

THE ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE



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About this reader

This reader was written within the scope of the INSPIRE project funded by the EU Erasmus+ Programme, implemented by the following consortium: RESCALED (European Office), Reshape (Portugal), Restorative Justice Nederland (Netherlands), WayBack (Norway) and RUBIKON (Czech Republic).

Initially used as a supporting material for the INSPIRE training academy, this reader details the (implementation of the) ecosystem of a detention house. Its purpose was to explore the ecosystem within and around the detention house, its intersections with other societal systems and its (im)balances to better understand the pathway to systemic change.

In particular, it i) acknowledges the ongoing and dynamic interaction between the individual, the context of the detention house and the wider community or society around the detention house; ii) observes disruptive and harmonious factors which influence detention on various levels; iii) explores the relationship with Restorative Cities.

Understanding and Visualising The Ecosystem Perspective



Detention houses have emerged at the **local, national, and European levels**, garnering increasing attention from policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and civil society.



This document explores the ecosystem perspective on detention houses, including disruptive and harmonious factors, theoretical underpinnings based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems' theory, and the relationship to Restorative Cities.

By examining all dimensions - including **social, economic, and cultural factors** - we can identify the disruptive and harmonious elements that impact these facilities. This comprehensive perspective highlights the need for **systemic change**, ensuring that the transition from large prison institutions to detention houses not only aims for reduced incarceration rates but also fosters inclusivity, safety, and sustainability within our communities. Only through this systemic lens can we truly measure the effectiveness of reforms and work towards a more equitable justice system.



The Ecosystem Perspective

Detention houses are characterised by three principles: small-scale, differentiation and community-integration. When many small detention houses are located in the community, and differ from each other they can provide the right context for each individual. These three principles are connected and reinforce each other. To fully grasp the value and potential of detention houses, we consider all dimensions of their ecosystem.

Small-Scale

At RESCALED, size is a means to achieve closeness and belonging, rather than an end in itself. Detention houses, with a capacity of 8 to 30 people, emphasize community and meaningful relationships. Hence, it is not about numbers. **It is about people.**

In these small-scale facilities, the environment is less bureaucratic and anonymous than in large prison institutions, allowing for a more **personal approach** and fostering **dynamic security**. The approachable nature of staff in these settings enhances feelings of safety and helps prevent or quickly resolve incidents. Except in rare high-risk cases, incarcerated individuals live communally, share responsibilities, and learn to navigate the complexities of group living.



The small-scale nature of detention houses also strengthens ties with the community as they are more likely to be located in neighbourhoods accessible to staff, NGOs, and visitors. Small-scale facilities tend to be **more visitor-friendly than large prison institutions**, which is particularly relevant when the visitors are children.

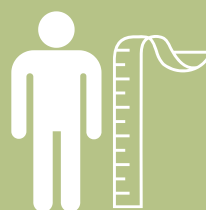


Differentiation

Because detention houses are small and there are many of them, they offer the flexibility to provide housing that best suits each individual's needs, enabling them to fulfil their potential. This approach, known as differentiation, involves placing people in contexts **tailored to their specific needs and conditions.**

High-security measures, typical of large prison institutions, are necessary for only few individuals and often make reintegration more challenging. In contrast, most incarcerated individuals benefit from lower security settings, which are not only more cost-effective to build and operate but also better suited to preparing them for reintegration. In a detention house, security may consist of (a combination of) **relational security, static security and procedural security measures.**

Instead of relying on traditional 'low-medium-high security' classifications, security is adjusted based on a scale from many restrictive measures in freedom of movement to very few measures and an individual's gradual regain of liberty.



Differentiated facilities, offering comprehensive and personalised support services, activities, and programs, ensure that incarceration aligns with each person's needs, ultimately making the reintegration process smoother and more beneficial for both the individual and society.

Detention houses are not isolated from society. They are integrated within the community, located at an accessible distance from the incarcerated persons' social network and the community where they will be living after release.



Community-Integration

This enables a dynamic interaction with local stakeholders: teachers, psychologists, social workers, health care professionals and sports coaches, as well as local governments and volunteers from the community. Thus, people in detention houses make use of the same service providers as everyone else in the neighbourhood, and in low-security settings, they can go out to meet these providers.

This **continuity helps build relationships** that will support their reintegration after release.

These initiatives allow incarcerated people to engage in meaningful activities that benefit society and themselves, helping to restore the harm caused by their offences both symbolically and financially. Even in high-security detention houses, added value can be created by sharing spaces with local NGOs or community groups.

Why not let the local art school gather in the detention house visiting room when it is not in use?

By fostering **thorough preparation and ongoing dialogue with the neighbourhood**, community-integrated detention houses contribute to a general sense of safety, fairness, and justice.



The Healthy Ecosystem of a Detention House



The ecosystem of a detention house is shaped by the individuals that are connected to the detention house, their communities and society as a whole, which all mutually influence each other.

Incarcerated people, staff members, visitors and local service providers **interact in a web of relationships**, together shaping the social environment in and around the detention house.

These relationships can be facilitated, or impeded or blocked, by other features like architectural design, work and education opportunities, psychosocial support, staff well-being, the use of technology etc.



Considering all these dimensions in and around a detention house in a holistic way is what we call the ecosystem perspective on detention houses.

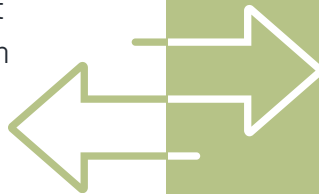
Harmonious and disruptive factors?



The ecosystem of a detention house is not limited to the physical boundaries of the detention house, nor is it limited to the boundaries of the criminal justice system.

On the contrary, it exists at the junction of other ecosystems: that of the criminal justice system, the (mental) health care system, the education system, the employment system etc.

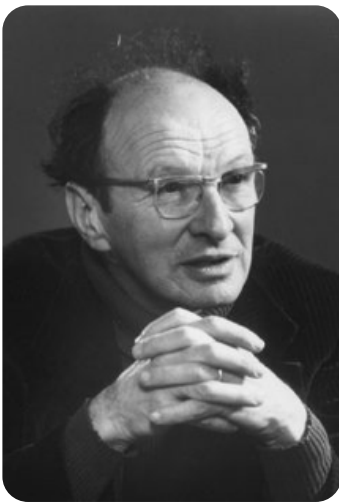
In healthy ecosystems, all different elements reinforce each other when they interact to form an effective and harmonious system.



The reverse can also happen: a disruptive factor can throw the ecosystem out of balance.

IMPORTANT NOTE: In defining the ecosystem of a detention house, it is imperative to engage people with lived-experience. Their perspectives and insights are essential to understanding the complexity of the system and ensuring that policy and practice align with the needs and realities of those directly affected by detention.

Theoretical Background: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Urie Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American psychologist, made important contributions to the field of developmental psychology through his seminal work on ecological systems theory.

Originally introduced as a conceptual model in the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework evolved into a fully developed theoretical model in the 1980s. This evolution included critical reflection on his earlier work, recognizing the importance of both environmental factors and the active role individuals play in their own development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development differs from traditional developmental theories by emphasizing the

intricate layers of influence that shape an individual's personality, behaviour and decisions.

The essence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model lies in the recognition of the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environment. Human development is seen as a symbiotic process, in which individuals both shape and are shaped by their environment. This perspective, often referred to as the "bio-ecological" model, highlights the complex interrelationships between individuals, society and the historical period in which they live, which ultimately influence behavior and developmental outcomes. His theory emphasizes the importance of considering multiple levels of influence on development, ranging from the immediate environment to broader social contexts. In doing so, he makes a division between five layers: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to the justice system and more specifically, detention houses, allows us to gain a better understanding of human development and behaviour leading to more meaningful interventions and support systems.

THE ECOSYSTEM OF DETENTION FACILITIES

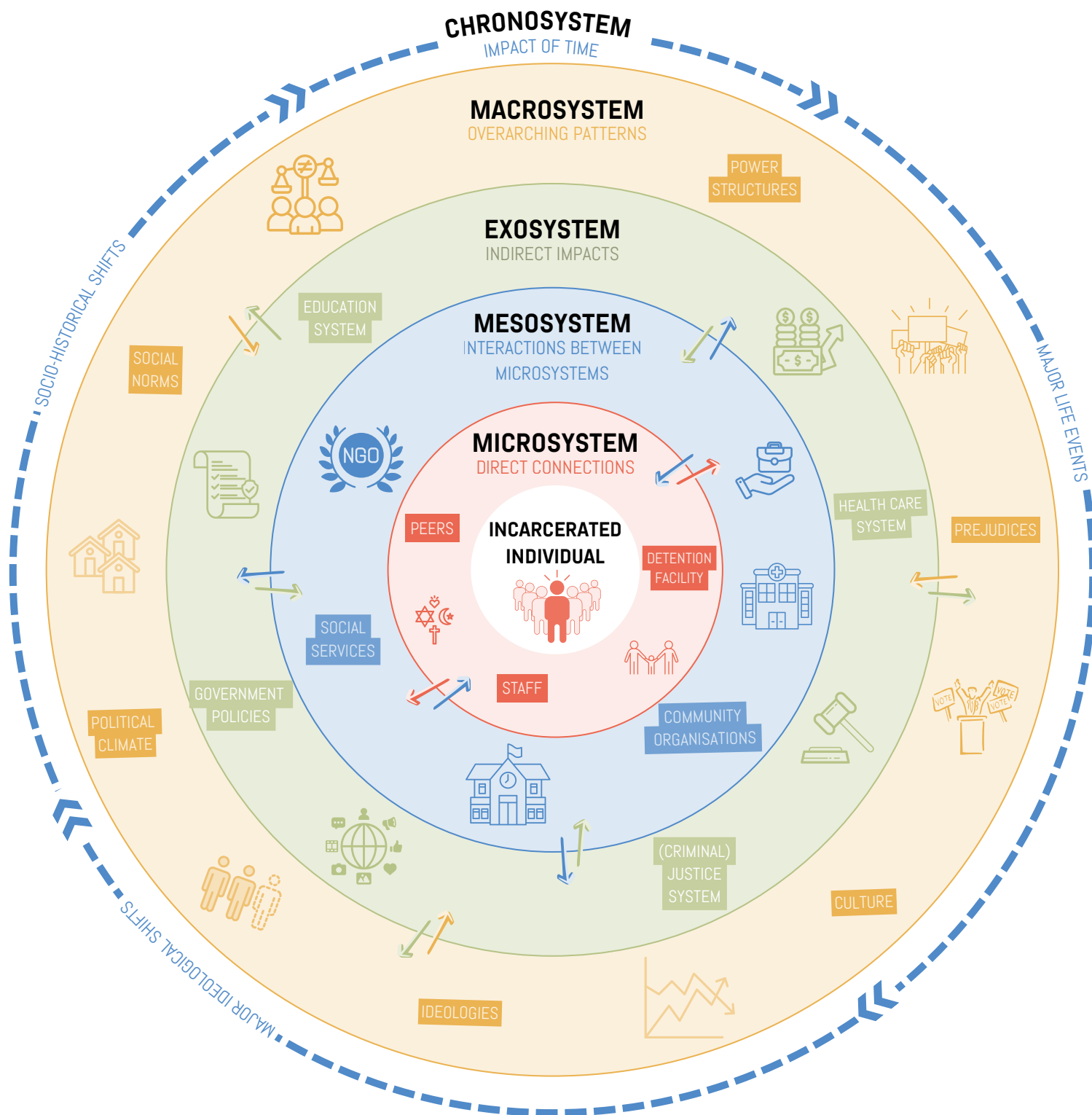


Fig. 1 developed by RESCALED according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems' theory

Levels of influence

01

Microsystem

The most immediate environment, including family, peers, staff, and the detention facility itself, directly influences individuals' development and well-being. Positive interactions within this microsystem can foster resilience and enhance individuals' ability to cope with challenges.

02

Mesosystem

This encompasses the interactions between various microsystems, such as the relationships between the detention house and community organisations such as care facilities, schools, employers, and social services. These connections can enhance or hinder the support individuals receive, emphasizing the need for collaboration among different systems to promote successful reintegration. The meso level highlights the complex and interdisciplinary nature of the challenges and opportunities surrounding detention and its interaction with the broader community, where different systems and contexts influence and shape each other.

03

Exosystem

External factors that indirectly impact individuals, such as government policies, community resources, and social services, play a crucial role in shaping experiences within detention facilities. Changes in the exosystem, such as shifts in funding or legislation, can have significant implications for the quality of care and support available to individuals.

04

Macrosystem

The broader cultural, societal, and ideological context influences individuals' opportunities and experiences within the detention house. Legislation around labour and employment, staff training, social security, health care, urban development, cultural norms, prejudices, and power structures all shape the environment in which detention houses operate, impacting access to resources and support for incarcerated individuals. Social inequality, stigma, and discrimination can impede access to care and rehabilitation, as well as opportunities for successful reintegration after incarceration.



05

Chronosystem

This dimension considers the impact of time, including major life events that affect individuals and communities, as well as broader socio-historical shifts such as the War on Drugs, the victims' rights movement, and the rise of mass incarceration. Changes in the chronosystem can influence development at all other levels of the ecological system. This is particularly relevant when considering our rapidly changing society:

Both technological and artificial intelligence systems play an increasingly bigger role in the justice system and, if not well-thought-out and monitored, come with severe consequences. Increased public awareness and (grassroots) movement also influence perceptions on the justice system, highlighting systemic injustices and racial disparities in incarceration. This has led to public demand for accountability, policy reform, and greater transparency within the justice system.

Examples of Disruptive and Harmonious Factors

While the ecosystem of a detention house can support positive interactions and outcomes, several disruptive factors can impede this harmony. Understanding these factors is crucial to support a well-functioning ecosystem and the wider impact of society. In this section, we will outline various examples of disruptive and harmonious factors. These examples were collected based on visits to prisons and detention houses, as well as interactions with staff, media, people with lived experience, etc. However, it is important to note that many more factors exist.

Staff shortages

A chronic lack of staff in detention facilities can lead to increased workloads and a decline in the quality of care. Insufficient staffing often results in burnout and diminished morale, which limits the ability to provide individualised support. This, in turn, negatively impacts the well-being of both staff and individuals in detention. For example, in a facility where a person benefited from a dedicated case manager who provided essential guidance, that case manager left because of overwhelming demands. As a result, the former staff member felt happy yet aware of the limitations faced by others, highlighting the broader problem of inadequate staffing faced by many people in such settings.

Substance use

Substance use remains a pervasive issue within detention facilities, often leading to rule violations and increased rates of recidivism. The normalisation of alcohol use in broader society complicates efforts to maintain a sober environment in detention houses. Addressing this challenge requires innovative approaches, such as enhancing collaboration with addiction services and implementing harm reduction strategies that prioritise recovery while in detention.

Mismatch of opportunities

The work and education opportunities available within detention facilities should align with those in the community. When individuals develop skills that do not translate to meaningful employment post-release - such as sewing and pottery - it can disrupt their reintegration efforts. Ensuring that vocational education and training aligns with labour market needs is vital for enhancing the employability of individuals upon release.



Disruptive Factors

Lack of discretionary space

Penal system constraints can limit the discretionary space available to facilities, impeding their ability to adapt to the needs of individuals. For instance, mandatory transport methods (e.g., cuffs and prison vehicles) can hinder opportunities for individuals to attend job interviews or community programs, disrupting their reintegration process. Finding ways to balance security concerns with the need for autonomy and dignity is essential for fostering successful outcomes.

Housing instability

Stable housing is critical for successful reintegration; however, many detention houses struggle to forge strong connections with organisations that assist individuals in securing stable housing. This lack of collaboration can create significant gaps in the support system for those transitioning back into the community. For example, in the Netherlands, while some facilities do engage with housing projects, this connection is not consistently applied, highlighting the challenges faced in providing adequate support upon release.

Media influence

Media narratives can significantly impact public perception and judicial decisions, often leading to increased pressure on the justice system. When sensationalised media coverage shapes perceptions of incarcerated individuals, it can reinforce stigma and result in policy decisions that adversely affect treatment and rehabilitation pathways. For example, the phenomenon known as the "Michael P. effect" in the Netherlands illustrates how media attention can shape these outcomes. Following the murder of Anne Faber in 2017, judges became more inclined to impose treatment and placement orders (TBS) when suspects refused to cooperate with behavioral assessments.

Mental health

The interplay between mental health and incarceration creates a reciprocal relationship that poses significant challenges. Poor mental health can be exacerbated by the conditions within detention facilities, including overcrowding, lack of privacy, and limited access to mental health services. Conversely, individuals with pre-existing mental health illnesses may struggle to cope with the stresses of incarceration. The lack of continuity in mental health care post-release further complicates the integration process.

1 The term "Michael P. effect" refers to the impact Michael P.'s case has had on the Dutch legal system and society. Michael P. was convicted in 2017 for the murder of Anne Faber, a young woman killed during a bike ride. His case revealed several weaknesses in the Dutch criminal and tbs (terbeschikkingstelling) system.



Harmonious Factors

Positive Staff Engagement

Supportive and engaged staff can foster relational security and create a constructive social climate within detention houses. This creates space to offer personalised support and enables staff to closely collaborate with other actors in the ecosystem, such as potential employers and visitors to the detention house. It also redefines the relationship between staff and people in detention, overcoming prejudice and stereotypes that may hinder their relationship.

Community Partnerships

Building strong partnerships with local organisations, such as schools, healthcare providers, and mental health services, can enhance the integration of incarcerated individuals into the community and the quality of those services. For example, a facility in which residents work or volunteer in a care home for elderly people benefits their individual trajectory. It also offers value to the patients receiving care, alleviates pressure due to staff shortages and supports the wider community such as the elderly people's social networks.

Holistic Approaches

Incorporating a holistic view of people's needs is essential for the challenges posed by social issues such as substance use, housing instability, and mental health. Political support and public policies that acknowledge the shared responsibilities of social systems can initiate wider justice reform. This affects multiple layers such as the mesosystem (health care services for substance use disorders and mental health, government agencies tackling housing instability etc.) and the microsystem (strengthened support for individuals in finding housing and continuing their care services post-release).

Tailored Education and Work Opportunities

Detention houses can help assess the skills level and knowledge of individuals from the first day of detention. This informs the person's choice to stay employed in their field or start an education for a new degree or profession. Leaving the detention house with an employment opportunity of which one sees its purpose can ultimately lead to financial stability and support one's social life. In addition, the person helps build a just, diverse and resilient (local) economy with their purchasing power, by paying taxes and by sharing their skills and knowledge as an active citizen of society.

Accurate Representation of Justice

Accurately representing the justice system in schools, media articles, and both fictional and non-fictional TV programs can enhance public awareness, humanise those affected by the system, and educate communities about the root causes of crime, particularly social issues. Acknowledging systemic inequalities and the shared responsibilities of social systems reinforces the necessity for a justice system that serves citizens rather than disadvantages them. This approach can positively influence the political climate, as well as related legislation and practices.

How the Ecosystem Perspective connects to Restorative Cities and Social Enterprises

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Social enterprises play a vital role in this ecosystem, bridging the gap between the social aspects of incarceration and employment opportunities. These initiatives can facilitate smoother transitions from incarceration to post-release employment, providing individuals with the skills, training, and support necessary to thrive in the community. By connecting employers, employees, and clients meaningfully, social enterprises can contribute to reducing recidivism and fostering a more inclusive society.

RESTORATIVE CITIES

A Restorative City encompasses a holistic and integrated, or even circular, approach to justice, which includes both doing justice and undoing injustice, often related to environmental, social, societal, cultural, and economic factors. The concept is a response to the current social challenges caused by rapid urbanisation, environmental degradation, and the need for more sustainable and livable urban spaces. It aligns with a growing awareness of the interconnectedness between the built environment, the well-being of individuals in communities, and (social and criminal) justice.

Restorative cities examine the connection between (in)justice and detention houses, seeking solutions at the micro, meso and macro levels, involving communities in the process. By integrating detention houses into the fabric of the restorative community, we can promote a more holistic approach that prioritises healing, support, and integration.



THE ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

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