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an ethnographic study conducted mid-pandemic**  
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# Prisoners' experiences and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic response

By

## Abstract

**Design/methodology/approach:** Data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork involving days of observations (N = 24) and the conduction of semi-structured interviews with prisoners (N = 30) in closed prisons and detentions in Denmark between May and December 2021. The transcribed interviews and fieldnotes were processed and coded by using the software programme Nvivo.

**Purpose:** This article reports findings about how prisoners experience and cope with COVID-19 restrictions, which can contribute to an understanding of how pandemic responses, and specifically the COVID-19 response, affect prisoners.

**Findings:** The data analysis reveals that the pains of imprisonment have been exacerbated to people incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. To relieve pains of imprisonment, prisoners turn to censoriousness as an informal coping strategy, where they complain about inconsistency and injustice in the prison's COVID-19 prevention strategy to reveal the prison system itself as a rule breaking institution. The prisoners criticise the prison management for using COVID-19 as an excuse, treating prisoners unjustly or not upholding the COVID-19 rules and human rights. Furthermore, principles of justice and equality are also alleged by some prisoners who contemplate the difficulty in treating all prisoners the same.

**Research limitation/implications:** More research will be needed to create a full picture of how prisoners cope with pandemic responses. Further research could include interviews with people working inside prisons.

**Originality/value:** In a Scandinavian context, this study is the first of its kind to apply an ethnographic approach in exploring prison life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords: covid-19, prisons, the pains of imprisonment, censoriousness, prison ethnography, qualitative prison research*

## 1. Introduction

Whilst lockdown, isolation and quarantine became a part of many people's vocabulary in the time after COVID-19 broke out in 2020, the meaning of these words remains acutely consequential in the context of our penal systems. Protecting prisoner's right to health under the European Convention of Human Rights, article 3, is a state obligation and the measures to safeguard this right have been manifold during the pandemic, with suspension of visits and limited activity in prisons as a common denominator in many national prison services' responses (World Health Organization, 2020). The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (CPT) stresses in a position paper of March 12 2020, that suspension of all activities in prison can be reasonable but should be compensated to protect prisoners fundamental rights (CPT, 2020). Also, WHO stated that people deprived of their liberty might react differently to restrictions than the general population (World Health Organization, 2020). In some countries, prisoners responded to the restricted regime by rioting violently, and a number of these riots had fatal outcomes, e.g. in Italian prisons where riots caused the death of 12 prisoners (Sorge et al., 2021). In Denmark, prisoners did not turn to violent riots, but in April 2020 a large group of prisoners protested the COVID-19 restrictions in Horsørød Prison and in Vestre Prison, inmates protested the restrictions by sitting down in the court yard and refusing to go back inside (Folketingets Ombudsmand, 2021). Of formal responses to the restrictions, 70 prisoners and their families complained about the suspension of visits to the Danish Ombudsman and requested interruption of their sentences (Ombudsmændene.dk, 2020). This article will explore the experiences and coping strategies of people incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic by giving voice to the those, who experienced first-hand the COVID-19 restrictions in an already restricted regime, also described as "a prison within the prison" (Suhomlinova et al., 2021).

### Infectious diseases in prison

Prisons are confined settings where people live in close proximity, and coupled with the prisoners' poor health conditions, a breeding ground for infectious diseases is inevitable (Suhomlinova et al., 2021). Other factors contributing to the spread of transmissible diseases includes overcrowding, delays in diagnosis and poor access to treatment (World Health Organization, 2014). The latest studies on epidemic outbreaks in prisons concern the contamination and spread of the H1N1-virus, the swine flu, from 2009, which threatened the Belgium prison system and was handled with similar strategies that have been seen in the prevention of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2014). Strategic management is key to preventing the spread of infectious diseases in prisons and society, but ethical considerations of prisoner's right to equivalence of care and the interests of society must be a part of a pandemic response, backing the assertion that '*prison health is public health*' (Van'T Hoff et al., 2009).

### The global prison COVID-19 response

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, preventing the virus from spreading inside prisons have been a part of everyday life to those working and living inside penal institutions. However, this is not only a concern relevant to prison authorities as outbreaks of COVID-19 in a prison setting can also pose a risk to the public in the shape of an amplification of the infection spreading in society (World Health Organization, 2020). It is widely recognised that prison environments are likely to be disproportionately hard hit by viruses like COVID-19 due to prisons' lack of resources, flow of staff, overcrowding, unequal access to healthcare services and existing chronic diseases amongst prisoners (Novisky et al., 2021). As it has been noted by other researchers within penology (Maycock and Dickson, 2021), the research of the COVID-19 response in prisons has mainly been covered from medical and health-oriented perspectives with focus on effectiveness and applicability of restrictions and strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Amongst recent studies, prevention strategies implemented in prisons during COVID-19-lockdown have been evaluated with regard to effectiveness of contact tracing (Clarke et al., 2020, Alves da Costa et al., 2021), symptom screening tools (Goncalves et al., 2021) and vaccination (Barsky et al., 2021). Meanwhile, other studies emphasise the need to weigh infection control strategies up against the potential threat they might impose to prisoners' mental health and wellbeing (Beaudry et al., 2020, Gray et al., 2021) and to be aware of how prevention strategies have a cost on prisoners and their families (Brennan, 2020, Minson and Flynn, 2021).

### Prisoners' experiences and reactions to COVID-19 restrictions

While contingency plans were in place in many national responses to COVID-19 in prisons, prisoners had few options to voice their experiences with the COVID-19 restrictions. Limitations in research access during the pandemic made it difficult for qualitative researchers to explore prison life during this time as qualitative methods often require the physical presence of the researcher. The consequence of suspended qualitative prison research results in limited insight to prisoners' experiences and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a review of the literature written on the topic indicates that restrictions combined with fear of COVID-19, impact of isolation, reduced contact with family and reduced mental healthcare services have impacted prisoners mental health negatively (Johnson et al., 2021). Other impacts are reflected in the number of suicide attempts, where the number of incidents in Swiss prisons suggests that COVID-19 has increased the likelihood of prisoners to attempt suicide and to self-harm despite a decrease in overcrowding, which is normally associated with better prevention of such incidents (Gétaz et al., 2021). In Denmark, The Danish Ombudsman remarked after inspection visits to several prisons in Denmark during lockdown, that the restrictions were a cause of frustration for many prisoners, and recognised that the restrictions made everyday life in prison more restricted than normal (Folketingets Ombudsmand, 2021).

## 2. State of the art

The relative novelty of the pandemic deflects scarcity in the field of qualitative studies focusing on prison life during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this limited field of literature, four articles have been selected and reviewed based on their application of qualitative methods and interaction with prisoners, be it written or orally. The selected studies explore prisoners' experience of and responses to COVID-19 (Maycock, 2021, Suhomlinova et al., 2021, Maycock and Dickson, 2021, Maycock, 2022) and increased isolation (Gray et al., 2021). The findings of existing literature in the field suggests that there is more knowledge and insights to gain on the topic of pandemic responses and their consequences for incarcerated people.

During the spring of 2020, PhD at University of Dundee, UK, Matthew Maycock (2021) was conducting research in Scottish Prisons when all face-to-face research was suspended because of COVID-19, leaving the researcher to apply alternative qualitative methods that could be completed without physical presence. Maycock (2021b) chose to proceed with the qualitative study on prison life during the COVID-19 lockdown by letter correspondence with prisoners in Scottish prisons. The method included participant involvement by inviting prisoners to shape the survey questions (Maycock, 2021). Eight prisoners participated in the research and contributed with a total of 19 letters. The analysis of the correspondence with prisoners revealed how COVID-19 restrictions have elevated pains associated with prison life, and particularly pains related to the deprivation of autonomy. The deepening of prison pain was caused by a feeling of intensified detachment from the life of the "outside world" and the "inside world" of the prison, which stems from the increased isolation and lack of communication during the COVID-19 lockdown (Maycock and Dickson, 2021, Maycock, 2022).

A group of researchers from University of Leicester, including Associate Professor in Management Olga Suhomlinova, Associate Professors in Criminology Tammy Ayres and Matthew James Tonkin (2021) provided an analysis of how pains of imprisonment have been enhanced due to COVID-19 restrictions in English and Welsh prisons. The authors provide the first longitudinal research examining prisoners' narratives of lockdown during one year of pandemic restrictions. Data was gathered through letter correspondence with 15 prisoners contributing with 2-19 letters each. Participants describe an increase in experienced difficulty in managing prison life, due to an increased isolation, lock-ups and lack of meaningful contact. The enhanced deprivation of security was manifested in the prisoner's lack of access to sanitisers, personal protection equipment (PPE), and social distancing. The lack of testing availability and the late opening of vaccinations for prisoners also enhanced deprivations of security, leaving prisoners with little options to protect themselves from contracting the virus. While mental health decreased further compared to pre-pandemic times, the availability of mental healthcare declined, resulting in the deprivation of access to goods and

services to be amplified. Poor food and lack of information about the pandemic are also highlighted as deprivations that intensified the pains of imprisonment.

Another study conducted by Ruth Gray, Barry Rooney and Clare Connolly (2021) based at the Healthcare in Prison Team, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust in UK, explores prisoners' reactions to spending 14 days of isolation upon admission due to COVID-19 restrictions. The study was conducted in April 2020 at a time when it was custom in England and Wales to isolate newly admitted prisoners for 14 days and thereby reduce the risk of transmission of the virus upon arrival to the prison. Based on the in-depth interviews made with 168 prisoners, the authors identify three main themes occupying prisoner's experiences with isolation during COVID-19, namely connection, support and communication. Through this thematic lens, the authors uncovered the most important coping strategies available to prisoners during COVID-19 isolation and stressed that meaningful contact with other people was essential to prisoners when coping with anxiety and stress. The study concludes that COVID-19 isolation in prison has a significant impact on prisoner's general wellbeing and stresses the need for prison healthcare staff to address and mitigate the negative effects of increased isolation (Gray et al., 2021).

### 3. Methodology

The purpose of conducting ethnographic fieldwork within prisons is to gather nuanced insights to prisoners' everyday life through observations and semi-structured interviews. General observations in a field will over time become focused observations with informal questions asked by the researcher (Spradley, 1980). In this study, observation ahead of carrying out interviews contributed to the creation of a knowledge foundation from which a semi-structured questionnaire was developed and revised throughout the fieldwork (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, Roulston, 2013). The empirical data presented in this study consists of field notes (N = 24) and semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face (N = 30) in two closed prisons and three local detentions in Denmark between May 2021 and December 2021 as part of a PhD-project exploring healthcare services in the Danish Prison and Probation Service. The interviews were recorded on an encrypted dictaphone and mainly conducted in prison cells, in smaller rooms connected to the prison officer's room or in empty offices in the wing where confidential conversations were possible. Three interviews were conducted in a common room with other prisoners arriving and leaving during the interviews. Around half of interviewees (N = 14) were recruited during field days where the author spent time in the common room of a wing informally chatting, having lunch, playing pool etc., with prisoners. The other half of interviewees (N = 16) were recommended as participants by prison officers or nurses, who considered each prisoner relevant and possible to talk to considering the prisoner's security category or other relevant circumstances. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1,5 hours. The questions in the interview guide were of an

explorative nature, allowing the informant to share current and relevant information of their own choice regarding health, illnesses and healthcare in prison. The semi-structured character of the interview questions let COVID-19 reveal as a theme relating to several sub-themes during the interview which indicated to the author, that COVID-19 at the time of the interview played a significant role for the participants (Roulston, 2013). The interview data is supplemented by field notes collected over 24 days of fieldwork in closed prisons and detentions. During transcription of the interviews, participants were given pseudonyms and their information anonymised. The analysis of transcripts was processed by coding interviews using the software programme Nvivo. The codes applied in the data analysis were identified while working with the data and was thereby guided by the participants testimonies with “COVID-19” as a main code from which subcodes such as “occupation”, “visits”, “officers”, “communication”, “test and contamination” and “vaccine” emerged (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Interview participants were all informed orally and in writing of their data protection rights and signed a consent form before the beginning of each interview. There was no requirement for approval by the university’s ethics committee or The Danish Data Protection Agency. The university’s Research and Innovation Organisation (RIO) has approved that the data collection, handling and storage complies with GDPR-rules.

### Conducting ethnographic fieldwork mid-pandemic

The collection of ethnographic data in this study was carried out by being physically present in prisons mid-pandemic, which further complicated the already challenging nature of carrying out research in a penal institution. Outside pandemic times, it is common for researchers to experience difficulties gaining access to prison environments, and the inhabitants, due to the inherently closed, secured and bureaucratic nature of prisons (Wacquant, 2002, Trulson et al., 2004). When entering a prison during a pandemic, it goes without saying that the researcher must follow the national health authorities’ recommendations and rules regarding infection prevention and stay observant to the risk any physical presence of the researcher might impose on the health and wellbeing of people living and working in the institution. Therefore, during the data collection, the author remained carefully aware of her responsibility to not show up with COVID-19 symptoms, test regularly for COVID-19 and be updated on vaccinations prior to a field visit. However, the possibility of collecting data in Danish prisons by physical presence must be viewed in relation with the development of restrictions generally in force in Denmark. During data collection, no official announcements were made regarding researcher’s access to prisons as other researchers experienced during the pandemic (Maycock and Dickson, 2021). Instead, each local prison management was in charge of deciding when or whether to let in researchers, which is also reflected in the conditions of the data collection agreement of April 12<sup>th</sup> 2021 between the Department of Danish Prison and Probation Service and the author. As the restrictions in prisons somewhat followed the development of restrictions in the surrounding society, the data collection began

after reopening plans was introduced on April 6<sup>st</sup> 2021 to retract the lockdown initiated in December 2020 (Coronasmitte.dk, 2021c). Access was stable and not affected by COVID-19 restrictions (Coronasmitte.dk, 2021b) from May 2021 and until the end of November 2021, when an increase in daily cases resulted in the re-enactment of restrictions this month. The restrictions were further expanded on December 8<sup>th</sup> 2021 (Coronasmitte.dk, 2021a) at a time where field trips began to be cancelled frequently due to lockdown measures or cases of COVID-19 occurring within the studied prisons.

The restrictions and recommendations introduced in prisons, as well as elsewhere in society, actuated a natural urge to not sit or stand closely or engage in physical contact such as shaking hands, which under normal circumstances would be part of establishing respectful and confidential relations to the participants. During two interviews and some parts of field days, the author and sometimes participants were required to wear face masks. Although face masks became a common sight in public spaces during the pandemic, wearing a face mask did restrict the embodied interaction involving facial expressions to show feelings and emotions during the interviews. This required extra sensitivity and clarification on behalf of the researcher to avoid misunderstandings. It also turned out that the face masks obstructed the participants' speech and complicated transcription of the recorded audio file, thereby making additional field notes invaluable when recalling the interviews.

#### 4. Theory

To understand prisoners' coping strategies during the covid-19 pandemic, it is relevant to understand what a prison context does to prisoners and how they cope with prison conditions through various means. The American professor of criminology Graham Sykes (2007 [1958], p. 64) describes in his work "Society of Captives" the deprivations, *pains of imprisonment*, that prisoners suffer while incarcerated. The pains of imprisonment are made up by the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. While the deprivations can be considered natural consequences of being confined, they nonetheless pose a threat to the prisoners' personality or sense of personal worth. Regarding the consequences of COVID-19 responses in prisons, the above-mentioned studies conclude that the pains of imprisonment became exacerbated by lockdown in prison (Suhomlinova et al., 2021) and argue that COVID-19 restrictions constitute an additional layer of pains (Maycock, 2022). When taking a closer look at how prisoners cope with prison pain, Sykes (2007 [1958], p. 107) concludes that prisoners will have no means to eliminate the pains and instead they will seek options to mitigate pains through either joining together with other prisoners or to individually seek advantages at the cost of other prisoners. The social system of unified prisoners will be able to create cohesive responses to the pains of imprisonment, alleviating pains for the prison population as a whole, whereas the aggravated and individual responses of the prisoner, will lead to



an “all-against-all” state amongst inmates causing prison pains to become more acute (Sykes, 2007 [1958], p. 108).

This paper will focus on the coping strategies that emerged when Danish prisons suspended prisoner’s access to formal coping strategies, such as activities with rehabilitative aims, such as employment, social relations, treatment and education. The concept of *ensoriousness*, as defined by the Norwegian criminologist Thomas Mathiesen (1965), describes how prisoners cope with irregularity and injustice in the prison system. Censoriousness takes a form of complaining and will often be made individually and not by creating subgroups as an expression of group solidarity. When complaints are voiced individually, the prisoner’s starting point derives from principles and values considered basic and commonly accepted by prisoners and prison officials alike. Thereby, the prisoner will point at irregularities where the prison officials or the institutions themselves are not in compliance with their own standards. In this act, *ensoriousness* is directed at the prison system and the prisoner aims at evaluating the consensus between staff and prisoner regarding rules, rights, values, and principles that exist in the prison (p. 11). Censoriousness is thereby a performance criticising the institution for not living up to its own norms (p. 25) and aims at making prison staff, and the prison system, appear as the deviants themselves. The performance of censoriousness serves the purpose of alleviating the pains of imprisonments described by Sykes (2007 [1958]) and can be regarded as an alternative to peer solidarity, which enables the prisoner to act on his own. The prisoners can make claims of either formal or informal norms and the spectrum of norms which the prisoner might refer to can be concrete formal rules of the specific institution, while other norms can be societal and abstract in their content (e.g. prisoners pointing at different rules in each institution or to more general rules in society). Prisoners’ conviction of the principle of equality or of justice is hereafter triggered by circumstances, conditions or specific problems that arises herein (p. 25).

## 5. Findings

In the prisoner’s descriptions of how their daily life was affected during the COVID-19 lockdown, disconnections to family and friends, suspension of occupation and access to fitness facilities prevail as recurring thematics elevating the pains of imprisonment. Visits, occupation and participation in activities can be considered coping mechanisms, that outside pandemic times support prisoners to relieve prison pains. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the access to formal coping mechanisms was limited or suspended and prisoners instead tended to apply censoriousness in the shape of critiques of the prison management. The critique manifested itself into what prisoners labelled a “corona excuse” to describe how COVID-19 restrictions resulted in erratic decision-making to the inconvenience of prisoners. Censoriousness is applied by prisoners to show how prison management and staff deviates from what should be considered

overarching principles and standards during COVID-19. Other prisoners allege principles of justice and equality by pointing at inconsistencies in the COVID-19 response albeit contemplating the difficulty of equal treatment during a lockdown.

### Exacerbated pains of imprisonment in pandemic times

Research suggest that prisoners receiving visitors show less depressive symptoms and rule-breaking behaviour (De Claire and Dixon, 2017). Staying in touch with relations outside prison can be considered a formal coping strategy to prisoners. 30-year-old Rune is a long-time serving inmate in a closed prison, who served in pre-trial detention for most of the COVID-19 lockdown. He was accustomed to having visits once a week, but the restrictions resulted in a long period of time where he could not have visitors:

*Interviewer: How was it [to not have visits]?*

*Rune: It was hard. There were no visits at all for a long time, we did not have a visit for six months. And after that another round of three months [...] It was hard to not see anyone for six months in a row. And then three months.*

*Interviewer: Was that how COVID-19 affected you the most?*

*Rune: Yeah obviously. When you are used to having visits once a week and suddenly you have nothing. (Rune, interview 9)*

Rune describes not having visitors as “not seeing anyone” and ending up with “nothing”. To Rune, visits are central to staying in touch with life outside the prison. Another long-time serving prisoner, 32-year-old Ralf, was also in pre-trial detention when the restrictions were introduced. The suspension of visits was introduced around the same time as he had his *visit and letter-control* lifted and consequently he did not see his wife for 3-4 months.

*When my visit and letter-control lifted, I had visits planned and then they closed everything down. I did not see my wife for three-four months. It's really difficult and not funny at all. (Ralf, interview 23)*

To the prisoners with family and friends outside of prison, the cessation of visits had an emotional impact, which can be considered a worsening of already existing prison pains. In the cases where visitors were excluded from seeing female acquaintances the deprivation of heterosexual relationships is manifested, which can result in anxiety and concern regarding prisoners' own masculinity (Sykes, 2007 [1958], p. 71).

Several prisoners mention exercising and access to fitness facilities as central activities helping them cope with prison life. In a closed prison, a long-term serving prisoner states that the regular access to training facilities in the prison had replaced the illegal drugs he used to take prior to imprisonment (Lennart, interview 16), while a short-term serving prisoner says exercise helps him calm down and be less easily agitated in

prison (Osvald, interview 14). Hans, a 22-year-old short-term serving prisoner, experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown in pre-trial detention, that there was little to do with training facilities closed, and spending time was tedious. As a result, he gained weight and his blood pressure increased to above normal, which he described as unavoidable despite his age and good health (Interview 12). 28-year-old Tobias was also serving pre-trial detention during the first lockdown in March 2020, and as he was normally employed in the workshop he found the lockdown-alternative, cell work, boring and was unable to pick it up.

*Interviewer: How was it in the detention during COVID-19?*

*Tobias: It was a disaster. There wasn't anything we could do. I used to work but then I couldn't work anymore.*

*Interviewer: What was your occupation?*

*Tobias: I was working in the workshop, so I was pretty bored after [the lockdown]*

*Interviewer: Did you get any compensating work?*

*Tobias: Yes, but it was not the same, so I stopped after a while. I didn't want it, and I couldn't do it. It was too much (Tobias, interview 11)*

When compensating cell work was offered to Tobias, he was unable to find the motivation to do it. This was more than Tobias could tolerate and he described it as a “disaster” and that “it was too much”. To Hans and Tobias alike, the boredom and lack of meaningful activity caused the deprivations of their imprisonment to be strengthened. Hans describes the physical consequences of not being able to take care of one-self's physical well-being, and Tobias describes the mental let down caused by the closedown of the workshop, which enhances the deprivation of autonomy making “features of childhood's helplessness” evident (Sykes, 2007 [1958], p. 76).

### Coping strategies and the COVID-19 excuse

Prior to the pandemic, participant's coping strategies involved having visitors, being employed and participating in activities, such as exercising. As access to these formal coping strategies was limited during the COVID-19 lockdown, prisoners had to turn to other strategies to cope. In the following sections, prisoner's usage of censoriousness when expressing their views on COVID-19 is explored to arrive at an understanding of how prisoners performed actions of censoriousness to cope with the exacerbation of prison pains.

In pre-pandemic times prisoners found the prison administrations' casework slow running with only rare explanations to why delays occur. The delay in casework and the absence of reasons for delay, is also noted by Sykes (2007 [1958]) who describes it as a part of the deprivation of autonomy when explanations and reasons for decisions are not shared with prisoners. In its essence, information is kept away from prisoners to prevent them from arguing with the staff (Sykes, 2007 [1958], p. 75). Prisoners experienced that the

pandemic provided the prison administration with an excuse to why processes were delayed, which corresponds with a similar finding of Maycocks' (2022), where prisoners experienced COVID-19 being used as an excuse by prison officers to not engage with them. In a medium-sized closed prison, a prisoner had his appointment at the prison dentist delayed by 8 months because of COVID-19. He explains why this is dissatisfactory to him with reference to his right to medical assistance within reasonable time according to international human rights (Interview 6). Another prisoner, 50-year-old Peter, who suffers from a chronic disease, mentions how the medical tests he was supposed to attend were delayed because of COVID-19, although, as he remarks, that *"there is still the same number of prisoners and nurses, no matter how much COVID-19 there is"* implying that COVID-19 should not affect the opportunities to have medical tests carried out as usual (Interview 5). The act of *ensoriousness* is evident in Bjørn and Peter's descriptions of how COVID-19 affected their access to healthcare by referencing to respective formal *rights* and *standards* that they expect to be shared by the prison administration. By pointing at instances where the prison staff does not fulfil rights and standards, the goal is to make the prison staff look like the true deviants rather than themselves (Mathiesen, 1965). Applying this coping mechanism can, according to Mathiesen (1965), alleviate the enhanced pains of imprisonment that COVID-19 restrictions have imposed on them.

When visits were suspended, the previously mentioned prisoner Rune pointed at how visits even after restrictions were eased, continued to be cancelled from time to time. He blames the prison guards for the cancellation of visits, explaining that the officers are only looking for a reason to cancel visits:

*Interviewer: When the prison opened for visits again, did you resume to having visitors every week?*

*Rune: No, we didn't. We had visits once every two weeks because of COVID-19 and they had to give equal access to all, and visitors couldn't come too often and blah blah blah. Every time [the officers] can find a reason to cancel, they will do it (Rune, interview 9)*

Later in the interview Rune refers to his right to have visits, which is an act of *ensoriousness* as he emphasizes the pain caused by a breach on his rights:

*They don't try to see it from the other side to look at who is actually hurt. We have so many rights we can claim because they are not upheld and it's really not okay (Rune, Interview 9)*

The cancelling of family visits in prison during the pandemic was a measure applied widely internationally to prevent visitors from bringing the virus into prisons. Along with the ban on visits followed a deepening of the deprivation of family life particularly affecting people in prison as well as their families and children (Minson and Flynn, 2021). The suspension of visits was by many prisoners regarded a strict measure to introduce in the prevention of COVID-19, and when this measure was applied, prisoners expected the prison regime to

manage less intrusive prevention measures as well, such as limiting the number of new officers entering the prison. Ralf, a previously mentioned prisoner, describes that while every restriction in the prison was aimed at reducing physical contact with other people, day after day his door was opened by a new officer, and often officers who appeared sick with coughs and sniffles.

*They cancelled our visits, our work, everything. We weren't allowed to do anything. But every single day there was a new officer outside our door. It made no sense and we complained about it. We said: 'We can't see our families and you [the prison management] can send new officers to our wing daily. We don't know if the officers have COVID-19 or not but two of them are sniffling, sounding sick. Does [the prison management] really think this is OK?' (Ralf, interview 23)*

The prisoner expects to see that the COVID-19 restrictions are handled with reciprocity in the sense that the prison officers must make sacrifices reflecting the extent of the prisoners' sacrifices. When the prisoners see new officers entering prison every day and other officers sniffing, the prisoner claims that the prison management is not applying the preventive measures and restrictions according to the principle of equality. Thereby, the prisoner underlines that the restrictions should hold prisoners and staff accountable on equal terms. During the first lockdown in the spring of 2020, the Danish Prison and Probation Service provided extra phone calls as a compensating measure to the prisoners (Folketingets Ombudsmand, 2021). To Christer, a long-time serving prisoner who served in detention at the time, the extended availability of phone calls did not make a big difference as there was only the same phone available to all prisoners.

*It requires a lot of resources if there's 50 detainees who have a right to make an extra phone call. You see, if they are allowed to call just for an extra half an hour, or one hour, and then multiplied by 50. Then one officer needs to come up, hand you the phone, dial the number, call, and pick up the phone afterwards. That time must be taken from something else, and people still need showers and yard time. So, if you need time for something extraordinary, that time is deducted from something else, because officers are not allotted extra resources. (Christer, interview 21)*

Christer copes with the lack of contact with his family by contemplating the prison officers' point of view. Referencing to the phone time that needs to be allocated to each prisoner, Christer shows support of the principle of justice and equality, that he experiences the officers practicing, and through this perspective Christer makes sense of the situation, where promised extra time on the phone is not actually practiced because other tasks need prioritisation. Other prisoners expressed the same understanding of the limitations there are to implementing extended phone calls to all (Ralf, interview 23). The difficulties of implementing the expanded time for phone calling has also been described by Minson and Flynn (2021) who find that the difficulty of providing extra phone calls is further complicated due to COVID-19 restrictions limiting prisoners

time out of cell, which corresponds to Christer's analysis of how the officer needs to bring about the phone instead of letting prisoners access the phone without the involvement of an officer. However, the Danish Ombudsmand has also noted that in Nyborg Prison where time out of cell was expanded due to COVID-19, the prisoners did experience increased time to make phone calls (Folketingets Ombudsmand, 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

While the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic is currently receding, this paper explores the experiences of incarcerated people and how they coped during COVID-19 lockdown in prison. The findings of this study indicates that pains of imprisonment have been exacerbated due to suspension of the activities that enables the application of formal coping strategies. The prisoners' accounts reveal a profound adoption of actions of censoriousness to cope with the exacerbated pains of imprisonment and underline the importance of managing the prevention of COVID-19 in prison with coherence and fairness. The acts of censoriousness applied by prisoners might have had a relieving effect to the prison pains during the pandemic, but more research is required to assess the mitigating factors most valuable to prisoners. This study provides important qualitative insights to existing literature on the prevention and management of COVID-19 in prisons by giving voice to prisoners. Notwithstanding, research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced people working inside prisons could further provide holistic insights on the topic of prison life in pandemic times.

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