Leira were highlighted as models for such 'village prisons' back in 2008. However, during the fieldwork, prisoners at Bastøy reported more frequent rejections of their leave applications, reduced travel time during leave, and an increasing requirement to check in with local police while on leave. The previously open-door policy was replaced with a system requiring prisoners to apply for meetings with management staff, and one prisoner noted the loss of accommodations for his functional impairment. Staff also expressed frustration as carrying out activities and trips outside the prison, which had previously been easier to organize, became increasingly difficult. For example, what once required one officer to accompany a group of prisoners now required two, and external professionals, like the prison chaplain, could no longer accompany prisoners without at least one prison officer present. These changes, coupled with budget cuts and staff shortage, made it increasingly difficult to conduct activities that many staff considered vital for building trust, competence and confidence. A similar but less severe situation was reported at Leira, where staff were increasingly required to follow more security-oriented guidelines that clashed with their rehabilitative approach and pressed the prison's available resources further.

Another significant issue at Bastøy, in addition to the impact of a global pandemic and national austerity measures, was a long-term process of organizational restructuring, and multiple reports of staff misconduct. The latter gained attention in local and national media with stories of anonymous reports against staff; a culture of fear; violations of the Work Environment Act; deficiencies in management; frequent leadership changes; increased sick leave and high staff turnover (Larssen 2020; Foss 2022). The pandemic exacerbated communication difficulties in an already strained environment, with some staff members later linking the frequent

2 The budget cut required was 0.6 per cent in 2015, 0.7 per cent in 2016, 0.8 per cent in 2017 and 0.7 per cent in 2018 (Oslo Economics and Agenda Kaupang 2018).

3 See St.meld. 37 (2018) for an English summary.

turnover of upper management to the persistent austerity measures (Brønne Larssen 2023). Although these local challenges were often mentioned as the most pressing, it was difficult to disentangle the impacts of these various disruptions, which likely influenced and exacerbated one another.

## THE 'TEXTURE' OF IMPRISONMENT IN TURBULENT TIMES

It is tempting to label both Bastøy and Leira as 'shallow' and 'light' institutions. They differ significantly from more typical 'heavy' and 'deep' penal institutions by having less static security, greater autonomy, and more interaction with society outside the prison. However, a closer examination suggests that both prisons, albeit to different degrees, have recently experienced changes pushing them towards the 'heavy' and 'deep' end of the scale, with Bastøy being more affected than Leira. Firstly, opportunities for prisoners to leave the prison area, whether for escorted or unescorted leave, have decreased, contributing to a larger separation from society and increased depth. This reduction was partly due to temporary COVID-19 restrictions, but also to staff shortages and implementation of stricter routines. Secondly, there have been noticeable changes in the staff-prisoner relationship at Bastøy, with informal social interactions, such as staff visits in prisoners' accommodation houses ('coffee visits'), becoming less common. Participants observed that trust and legitimacy seemed to diminish at Bastøy, whereas it has remained seemingly intact at Leira. Bastøy is thus experienced as less staff-present and consequently more 'tight' as the reduced information flow and contact with staff increased anxiety and made prisoners more responsible for their own self-regulation. The factors distinguishing Bastøy from Leira, which may explain these differences, include its larger prison size, less institutional autonomy, and less stability of staff and routines. The latter was likely exacerbated by frequent staff turnover and uncertainties arising from the restructuring process. The following section will describe these changes in more detail.

## HOW WAS LEIRA AFFECTED?

This first part of the analysis explores the changes and impacts on Leira during the COVID-19 pandemic and budgetary constraints. The data show that staff worked to preserve a supportive environment, demonstrating resilience despite the pressure faced by the institution.

### Navigating routines during COVID-19

Originally, this study was planned to start at Bastøy, but a surge in COVID-19 cases in southeast Norway caused a seven-month delay. Instead, I began fieldwork at Leira, located in the middle of Norway in an area with fewer COVID-19 cases and less strict pandemic protocols at the time. Apart from a brief two-week lockdown, daily routines at Leira remained largely unaffected during fieldwork. Face masks and social distancing were required, but the prison's architectural layout made the latter challenging. Most rooms, including the main kitchen and common areas, are located close to the staff office, which allowed staff-prisoner interactions to continue as usual. Prisoners were only confined to their rooms when infected or exposed to infection. Visitation and leaves were periodically limited as a precaution. The garden centre was closed for shorter periods following local COVID-19 restrictions, but the remaining prison routines adhered to national guidelines issued by the Norwegian correctional service, which periodically were stricter than local COVID-19 guidelines. Some prisoners criticized the decision to keep the garden centre open while restricting visits and leaves.

However, Leira's central location, lack of fences or walls, access to daily walks, and visits by customers at the garden centre and dog day-care centre helped maintain a significant connection



with the outside world, keeping the prison environment relatively 'shallow' despite the pandemic. Whilst many COVID-19 restrictions were spoken of as boring, limiting, or depressing, they were rarely spoken of as being long-lasting. Some prisoners even had a positive take on it, as James exemplified:

The pandemic has actually been an advantage, for me at least. Everything outside is almost the same as it is here. Or it has been, they've opened up again now. So I haven't missed out on much, which is good.

As a compensatory measure, the correctional services purchased iPads to use for communication with friends and family, and both prisons started using them. This was considered a downgrade by those who normally received regular visits, while others saw the use of iPads as an enrichment.

### **Impact of budget cuts and heightened disconnection**

While the pandemic was discussed in temporary terms, the primary concern at Leira was the budget cuts imposed by the ABE-reform, amplifying the 'depth' by increasing the distance to freedom and 'weight' by adding to the psychological burden. These cuts and the resulting staff shortages forced Leira to operate with the minimum number of staff required for security purposes, causing a reduction in escorted leaves and leisure activities that required additional staff. Previously, Leira operated a shift system that included weekly 'leisure shifts', where staff organized and accompanied overnight hikes with prisoners. This unique aspect of Leira, which was spoken of warmly by both staff and prisoners, was discontinued due to its higher cost compared to regular shifts. Additionally, the budget cuts made it more challenging to give staff adequate coursing in Leira's pedagogical approach. The decrease in leaves and trips outside the prison, caused both by pandemic restrictions and budget cuts, led some prisoners to express feelings of heightened disconnection from the outside world, increasing the feeling of 'depth' and 'heaviness'. Nevertheless, many prisoners found that regular access to the pre-set walking routes offered relief from the increased 'depth' by allowing access to areas outside of the limited prison grounds.

### **Maintaining staff presence and legitimacy**

And despite these challenges, prisoners at Leira generally reported an adequate presence of staff, as illustrated in this quote from Kenneth:

I think it's very good.. [...] There are plenty of opportunities for contact. There are many [officers] to choose from, they are easily accessible, and most of them are very nice, in my opinion.

That there were plentiful opportunities for contact was regularly confirmed during my fieldwork. This extensive contact was enabled by the open-door policy in the staff office, and the prison's size, which meant that all prisoners and staff remained gathered in a few buildings. Overall, Leira managed to maintain much of its 'light-present' environment, despite budgetary cuts and pandemic measures.

While the majority of prisoners at Leira did not report a significant increase in 'pains of imprisonment', a small group of prisoners on preventive detention did experience a heightened sense of 'heaviness' and 'tightness' as a result of reduced autonomy and increased pressure to self-regulate and improve behaviour. These individuals, convicted of more serious offences and sentenced to an indefinite term of imprisonment, can only be released by a court ruling that

deems they are no longer a threat to society. The duration of their sentence is determined by personal development and risk assessment; whereas the indefinite nature of preventative detention should be compensated for by providing more individual-focused, treatment-oriented conditions (Dullum 2014). However, this also demands more documentation and resources from the prison and requires considerable personal adjustment from the prisoner and thus increasing the sense of ‘tightness’ through heightened demands for self-regulation. These conditions are more difficult to fulfil in a highly open prison with limited staff resources, which explains why many staff at Leira were sceptical of having this group there.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas decisions for the general prison population are made by Leira’s staff, decisions regarding prisoners on preventive detention—such as granting leave—are made at the regional level. This often resulted in stricter treatment and reduced autonomy—which increased the feeling of ‘depth’ and ‘weight’—as these decisions are made with the specific needs of this group in mind, rather than taking into account Leira’s intended rehabilitative approach. One of those affected, Michael, emphasized that his frustrations were not connected to Leira:

I feel I get a lot of support here. So if I am angry and pissed then it’s never due to Leira, or the staff here. I believe it’s frustrating for the staff as well, they’ve told me that it’s frustrating for them too. And it is probably mostly about ... that Leira’s assessments perhaps aren’t appreciated as much as they should be.

Prisoners can have a positive relationship with individual officers while being discontent with the system (Crewe 2011b), which appeared to be the case at Leira. The interviewed prisoners generally perceived the staff to be on the same page as them, although a few noted that some staff members were less helpful and understanding than others. The general perception of staff at Leira is illustrated by Martin’s comparison with staff at a high-security prison:

Martin: In [high-security] it was very much a top-down view towards prisoners. ‘We’re the officers, you’re the prisoners, that’s how it is. Just listen to us, we’ll tell you how it’s going to be’. No one talks to them, or anything.

Me: How are they able to be so different here?

Martin: Here they are, I feel ... they’re not just here to keep us in storage. [...] They don’t wear uniforms, which makes a big difference. [...] The officers don’t have the prison mentality, they are here to help us.

Staff were strongly motivated to continue the same approach to rehabilitation as before, and most changes in practice stemmed from specific guidelines set by higher levels of the correctional service. The unpopular changes were thus attributed to an external ‘enemy’, allowing local staff to retain a high level of legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the prisoners, who viewed them as being ‘here to help’. The continued positive staff-prisoner relationship and staff’s continued presence and helpful practice enabled Leira to maintain a more trusting and ‘light’ environment.

## HOW WAS BASTØY AFFECTED?

This second part of the analysis examines how Bastøy was affected by various challenges, particularly new management strategies and budgetary constraints. The following sections explore

4 The complexities of managing prisoners on preventive detention in a low-security setting like Leira warrant a separate, in-depth exploration that cannot be provided in this study. For further reading on this group of prisoners in general, see Dullum (2014).

the shift toward stricter regulations, the reduction of trust and flexibility, and the difficulties arising from a reduced staff presence.

### Stricter regulation

Bastøy suffered from a high turnover both in general staff and in management staff in particular. A few prisoners commented that each new manager introduced 'increasingly strict changes' (fieldnotes). Alf, one of the prisoners, reflected on these changes, stated:

I was happy. [...] I had heard that they [at Bastøy] were really kind with exits, leaves and stuff. It was a contrast to come from high security and here. [...] And they showed that they trusted you. You went on leave, you came back. I had been doing that on Bastøy for years, and it was all going really well. Until the new management started. [...] And the first thing I noticed was that they were stricter.

Although it was challenging to pinpoint the exact nature of these restrictions, this speaks to a general feeling of continuous changes that rarely favoured the prisoners and intensified the sense of 'weight'.

Management staff at Bastøy informed me early in my fieldwork that I would likely hear about prisoners' discontent regarding leaves. From the management's perspective, the practice of granting leaves at Bastøy had previously been more lenient than in other prisons, and the recent changes were intended to align Bastøy's practices more closely with what they perceived as 'normal' (fieldnotes). Furthermore, processing leave applications required administrative resources, and escorted leaves demanded staff resources, both of which were impacted by budget cuts. As opportunities to interact with society and take breaks from prison decreased, so did the feeling of being in a 'shallow' prison system. Unlike at Leira, prisoners at Bastøy were not free to walk outside of the prison grounds, nor did they regularly see 'normal people' beside prisoners and staff. Thus, Bastøy's isolation on an island likely intensified the sense of being 'deep' within the prison system.

### Reduction of elasticity and trust

Those familiar with earlier practices observed that the prison had become more security-oriented and less trusting than before, increasing the sense of 'weight'. Fred remarked on the changes since his arrival: 'Things have become more difficult. Everything has been tightened up...' In a similar vein, Christoffer noted: 'It's more restricted now; before, it was more, you know, elastic'. Prisoners experienced increased delays and stricter conditions when applying for leave, alongside the general tightening of routines, which contributed to a heightened sense of control. The continual shift towards more stringent practices further intensified the 'weight' of imprisonment as prisoners experienced a reduction in autonomy and trust.

While stricter routines might reduce reliance on self-control, potentially decreasing 'tightness', the constant changes in routines and practices instead led to a reduced sense of stability and increased uncertainty, which ultimately aggravated the feeling of 'tightness'. Magne illustrated this with his experience: 'I came back from leave yesterday and had some money with me, which has been permitted before. But suddenly, it's not allowed, so I had a bad experience as a result'. A staff member pointed out that the tightening of practice, combined with limited resources, created a spiral of rejections and misinformation, causing prisoners to develop their own interpretations of the reasoning behind these changes. Often, changes were interpreted as a lack of trust. Tightening their routines conveyed a message that prisoners were deemed less trustworthy, and limited the amount of outside activities, as more security-oriented routines required additional staff resources.

During my fieldwork, Bastøy installed a CCTV camera, the first of its kind at the prison. This development was negatively perceived by the majority of the prisoners:

I enjoyed myself very much at Bastøy prison. Of course, there has been a new administration at Bastøy, tightening the reins a bit, if you can call it that, making it a bit more restrictive. They're installing cameras, among other things, so you feel more monitored. Before, you had a bit more freedom. (Marcus)

As expressed by several participants, the camera signalled a shift towards a 'heavier' and 'deeper' high-security environment, symbolizing a departure from trust-based practices towards increased surveillance. It also served as a stark reminder that Bastøy is, ultimately, a prison and that the participants were viewed as untrustworthy. Ugelvik's (2021, p. 10) study shed light on Bastøy's practices for fostering trust and adapting rules to encourage change, and while Ugelvik's research was conducted a few years prior to mine the sense of trust he described was still evident among several of the prisoners. Yet, prisoners I interviewed who had been at Bastøy for a while noted a decrease in trust, as illustrated by Bob:

Here, it's very trust-based, or has been, at least. Now it seems like that's changing too, with things tightening up... so it's becoming more and more like a closed prison, at least when it comes to rules.

This reduced willingness to adjust routines and practice in order to accommodate individual needs—or 'bend rules to support change' (Ugelvik 2021, p. 10)—was evident in cases like that of William and Thomas. William experienced increased well-being when working with farm animals and was considered trustworthy and resourceful. He had been allowed to use the prison's vehicles to minimize walking, due to limited mobility from health issues. However, this was revoked by the new management. Thomas also received much-appreciated assistance from a staff member in order to keep his job outside of prison, yet felt that this needed to be kept discreet:

Yes, I got the impression at least that it shouldn't be discussed openly. I don't know if it is ... it is not illegal, I think. But it's not standard practice, so if the wrong person learns that I'm allowed to send work-related documents, they might put a stop to it, I don't know.

In these examples, the sense of both 'tightness' and 'heaviness' was heightened. Thomas felt the need to hide the fact that he was receiving assistance with work, while William felt that the new management ignored his health needs as well as his positive work history at Bastøy. These changed dynamics between staff and prisoners affected the sense of 'tightness' as trust-based and predictable relationships eroded.

### Internal tensions and absent staff

Some staff members commented that they had been too lenient with their procedures in the past, whilst others expressed disagreement with the new development. This variation in opinions among staff was also noticeable among prisoners:

There are certain staff who are ... what can I say, certain staff who are really busy following rules and following the new management. Many of the old staff are quite liberal, walk around and talk with ... they are more discerning than the others. They also feel like it has gotten too strict here. (Steve)

This created a problematic limbo, with staff struggling to address prisoners' frustrations while feeling scrutinized themselves. According to staff interviews and observations, both the reported cases of staff misconduct and the restructuring process—which had undergone several rounds, over extended periods of time—led to a lack of stability and trust among the staff. This tension and growing sense of disagreement did not go unnoticed by prisoners:

There are two fractions among the officers. There's resistance. How can I explain it ... Some are trying to squeeze each other out, it seems. Like they are... they don't dare say anything. They have a lot to say, but don't dare say anything. (Simon)

Constructive and balanced staff-prisoner relationships have been highlighted as an essential part of Scandinavian exceptionalism (Pratt 2008; Pratt and Eriksson 2013). While Leira managed to maintain these relationships, many of the previously held routines and activities that helped foster these relationships at Bastøy, diminished. COVID-19 lockdowns and budget cuts significantly impacted informal interactions and staff-prisoner relationships at Bastøy. Prisoners were instructed to remain in their respective houses to maintain social distancing—halting all coffee invitations and informal staff visits, and staff only entered houses briefly for routine searches. Budget cuts and staff shortages also hindered the implementation of prisoner programs, that staff valued for their role in rehabilitation and fostering positive staff-prisoner relationships. After lockdowns, returning to the previous routines and level of informal interactions between staff and prisoners proved difficult—not only because routines had changed and new prisoners were unfamiliar with interacting informally with staff, but also due to reduced staff resources.

The physical space and vast distances, usually symbols of freedom at Bastøy, became increasingly a social barrier in the face of staff shortages, pandemic restrictions and the removal of the seemingly open-door policy of the administration. Additionally, having few natural meeting points and a larger prison population spread over a vast area, Bastøy became increasingly 'staff-absent'. The new management was also perceived as less accessible—or more 'absent'. Alf shared his experience with the different managements he had experienced:

Before, you could go and knock on the door and talk to the management, legal staff, or whoever it was if you had any questions. You could do that, and then you were met with, 'What can we help you with?' Right? They were helpful. But today, it's not like that. [...] We have to ask our contact officer, and the contact officer has to ask the senior officer, and the senior officer has to ask so and so. The distance to the administration has become really large. It's more or less impossible.

One visible sign of this staff absence was that it became easier to avoid work responsibilities, a fact prisoners remarked frequently. This is how Johan explained the previous situation at Bastøy when asked about the current developments: *'It wasn't possible to just stay in the house, so to speak. They [staff] came around. If we were in the house, we got into trouble, really'*. Tellingly, the situation of increased staff absence due to staffing shortages was part of the rationale for installing the aforementioned CCTV camera. It was intended to monitor unwanted situations during the daily head count. With 125 prisoners gathered in one place, it was impossible to oversee everything, and staff were informed that some of the more vulnerable prisoners felt unsafe. However, prisoners perceived the camera as a symbol of higher security, shifting Bastøy towards a more restrictive and 'heavier' environment.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that prisoners in both institutions were affected by multiple challenges and disruptions, but those at Bastøy were more significantly affected. While Bastøy remained



'shallow' and 'light' in many ways, several changes—such as the installation of a CCTV camera, fewer escorted and unescorted leaves, more restrictive routines, less individualization and fewer exceptions granted—contributed to an increased sense of 'depth' and 'heaviness'. These elements were frequent reminders that people were considered untrustworthy and were often interpreted as deliberate displays of authority. The continuous changes in routines, the fear of further restrictions, and the high turnover of staff and leadership created uncertainty and unpredictability, heightening the sense of 'tightness'. These experiences were also shaped by unmet expectations that prisoners had previously held of Bastøy before arriving and a growing fear of a progressive 'deepening' of the prison environment.

These ongoing changes and the progressive 'deepening' were possible due to the discretionary nature of prison rules, which could be interpreted as more or less restrictive by staff. Prison staff, acting as street-level bureaucrats, are workers who interpret and implement government policy while interacting with citizens (Lipsky 2010), or as Shannon and Page (2014, p. 631) describe, the 'face of the state behind the walls'. Street-level bureaucrats wield considerable discretionary power in determining how policies are enacted, including the amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided (Lipsky 2010). This discretionary power can sometimes conflict with overarching principles, such as the right to health or the prohibition of discrimination, particularly in the absence of juridical oversight. These tensions existed before the challenges documented in this article, but the disruptions seem to have further blurred these boundaries. The task of translating policy into practice is deeply embedded in the knowledge formed through staff-prisoner relationships (Liebling 2000). As one of the most decisive differences between the two prisons was the deterioration of staff-prisoner relationships at Bastøy, it is likely that this task has been affected.

Historically, Leira and Bastøy have operated with greater flexibility, allowing local staff to manage daily interactions and requests through their discretionary power as street-level bureaucrats. However, the findings from this study indicate a decline in local autonomy at both prisons, with prisoners suggesting that this reduction may hinder the prisons' ability to offer individualized services and build trust. Compared to Ugelvik's study (2021), which highlights the importance of 'bending rules' to maintain trust, my findings reveal an increasingly 'restricted' and less 'elastic' environment at Bastøy, leading to reduced trust. This suggests that elasticity helps foster environments where trust can thrive and individual needs are prioritized. At Bastøy however, there appeared to be a notable shift toward increased standardization and reduced flexibility, which may hinder these dynamics. These observations indicate that elasticity is crucial for maintaining this balance, and its absence can undermine a prison's exceptional status.

This study raises crucial questions about how to uphold the humane and rehabilitative approach in the face of a shifting penal environment and ongoing challenges. Proactively addressing these challenges will be vital for preserving the core elements that define Nordic exceptionalism. Even during challenging and disruptive times, the prison conditions described in this article would still be considered exceptional in most other countries. The claim of Nordic exceptionalism can be viewed as absolute—'Nordic prisons are humane'—or relative—'Nordic prisons are more humane than the other prisons' (Crewe *et al.* 2023). Relatively speaking, Bastøy and Leira continue to stand out as exceptional. However, in absolute terms, some of the key elements that have defined Bastøy in scholarly discussions—soft values such as trust and emphasis on informal staff-prisoner relationships (Andvig *et al.* 2018; Ugelvik 2021)—have seen a noticeable decline. I argue that Leira's 'exceptionality' is better preserved due to stable routines, low staff turnover, partially continued institutional autonomy, and its smaller size and population. Prisoners' opinions on the prison climate are also best understood in relative terms—those at Bastøy often compared their experience with past ones or with expectations based on others' experiences, leading some to feel that reality falls short of the promise of something

much 'lighter'. To maintain penal exceptionalism, in absolute terms, it is essential to focus on preserving these positive aspects.

The expansive prison grounds, combined with staff shortages, high staff turnover, and social distancing, meant that informal interactions were harder to come by at Bastøy. Social distancing and high staff turnover further weakened social bonds, whilst local conflicts and poor communication diminished staff legitimacy and weakened the sense of predictability and safety for both staff and prisoners. By contrast, staff at Leira were more unified, and prisoners experienced greater continuity. The staff made concerted efforts to maintain normal routines and a rehabilitative approach, which helped sustain positive relationships. The absence of uniforms likely lessened the typical, hierarchical divide between staff and prisoners. Increased 'heaviness' and 'tightness' at Leira were mostly experienced by prisoners on preventive detention, who were under regional, rather than local, jurisdiction. The presence of this external authority as a scapegoat for dissatisfaction helped preserve close staff-prisoner relationships based on trust. Meanwhile, at Bastøy, dissatisfaction was directed internally at the 'new management' for enforcing changes in procedure and routines, which disrupted the overall prison environment.

Understanding these prisons' situation necessitates considering broader trends within the Norwegian correctional service. Norway is moving further away from using smaller and open prisons: in recent years, seven open prisons, five similar in size to Leira or smaller, have closed. Leira's smaller size and population helped facilitate more informal and positive staff-prisoner interactions. In contrast, Bastøy's larger size, coupled with staff shortage and social distancing measures, created a social barrier. This aligns with findings from a study on Norwegian high-security prisons, which concluded that smaller prisons foster better staff-prisoner relationships, likely due to a decentralized, less hierarchical structure, greater transparency and more frequent, informal day-to-day interactions (Johnsen *et al.* 2011). This likely holds true for low-security prisons as well; Pratt (2008) emphasized the importance of small, open prisons in his 'Nordic exceptionalism' thesis.

The trend now favors standardized, higher-security prisons that are quick to build and capable of housing greater numbers (Johnsen *et al.* 2023). Although cost-effective, these prisons have faced criticism for not prioritizing prisoners' well-being and constructing architectural layouts that hinder the organic growth of staff-prisoner relationships, reflective of Liebling's (2011) observations of the shift from welfare-oriented thinking to greater 'economic rationality'. Across the correctional services, budget cuts and staff shortages have also led to reduced dynamic security, even in 'exceptional' prisons. Halden, the 'flagship' of Norwegian high-security prisons, was initially funded to suit the needs of its unique architectural layout but is now subject to the same budget constraints as other prisons, leading to dissatisfaction among staff and prisoners (Letvik 2021).

Another significant shift is that toward reduced local autonomy and increased homogeneity under the centralized correctional service. This shift is said to promote more equal treatment of prisoners and prevent inconsistent standards as a strong emphasis on individual and discretionary decisions in prison can contribute to a weakening in legitimacy (Lundeberg and Mjåland 2016)). However, reduced local autonomy challenges the preservation of each prison's unique qualities. Christie (1970), used this argument to advocate for more autonomous prison systems, viewing prisons' autonomy as essential for achieving therapeutic outcomes.

COVID-19 was another layer of disruption that added complexity to daily life, and it was often discussed as a temporary disruption that had caused worry, irritation and boredom. While the pandemic did not seem to dominate people's concerns for the future, it did add complexity to day-to-day life and exacerbated existing issues, especially at Bastøy, where social distancing and lockdowns weakened traditions of informal staff-prisoner interactions. It is also worth noting that fieldwork began after the peak of COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns in Norway; sentiments might have differed if data had been collected earlier.

## CONCLUSION

This paper extends the contemporary history of Norwegian penal policy and advances the theoretical discussion on the Nordic exceptionalism thesis. By empirically exploring two ‘exceptional’ open prisons, it highlights how systemic challenges are reshaping Norway’s open penal landscape. The findings from Bastøy and Leira illustrate the uneven impact of these disruptions and challenges. Bastøy experienced more severe consequences, consistent with the ‘warning’ I received on my first day of fieldwork—that it was the ‘worst possible time’ to visit. Although Bastøy faced additional local disruptions, the prison’s larger size and reduced local autonomy likely intensified the effects of these disruptions and challenges experienced. By contrast, Leira managed to maintain staff presence and preserve staff-prisoner relationships. Budget cuts curtailed activities in both prisons, reflecting broader trends across the Norwegian correctional service. These developments, along with the ongoing shift towards closing small, open prisons and constructing large, high-security prisons, risk eroding the ‘exceptionality’ associated with Norwegian prisons. This paper identifies three critical steps to safeguard humane and rehabilitative practices; prioritizing smaller prisons, ensuring sufficient resources, and granting prisons greater local autonomy to foster elasticity and maintain staff’s discretionary power.

It was a challenging time to conduct research and an equally challenging time for prisons to be the focus of research, as the tension between the ideals of Nordic exceptionalism and the realities of a penal system increasingly shaped by unforeseen challenges and austerity measures became apparent. The staff I interacted with expressed a strong desire to uphold or reclaim their ‘exceptional’ reputation of fostering humane and rehabilitative practices. Yet, the progressive ‘deepening’ of the penal system and shifting policy priorities presented significant barriers. While the COVID-19 pandemic and, in Bastøy’s case, internal conflicts played a role, these challenges seemed primarily driven by austerity, instability, and diminishing trust. Such challenges can arise independently or reinforce another, and no prison—regardless of its ‘exceptional’ status—is immune to such impact on its prison environment.

While both prisons remain broadly consistent with the core principles of Nordic exceptionalism, visible cracks in the framework signal the need for urgent action. If left unchecked, these cracks could deepen, threatening the very foundation of exceptionalism. This study underlines the critical point that exceptionality is not static. A strong positive label or narrative can create an illusion of permanence, yet the conditions that sustain exceptionalism are vulnerable to negative trends and disruptions. Just as all prisons are dynamic social institutions, constantly evolving. Any country that seeks to remain at the forefront of progressive penal policy must continuously invest in its system, ensure stability, and uphold trust.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Thomas Ugelvik, Rose Lunde, Yvonne Jewkes, Sveinung Sandberg and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback. As well, a special thanks to everyone at Bastøy and Leira prison for generously sharing their experiences and perspectives.

## FUNDING

This work was supported by the Norwegian Research Council (grant number VAM 300995).

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