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Prison climate as method and experience: Insights from a system-wide study in Slovenia

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Abstract: This paper examines how prison climate can be measured in a small, interconnected, and increasingly strained prison system. Slovenia offers a rare longitudinal foundation: for over four decades, its prisons have been assessed with an adapted Moos social-climate scale. Yet changing populations, rising operational pressures, and the conceptual limits of Moos necessitated a methodological transition. We document the introduction of the MQPL+ framework, combined with SQL and a final administration of the Moos questionnaire, and we analyse the practical, organisational, and emotional realities of conducting system-wide mixed-method research across fourteen prisons. The study required substantial linguistic and

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cultural adaptation of MQPL+/SQL, flexible implementation under overcrowding and staff shortages, and a multi-layered qualitative design involving focus groups, interviews, and structured ethnographic observation. These elements enabled us to situate climate scores within their institutional context and to interpret them in light of leadership practices, population turnover, and broader system-level strain. Rather than presenting climate as a set of isolated perceptions, the paper demonstrates how measurement itself is embedded in organisational conditions and relational dynamics. By offering a transparent account of adapting and applying MQPL+ in a unique penal context, the paper contributes to debates on longitudinal climate research and provides insights for jurisdictions seeking to build relationally informed approaches to understanding the quality of prison life.

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Beitrag wird untersucht, wie das Gefängnisklima in einem kleinen, vernetzten und zunehmend unter Druck stehenden Strafvollzugssystem gemessen werden kann. Slowenien bietet hierfür eine seltene Längsschnittbasis: Seit über vier Jahrzehnten werden die dortigen Haftanstalten anhand einer angepassten Moos-Skala zur Erfassung des sozialen Klimas bewertet. Doch veränderte Insassenpopulationen, zunehmender Betriebsdruck und die konzeptionellen Grenzen der Moos-Skala machten einen methodischen Wandel erforderlich. Wir dokumentieren die Einführung des MQPL+-Rahmenwerks in Kombination mit SQL und einer abschließenden Durchführung des Moos-Fragebogens und analysieren die praktischen, organisatorischen und emotionalen Realitäten der Durchführung systemweiter Mixed-Methods-Forschung in vierzehn Gefängnissen. Die Studie erforderte eine erhebliche sprachliche und kulturelle Anpassung von MQPL+/SQL, eine flexible Umsetzung unter Bedingungen von Überbelegung und Personalmangel sowie ein vielschichtiges qualitatives Design mit Fokusgruppen, Interviews und strukturierter ethnografischer Beobachtung. Diese Elemente ermöglichten es uns, Klimawerte in ihren institutionellen Kontext einzuordnen und sie im Lichte von Führungspraktiken, Personalfluktuation und allgemeinen Belastungen auf Systemebene zu interpretieren. Anstatt das Klima als eine Reihe isolierter Wahrnehmungen darzustellen, zeigt der Artikel, wie die Messung selbst in organisatorische Bedingungen und Beziehungsdynamiken eingebettet ist. Durch die transparente Darstellung der Anpassung und Anwendung von MQPL+ in einem spezifischen strafrechtlichen Kontext leistet der Beitrag einen Beitrag zur Debatte über die Langzeitforschung im Bereich des (Gefängnis)-Klimas und liefert Erkenntnisse für Rechtsordnungen, die darauf abzielen, beziehungsorientierte Ansätze zum Verständnis der Lebensqualität im Strafvollzug zu entwickeln.

Keywords: prisons, prison climate, prison research, ethnographic research, qualitative research, comparative research

1 Introduction

Prison climate has long been recognised as a key dimension of institutional life, shaping how people experience imprisonment and how prisons function on a daily basis (Crewe 2011, Haney 2003, Liebling et al. 2011). It influences safety, legitimacy, well-being, relationships, and the emotional texture of everyday existence behind bars. For this reason, climate has become an important focus of research internationally, with growing attention to how it can be measured, interpreted, and used to understand both the quality and the consequences of imprisonment (Bosma et al. 2020, Neubacher et al. 2023, Pascaud & Kazemian 2025, van Tiem et al. 2025).

Slovenia, where we situate our paper, is unusual in this landscape. For more than four decades, its prison system has been studied through a modified Moos Correctional Institutions Environment Scale (Brinc 1995, 2011, Brinc & Petrovec 2001), creating one of the most sustained longitudinal climate datasets in Europe. This tradition offers continuity and depth, yet it has also placed increasing pressure on an instrument that was never designed to capture the relational, experiential, and moral dimensions that contemporary research considers central to prison life. The shift to the MQPL+ framework, which we describe here, therefore marks a significant moment: a methodological transition that allows Slovenia to align with international developments while preserving the historical value of its earlier measurements.

This paper examines that transition. Our aim is not to present climate results, but to document how climate can be measured in a small, heterogeneous, and increasingly strained prison system (see e.g. Hacin & Meško 2020). We explore the methodological choices that shaped our study, the adaptations required when moving from Moos to MQPL+, and the challenges of carrying out system-wide mixed-method research in fourteen institutions during a period of overcrowding, staff shortages, and rapid population change. In doing so, we reflect on the practical, organisational, and emotional dimensions of prison fieldwork, dimensions less frequently discussed in formal methodological writing but central to understanding how climate data are produced.

We also consider what it means to integrate two different measurement traditions. By combining the final use of the Moos scale with the adoption of MQPL+ and SQL, we created a dataset that aims to bridge past and present. This unique combination offers the possibility of building a longitudinal and internationally comparable framework for future research, but it also demands careful interpretation.

Our goal in this paper is therefore twofold: to offer a transparent account of the methodological journey involved in transitioning to MQPL+, and to situate that journey within the broader practical realities of researching prison life in Slovenia. In doing so, the paper functions as a form of methodological reflection: a practice-based, system-level case study of instrument transition in context. By

documenting this process, we aim to contribute both to national debates on prison quality and to wider discussions on how prison climate can be studied responsibly.

2 Background: Slovenia's prison landscape

Slovenia operates a small, centralised prison system consisting of fourteen institutions, ranging from closed facilities to semi-open and open departments. The system's scale creates a tightly interconnected penal environment in which institutional cultures differ, but organisational and staffing structures are closely coordinated across the country. Ig remains the only dedicated women's prison, a structural feature that shapes both practice and research in gender-specific ways (Bertok 2024b, Bezlaj & Tadič 2024).

Historical legacy

Slovenia's prisons are shaped by a distinctive legacy of sociotherapy, an approach developed during the 1970s and 1980s that emphasised openness, participatory decision-making, and cooperative staff–prisoner relations. These reforms positioned Slovenia as an international outlier, with practices that challenged conventional custodial hierarchies and emphasised communication and treatment-oriented regimes (Petrovec & Muršič 2011).

Although sociotherapy declined after independence (see e.g. Hacin & Meško 2020), elements of its ethos persisted, especially in smaller or more specialised institutions, where they continue to influence institutional culture, staff-prisoner relations, and perceptions of fairness and autonomy. Moreover, they helped create both the conceptual space and the institutional openness for the systematic measurement of prison climate.

Shifts in penal policy

Since independence, Slovenia has followed a trajectory often described as one of penal moderation, marked by comparatively low imprisonment rates and a sustained emphasis on rehabilitation. Early analyses of penal policy highlight stability, restrained use of custody, and a limited resort to severe sanctions (Meško et al. 2011).

From the mid-2000s onward, however, this moderation began to erode. Legislative changes, expanding criminalisation, and shifts in prosecutorial and policing

priorities contributed to a gradual rise in the prison population (Flander et al. 2023). The most significant pressures emerged after 2018, when increases in border-related offences and pre-trial detentions led to persistent overcrowding, particularly in remand units. These developments exacerbated long-standing staffing shortages and intensified operational strain across the system (Holc & Plesničar, 2026).

Recent analyses underscore how these pressures affect everyday life in prisons: turnover is high, populations have become more heterogeneous (especially with rising numbers of foreign nationals), and staff report elevated workloads and declining organisational stability (Bertok 2024a). These conditions complicate the provision of treatment, undermine consistency across institutions, and create volatility in the social environment.

Traditions of prison research

Slovenia has an unusually long and coherent tradition of studying life in prison, centred for decades on the measurement of social climate. Since 1980, repeated system-wide assessments using an adapted Moos Correctional Institutions Environment Scale have produced one of the most sustained longitudinal climate datasets in Europe. Early waves documented differences between more open, treatment-oriented facilities and those with stricter custodial regimes (Brinc 1983, 1995, 2011, Brinc & Petrovec 2001). Later measurements pointed to declining autonomy and support, rising control, and increasing strain among staff and prisoners (Brinc 2011, Plesničar et al. 2019). In recent years, Slovenian prison research has complemented long-standing social-climate measurement with more focused studies of relational dynamics, including staff-prisoner interactions and experiences within the women's prison (Bertok 2024b, Meško & Hacin 2018, Tadič 2018).

Why Slovenia's context matters

Slovenia's prison system combines a distinctive historical legacy with one of the most sustained traditions of prison social-climate measurement in Europe. This long-term focus on climate provides essential insight into how everyday life in prisons is shaped by institutional culture, staff-prisoner relations, and the broader operational environment. The system's small size amplifies the importance of interpersonal dynamics, making prison life, and prison climate in particular, highly sensitive to organisational change, population pressures, and resource constraints (cf. Pakes & Gunnlaugsson 2018). These characteristics make Slovenia a unique and valuable case for examining prison climate, offering opportunities for comprehen-

sive, system-wide research while simultaneously magnifying challenges related to access, heterogeneity, and confidentiality.

3 Planning research

3.1 Rationale and design choices

Our study set out to update Slovenia's long-standing approach to measuring prison climate, which for more than four decades relied on an adapted version of the Moos Correctional Institutions Environment Scale (Moos 1968, 1970). While Moos provided exceptional continuity, its later iterations became increasingly difficult to administer, did not translate well to the changing prison population, and failed to capture important relational and organisational dimensions that have grown in importance in recent years. Both staff and prisoners frequently highlighted problems of clarity, relevance, and cultural fit during the last rounds of climate measurement, reinforcing the need for a more contemporary and sensitive tool (Plesničar et al. 2019).

Faced with the choice of substantially modifying the Moos scale or adopting a new framework, we undertook a broad review of available instruments, including European adaptations, relational-scale approaches, and domestic reformulations (e.g. Schalast & Tonkin 2016, Tonkin 2016, van Tiem et al. 2025, Wright 1985). We ultimately chose MQPL+ as the most suitable replacement. The decision mostly rested on two considerations: first, international comparability, as MQPL+ has been increasingly adopted across Europe; and second, the "plus" dimension, which offers qualitative and ethnographic depth capable of capturing aspects of prison life that traditional climate surveys cannot reach.

MQPL+ is a mixed-method, ethnographically informed framework that combines standardised prisoner and staff surveys with interviews, observation, and organisational analysis. At its core is a focus on the moral and relational quality of prison life: respect, trust, fairness, safety, professionalism, and the "weight", "depth", and "tightness" of imprisonment (Crewe 2011, Liebling et al. 2011). The framework is comparative, designed to identify differences between establishments and to explain them through institutional culture and everyday practices.

However, MQPL+ is not a plug-and-play tool. Research demonstrates that transferring prison surveys across jurisdictions requires careful cultural adaptation, linguistic precision, and sensitivity to local organisational norms. Studies in Norway, Germany, Serbia and other European systems highlight the challenges of achieving conceptual equivalence and measurement validity when instruments cross organisational and cultural boundaries (Johnsen et al. 2011, Milićević et al. 2024, Neubacher

et al. 2023, Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). Cross-national analyses similarly emphasise that differences in worldview, institutional structure, and penal culture can distort survey meaning unless accompanied by qualitative anchoring and iterative refinement (Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). These lessons guided our own adaptation process.

A central methodological decision in our study was to implement MQPL and SQL simultaneously, treating prisoner and staff perspectives as integral and complementary rather than separate or sequential (Johnsen et al. 2011). This choice aligns with Slovenia's long tradition of viewing staff-prisoner dynamics as co-constitutive elements of prison climate. It also enables a fuller understanding of the relational environment, as staff culture, emotional labour, and organisational strain directly shape prisoners' experiences of safety, trust, and fairness.

Finally, our design was system-wide. We collected Moos, MQPL+, and SQL across all Slovenian prisons within a compressed time window allowing meaningful cross-institutional comparison while capturing the system's climate at a single moment rather than through staggered or piecemeal studies. This holistic approach reflects the reality of Slovenia's tightly interconnected penal environment and provides a coherent basis for analysing climate variation across the entire system (Brinc 1995).

As in earlier waves of climate measurement in Slovenia, this study was commissioned by the Prison Service. While this meant that certain structural decisions, most notably the inclusion of all prisons, were defined at the outset, the Prison Service has a long-standing practice of leaving the design, administration, and interpretation of the instruments fully in the hands of researchers. This arm's-length arrangement preserved the independence of the study and ensured that methodological choices were guided by scientific rather than organisational considerations.

3.2 Quantitative methods: MQPL, SQL and Moos

The quantitative component of the study combined the new MQPL and SQL instruments with a shortened version of the long-standing Moos questionnaire. The decision to retain Moos was driven by the need to preserve longitudinal comparability: after four decades of climate measurement in Slovenia, it remained important to create a conceptual "key" that would allow us to translate earlier findings into the new framework and calibrate how MQPL-based domains correspond to Moos-derived ones. To minimise respondent burden, Moos was offered as an optional second questionnaire, with clear instructions encouraging participants to prioritise MQPL and SQL.

Adapting the MQPL and SQL instruments to the Slovenian context required a series of linguistic and cultural decisions. Because of time constraints, cost consid-

erations, and the long-standing practice of conducting climate surveys exclusively in Slovenian, we administered all instruments in Slovenian language only. During translation and adaptation, we identified several MQPL/SQL items that either could not be rendered meaningfully into Slovenian or relied on concepts with no cultural or institutional equivalent. In these cases, and following ideas on cross-jurisdictional prison survey adaptation (Milićević et al. 2024, Neubacher et al. 2023, Pascaud & Kazemian 2025), we removed or replaced the problematic items rather than force an artificial translation that risked distorting meaning. This selective adaptation prioritised conceptual clarity and construct validity over literal equivalence.

The decision to administer Slovenian-only surveys inevitably limited direct access for foreign nationals and semi-literate prisoners. We addressed the first limitation through the qualitative component, where individual interviews provided space for participation in other languages and the second through researcher-assisted expression. This strategy followed the idea that meaningful inclusion of multilingual or low-literacy participants is usually achieved more reliably through qualitative methods (Hall et al. 2018, Larkin et al. 2007).

3.3 Qualitative methods: The plus

Contemporary prison research shows that many of the most significant dimensions of prison life: legitimacy, relational climate, emotional tone, discretion, moral communication, are best understood through qualitative engagement (Liebling 1999). As Jewkes (2014) notes, prisons must be studied "differently", through methods that can capture atmosphere, interaction, and the subtle workings of power. Nordic relational-climate research similarly demonstrates that trust, fairness, dignity, and respect emerge not from formal rules but from the "everyday texture" of staff-prisoner encounters (Johnsen et al. 2011). These insights, along with newer discussions of the texture, depth, and weight of imprisonment (Crewe 2024, 2025), made qualitative inquiry indispensable for interpreting MQPL and SQL scores in the Slovenian context.

However, conducting a full MQPL+ ethnography was not feasible. Classic MQPL+ requires prolonged immersion, repeated visits, extensive staff interviewing, and detailed organisational mapping (Liebling et al. 2011, Neubacher et al. 2023). In line with arguments from comparative penology, methods must be adapted pragmatically to the realities of penal institutions and research conditions without compromising interpretive rigour (Brangan 2020, 2023). Recent cross-jurisdictional work on climate measurement similarly highlights the need for methodological flexibility when transferring instruments across penal cultures (Abbott et al. 2018, Milićević et al. 2024, Neubacher et al. 2023, Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). With these constraints

in mind, we designed a qualitative strategy that followed MQPL+ principles but was tailored to Slovenian conditions.

Focus groups as the primary method

Focus groups formed the core of the qualitative component. In each establishment, we aimed to conduct at least one staff and one prisoner focus group, typically more. Focus groups allowed participants to respond to, challenge, and elaborate on each other's reflections, providing insight into shared understandings and contested interpretations, which are dynamics central to relational climate (Cyr 2016, Gundumogula 2020). Consistent with good qualitative practice, groups were composed to avoid hierarchical relationships: staff of different ranks were not placed together, and prisoner groups avoided mixing individuals in direct power or status asymmetry (Ayrton 2019). This approach created a safer conversational environment and promoted open discussion.

Individual interviews

Individual interviews were originally intended for prisoners who could not participate in focus groups due to language or in quantitative research due to literacy barriers. Over time, they became a complementary method: in some establishments, staff shortages made focus group attendance impossible, and some prisoners preferred one-on-one conversations. Semi-structured interviews followed the same thematic outline as focus groups.

Ethnographic observation

Each field visit included short, systematic ethnographic observations conducted by multiple researchers (cf. Liebling et al. 2021). Observation followed a shared observation guide, used at every "live" point of contact with a prison, from administering surveys to conducting interviews and moving through institutional spaces. The guide prompted researchers to attend to key dimensions of everyday life, including staff–prisoner interactions, relations among staff and among prisoners, perceptions of safety, trust in the research, and the extent to which people felt able to express themselves freely. It also directed attention to the spatial and sensory environment: the condition of rooms, noise, heat, movement, and the overall atmosphere of the unit. Researchers recorded both their immediate subjective impressions (through

anchored ratings) and the concrete incidents or anecdotes that supported them. Taken together, these structured observations enabled us to "read" the moral and relational climate of each setting, complementing survey data and providing depth in units where verbal accounts were limited.

Photographic and documentary context

Where permitted, we took photographs of empty spaces: corridors, communal rooms, yards, to capture the spatial and material environment. The physical environment can be a critical part of understanding prison climate, and photography can supplement observational notes (Jewkes 2014, Moran et al. 2022). We also reviewed local rules, schedules, and visible operational practices to situate interviews and observations within institutional structure.

Taken together, these qualitative components formed an interpretive framework that complemented MQPL, SQL, and Moos scores. They enabled participation by multilingual and semi-literate prisoners, captured relational nuances invisible in quantitative data, and provided the contextual depth necessary to interpret climate across a small but complex penal system.

3.4 Challenges of designing, implementing, and interpreting the method

Conducting a system-wide mixed-method study across all Slovenian prisons presented several methodological challenges. These arose at three stages of the process: choosing and adapting the instruments, implementing them across institutions, and interpreting the resulting data in a rapidly shifting penal environment.

Designing

Linguistic and cultural feasibility shaped the limits of what we could realistically implement. As research on cross-cultural adaptation shows, questionnaires developed in one penal culture rarely transfer cleanly into another without careful modification (Neubacher et al. 2023, Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). Just translating MQPL and SQL into Slovenian proved demanding: several items had no precise linguistic equivalent, relied on institutional assumptions absent in Slovenia, or carried connotations that required careful rephrasing. Producing accurate versions in additional languages would have required a full-scale adaptation exercise for each, far beyond

the scope and resources of the project. For this reason, the survey had to remain in Slovenian, making it essential to build qualitative components capable of including multilingual or low-literacy participants.

Feasibility constraints also applied to the qualitative side. A full MQPL+ ethnography with extended immersion, organisational mapping, and prolonged engagement in each unit was not possible across fourteen institutions within the available timeframe. The design, therefore, drew on key MQPL+ principles while adapting them to a system-wide, time-limited study, retaining the relational focus that is central to interpreting prison climate but in a more flexible and scalable form.

Implementing

Where design challenges concerned what was feasible in principle, implementation challenges concerned how the method worked within the operational rhythms of each institution.

Implementing the study across all fourteen prisons required a design that could accommodate substantial variation in size, regime, and operational rhythm. From the outset, we anticipated that a uniform, highly scripted implementation would be unworkable in a system marked by staffing constraints, movement schedules, and heterogeneous populations. For this reason, the implementation plan was built around a universal protocol that specified the core components of the study: survey administration, focus groups, interviews, and observation, and the main procedural steps to be taken, while allowing each element to be sequenced flexibly within each institution. In this way, we aimed to pre-emptively consider broader accounts of prison research that emphasise the unpredictability and fragility of access, especially in institutions under strain (Reiter 2014).

A further challenge was planning for respondents' time and attention within restrictive regimes. The measuring instruments require focused completion, yet the availability of private space and uninterrupted time differs markedly across establishments. The implementation strategy, therefore, incorporated alternative formats, including the option to replace group discussions with individual interviews, and emphasised neutrality and confidentiality to ensure voluntary participation.

Finally, because observation was integral to interpreting climate, the implementation protocol had to allow for different levels of access. Some institutions were expected to enable movement through living areas, while others could only offer access to designated spaces. The plan, therefore, defined a minimum observational requirement and provided guidance for adapting the observation guide to the level of access available.

In this way, the implementation framework combined standardisation with deliberate flexibility, ensuring methodological consistency while recognising the structural realities of a small and diverse prison system.

Interpreting

Interpreting climate data across a small, interconnected system also posed challenges. Because Slovenia's prisons share staffing structures, centralised governance, and similar organisational pressures, differences between establishments may be subtle rather than stark. Understanding these differences required careful triangulation between surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations.

Rapidly shifting prison conditions further complicated interpretation. Rising remand populations, overcrowding, staff shortages, and administrative turnover influenced institutional climate, sometimes more strongly than local culture (Holc & Plesničar, forthcoming). As Crewe (2024, 2025) emphasises, the "texture" and "depth" of imprisonment are shaped as much by systemic pressures as by local relational dynamics. Interpreting climate scores, therefore, requires situating findings within broader operational and political contexts.

Finally, integrating Moos with MQPL and SQL demanded conceptual caution. Although the instruments share overlapping themes, they measure different constructs in different ways. Creating a meaningful "bridge" between them requires examining not only the scores but also the context in which they were produced.

4 Doing research

Designing the study was only half (or less) of the work. Once the instruments and procedures were set, the research confronted the realities of entering and working inside fourteen prisons or units across a system under pressure. The gap between methodological intention and on-the-ground practice became one of the important findings of the study in its own right.

4.1 Negotiating access

Although the study was formally commissioned by the Prison Service and system-wide access was guaranteed, practical access to each institution proved far more complex. Entry into a prison is never a neutral or automatic process: it is

negotiated, relational, and shaped by the institution's internal climate (Abbott et al. 2018, Reiter 2014). Each prison has its own culture, its own rhythms, and its own gatekeepers, and these differences became visible from the first contact onward.

Most establishments were welcoming and well-prepared, with contact persons who facilitated smooth entry, organised groups, and ensured that staff and prisoners understood the purpose of the study. In others, where overcrowding, staff shortages, recent incidents, or a general sense of disillusionment prevailed, access was more cautious and uneven, and the research was at times perceived as just another burden.

Access was also influenced by broader system pressures. Rising remand populations, fluctuating regimes, and high turnover meant that the "same" prison could feel entirely different from week to week. As a result, access was not a single event but a continuing negotiation, shaped by operational realities, institutional priorities, and the capacity of individual prisons to make space for research in the midst of daily pressures.

Rather than an obstacle external to the study, access became part of the very phenomenon being measured. The ease or difficulty of entering a facility, the degree of organisational readiness, and the availability of participants all reflected local institutional culture and the system's wider strain.

4.2 Coordinating system-wide fieldwork

Coordinating fieldwork across all fourteen units of the Slovenian prison system: six main prisons, seven satellite units, and one correctional home, required substantial logistical flexibility.

Table 1: Researched institutions and size

Main Prisons	Prison Satellite Units	Correctional Home
Dob Prison (468 places)		
	Slovenska vas unit (70 places)	
	Puščava open unit (21 places)	
Maribor Prison (140 places)		
	Rogoza unit (36 places)	
	Murska Sobota unit (34 places)	
Ljubljana Prison (135 places)		
	Novo mesto unit (35 places)	
	Ig open unit (27 places)	
Koper Prison (106 places)		
	Nova Gorica unit (32 places)	

Main Prisons	Prison Satellite Units	Correctional Home
Ig Women's Prison (98 places) Celje Prison (97 places)		
		Juvenile correctional home Radeče (47 places)

These establishments differed markedly in size, regime, and occupancy. Most adult facilities were operating above capacity, in some cases significantly so. These pressures shaped not only daily routines but also the windows in which prisoners or staff could participate in research activities.

Institutional scale strongly influenced coordination. Small open and semi-open units, typically holding fewer than 20 or 30 prisoners, could comprehensively be covered in a single visit, although uninterrupted time was limited. Large establishments, particularly the central Dob facility with over 600 prisoners across multiple regimes, required repeated visits to reach different wings, security levels, and population groups. Geography added further complexity: some units were located far from the research centre, requiring long commutes or occasional overnight stays to accommodate fieldwork.

Fieldwork was conducted between late January and late May 2025. Given the scale and heterogeneity of the system, institutions were visited sequentially rather than simultaneously. Most visits lasted a full day, while follow-up visits were sometimes shorter and focused on specific components, such as additional interviews or staff engagement. Larger prisons required multiple days of coordinated activity. Repeat visits were also necessary to include staff working across different shifts and prisoners unavailable during standard hours due to work or programme obligations. Dob prison required the most extensive field presence due to its scale and organisational complexity.

Prior to formal data collection, each prison was approached through an initial informative visit to coordinate access, scheduling, and local procedures. These preparatory encounters already involved observational engagement and formed part of the research process itself. Only in the smallest or most remote units were logistical arrangements handled remotely, typically by phone.

Throughout the fieldwork period, the research team adapted to institutional availability and operational needs, occasionally conducting activities outside standard weekday schedules. At the same time, the design had to avoid an overly prolonged presence. While prolonged immersion would ideally allow deeper ethnographic understanding, it was logistically impossible to spend extended periods in each of fourteen units. The study therefore represents a deliberate compromise: a system-wide, time-limited approach that prioritised comparability and feasibility while retaining qualitative depth through repeated visits where necessary.

As comparative research has shown, differences in size and regime shape institutional dynamics, with smaller units often characterised by more immediate relational climates and larger establishments by more formal, layered organisational structures (Crewe 2024, 2025; Johnsen et al. 2011). Our coordination strategy necessarily reflected these structural realities.

Finally, our ability to conduct observation varied considerably across sites. Some prisons allowed extended movement through living areas; others restricted access to specific units or times of day. This variability necessarily shaped the depth of observational insight across institutions and forms part of the context within which climate data were produced. Moreover, sequential fieldwork across several months inevitably means that climate is captured within institutional time rather than at a single frozen moment; interpretation therefore requires sensitivity to temporal variation as well as structural difference.

4.3 Reaching participants

Engagement with prisoners and staff began in each unit with an introductory meeting, where the research team presented the purpose and scope of the study, explained how the visits would proceed, and distributed flyers and posters. Each establishment appointed a contact person responsible for coordinating the practical aspects of the fieldwork. This initial step proved crucial: it allowed us to clarify expectations, establish independence from the prison administration, and ensure that information about participation circulated widely among both staff and prisoners.

Sampling was straightforward in principle, but shaped by several structural constraints. In line with previous Slovenian climate studies, only sentenced prisoners were included. This decision reflected three considerations: historical continuity with earlier measurements; uncertainty over whether consistent access to pre-trial detainees could be negotiated at all; and the linguistic composition of the remand population, where very high proportions of foreign nationals created intersecting challenges of language, literacy, and availability. Eligible participants were those who had spent at least 30 consecutive days in the unit being studied. Participation was voluntary, and invitations were issued directly by the researchers rather than by prison staff, reinforcing the boundary between the research team and the institution (Abbott et al. 2018, Martos-García et al. 2022).

Once recruitment began, availability within each regime shaped the practical execution of the fieldwork. Although we were permitted to speak to prisoners across almost all units, access to the most secure unit at Dob was restricted. Otherwise, regime differences did not present major obstacles; what varied far more was the day-to-day rhythm of each establishment. Prisoners were sometimes unavailable

due to work, programmes, appointments, or internal movements, which required continuous schedule adjustments. Staff participation was equally affected by structural factors, including shortages and shift patterns, making it difficult to assemble groups at one time. To address these constraints, we adopted a flexible scheduling strategy, returning to units in the morning, afternoon, and occasionally the evening, depending on when staff or prisoner groups could realistically meet. This flexibility was essential for achieving adequate coverage and ensuring that participation did not privilege only those available at a single point in the day. Such methodological adaptability is recommended in climate research, particularly in systems where institutions differ sharply in size, capacity, and operational stability (Apa et al. 2012).

Language and literacy also shaped participation. Although the questionnaires were administered only in Slovenian, many prisoners required additional explanation or, in some cases, researcher assistance. A smaller group could not engage with the survey meaningfully; for these individuals, interviews became the primary route for participation.

Table 2: Number of prisoners and staff participating in quantitative research per prison

Prison	All prisoners	Prisoners w/ language skills	Participating prisoners	% of eligible prisoners	All staff	Participating staff	% of participating staff
Celje	78	46	44	**95,6 %**	83	64	**77,1 %**
Dob	410	279	210	**75,3 %**	178	119	**66,8 %**
Ig	59	49	42	**85,7 %**	47	36	**76,6 %**
Koper	24	5	3	**6 %**	74	37	**50 %**
Ljubljana	23	20	20	**100 %**	101	70	**69,3 %**
Maribor	108	42	22	**52,4 %**	123	58	**47,1 %**
Murska Sobota	15	10	6	**60 %**	23	14	**60,8 %**
Nova Gorica	14	7	7	**100 %**	19	12	**63,2 %**
Novo mesto	11	8	8	**100 %**	25	14	**56 %**
OO Ig	24	19	14	**73,7 %**	6	6	**100 %**
Slovenska vas	62	58	47	**81 %**	12	9	**75 %**
Puščava	21	12	12	**100 %**	7	4	**57,1 %**
Radeče	23	21	17	**81 %**	40	31	**77,5 %**
Rogoza	42	30	22	**73,3 %**	13	13	**100,0 %**
TOTAL	**914**	**606**	**474**	**78,2 %**	**771**	**487**	**63,2 %**

All in all, we were able to include a significant part of the prison population as well as of prison staff as seen in Tables 2 and 3. 78 % of eligible prisoners and 63 % of staff participated in the MQPL questionnaire and the majority of those also chose to participate in the MOOS questionnaire. The balance of qualitative research activ-

ities differed between the two main groups, as it was much harder to organise focus groups with staff due to their ongoing obligations. Hence, we shifted towards one on one interviews with staff, which resulted in 40 total staff interviews. On the other hand, we were able to conduct prisoner focus groups in all but two prisons and mostly used one on one interviews with prisoners in smaller units or to include prisoners who were cognitively or language-wise unable to participate in wither quantitative instruments or focus groups.

Table 3: Number of qualitative research activities per prison

Prison	Prisoner focus groups	Prisoner interviews	Staff focus groups	Staff interviews
Celje	1	7	1	3
Dob	7	7	6	3
Ig	1	3	0	4
Koper	1	3	1	0
Ljubljana	1	1	1	6
Maribor	2	2	1	3
Murska Sobota	0	2	0	3
Nova Gorica	1	2	0	1
Novo mesto	0	0	0	4
OO Ig	1	0	0	4
OO Slovenska vas	2	1	0	0
Puščava	1	3	0	1
Radeče	2	1	0	5
Rogoza	1	0	0	3
Total	**21**	**10**	**10**	**40**

All surveys, interviews, and focus groups were conducted in close proximity to the living environment of participants. In larger establishments, fieldwork was organised at the level of wards or residential units rather than across the institution as a whole, allowing researchers to capture the immediate relational context of everyday prison life. In smaller prisons and open units, where populations were limited and regimes less segmented, data collection effectively took place at the prison-wide level. For comparative purposes, however, quantitative results were subsequently aggregated and reported at the level of the institution, meaning that large prisons such as Dob are presented as single establishments in the overall findings despite the ward-based organisation of fieldwork. This aggregation inevitably smooths some intra-institutional variation, which was nonetheless explored qualitatively through observation and group discussions.

4.4 Creating safe spaces

Creating safe and independent spaces for dialogue was essential for ensuring that both prisoners and staff could speak openly. Although the introductory meetings helped clarify the aims of the study, trust had to be built continuously in each unit. A key part of this was making our independence visible: invitations were distributed by the research team rather than by prison staff, and we repeatedly emphasised that participation was voluntary and confidential, and that no information about individual contributions would be shared with the administration.

Physical space also mattered. Whenever possible, focus groups and interviews were held in neutral rooms where participants felt shielded from observation. These were conducted without staff presence to avoid a sense of oversight.

Attention to internal power dynamics was equally important. Staff focus groups avoided mixing officers with supervisors, and prisoner groups were organised by unit or regime so that hierarchies did not inhibit conversation.

The emotional climate of each prison also shaped the discussions. In units under operational strain or acute pressure, participants sometimes entered the room tense or fatigued, and initial conversations reflected immediate frustrations. In more stable environments, discussions unfolded more easily and focused on broader patterns rather than pressing incidents. These differences were not obstacles but valuable indicators of how institutional conditions shape willingness to speak and how people experience everyday life inside.

Flexibility also played an important role in maintaining the neutrality and independence of the research process. By adjusting our work to institutional rhythms rather than demanding that prisons adjust theirs, the team avoided imposing additional strain on already overstretched environments (Kazemian 2015). This approach was regularly acknowledged by participants, who expressed appreciation that the research was organised in a way that respected both their constraints and their time.

Ultimately, the ability to create safe spaces depended on repeated visits, transparent communication, and sensitivity to the relational dynamics of each unit. Trust was not automatic; it emerged gradually as participants recognised the independence of the research and the effort made to protect their privacy and dignity (Gomes & Granja 2021, Lafferty 2022).

4.5 Balancing structure and flexibility

On paper, each visit followed a straightforward pattern: distribute surveys, conduct prisoner and staff focus groups, carry out interviews when needed, and complete

observational notes. In practice, almost none of these steps occurred in the intended order. Daily routines, staffing pressures, and unplanned incidents often required real-time reshuffling of focus groups, interviews, and observations.

To navigate this, we learned to build flexibility directly into our sampling process. Rather than pre-selecting participants and waiting for those specific individuals to become available, we invited participants on the spot and made random selections from the eligibility lists provided by each establishment. If someone was unavailable at the scheduled time, we simply selected another eligible participant at random. This approach allowed us to absorb the unpredictability of daily prison life by creating deliberate methodological elasticity, while still retaining the neutrality and objectivity expected of a system-wide study. In effect, we matched institutional uncertainty with methodological flexibility, wary of lowering standards, but rather of sustaining them in a setting where plans inevitably shift.

The constant movement between structured design and real-time adaptation shaped the fieldwork in ways that were both methodological and substantive. It required careful coordination and a willingness to modify plans without compromising the core principles of the study (Gaber et al., 2025). At the same time, it revealed how institutional routines, staffing levels, and everyday pressures form the backdrop against which prison climate is experienced. These factors were therefore not operational obstacles but essential elements in understanding the conditions under which the Slovenian prison system operates.

4.6 The researcher experience

Conducting a system-wide study across all Slovenian prisons required not only methodological coordination but a sustained degree of emotional, organisational, and relational labour. As highlighted in comparative ethnographic literature, entering carceral institutions as an outsider involves negotiating distrust, navigating both formal and informal hierarchies, and constantly absorbing emotional cues from the environment (Gomes & Granja 2021).

Structure of research team

The study was conducted by a multidisciplinary research team combining methodological, fieldwork, and analytical expertise. The core fieldwork team consisted of thirteen researchers: one senior researcher, three mid-career researchers, one postdoctoral researcher, six doctoral researchers, and two graduate students. While graduate students participated through structured internships at the Institute, all

other team members were employed researchers or doctoral candidates with prior experience in prison-related or qualitative fieldwork. In disciplinary terms, the team included criminologists, psychologists, and socio-legal scholars, allowing for both criminological and relational-institutional sensitivities in interpreting prison climate.

The research process relied on a clear division of labour across stages. Team members contributed to different components of the study, including the development of the methodological framework and research instruments, the conduct of on-site data collection in prisons, and the subsequent phases of transcription, qualitative and quantitative analysis, and final synthesis. Two additional undergraduate students supported the project through transcription work, increasing capacity while keeping interpretive and analytical responsibility within the core research team. Overall, the on-site fieldwork group formed the largest component, reflecting the relational and organisational intensity of conducting research inside custodial settings.

To ensure consistency across fourteen institutions, fieldwork was organised in rotating teams. At least two researchers were always present during each prison visit, while larger teams (up to four researchers) were deployed in larger establishments where parallel interviews, focus groups, and observations could be conducted simultaneously. In the largest prison (Dob), multiple researchers were often present to manage the volume and complexity of data collection.

Continuity across sites was supported through a deliberately centralised coordination structure. Rather than assigning separate coordinators to each institution, only two core coordinators oversaw fieldwork across the entire prison system. This meant that the same individuals held responsibility for multiple units, allowing them to accumulate institutional familiarity, build relational trust, and ensure coherence in the application of research protocols across sites. Each major component of the research process (fieldwork, transcription, analysis, synthesis) also had an internal lead researcher responsible for monitoring progress and communicating emerging issues within the wider team.

Preparatory meetings, shared written guidance, interim reflection sessions, and ongoing communication with the project leader and prison administration were essential in sustaining a coherent approach across sites. This organisational structure helped balance methodological standardisation with the flexibility required by shifting institutional conditions, while also supporting researchers in managing the emotional and interpretive demands of prison-based fieldwork.

Emotional labour and shifting atmospheres

Each visit carried its own affective climate. Some units felt stable and relationally warm; others operated under strain due to overcrowding, staff shortages, or recent incidents. Researchers inevitably absorbed these atmospheres, and this shaped how they approached interviews, focus groups, and observations. Similar patterns appear across prison ethnography, where fieldwork is described as emotionally charged and requiring continual management of one's own reactions and vulnerabilities (Garrihy & Watters 2020, Gomes & Granja 2021).

Moving rapidly between units intensified these demands, requiring ongoing emotional recalibration and deliberate debriefing within the team. These embodied experiences influenced what felt salient, plausible, or concerning in each unit (Gomes & Granja 2021, Garrihy & Watters 2020).

Working as a large research team

Having multiple researchers in each prison strengthened the study methodologically and emotionally. Team members could cross-check impressions, contextualise each other's reactions, and counterbalance moments when a unit felt overwhelming or unusually tense. This internal triangulation helped prevent over-interpretation based on individual emotional responses. At the same time, coordinating a large team across fourteen establishments required shared frameworks, regular reflective discussions, and consistent approaches to observational note-taking. While the MQPL tradition highlights the value of a coherent interpretive community (Liebling et al. 2021), applying this on a national scale required active effort to maintain consistency in interpretive tone, sensitivity, and judgement.

Presence, distance, reflexivity

A central challenge throughout the fieldwork was balancing emotional presence with analytical distance. Being physically and relationally embedded in the institutions allowed researchers to grasp subtleties that surveys alone cannot capture: tone, rhythm, tensions, humour, visible stress, and the "feel" of a unit. At the same time, this presence came with the risk of over-identification or emotional oversaturation. Debriefings and discussions about emotional reactions helped transform these responses into analytic insight rather than distortion. The literature on prison ethnography echoes this: researcher emotions are not noise but part of the data,

revealing how power, strain, and institutional climates operate at a micro-level (Gomes & Granja 2021, Garrihy & Watters 2020).

Comparative insights

Many of these dynamics echo those reported in multi-site or cross-national studies, which describe the need for constant adaptation, re-negotiation of access, and methodological flexibility in shifting institutional contexts (Kazemian 2015). Although the Slovenian system is small and largely familiar to the research team, its compactness heightened contrasts between units and produced rapid shifts in emotional atmosphere from site to site, intensifying the cumulative demands on researchers over time.

Overall, these emotional and organisational dimensions are not peripheral but central to prison-climate research. They help explain why trust, openness, or relational quality varied across units and provide essential context for understanding how institutional conditions shape both climate and the process of researching it.

5 Interpreting prison climate in a complex institutional environment

5.1 What climate measures capture and what they miss

Prison climate instruments, whether based on the Moos tradition or on MQPL+, are designed to capture the relational, moral, and organisational quality of prison life as experienced by people inside. They tell us how prisoners and staff perceive fairness, humanity, safety, tension, communication, order, and support. Yet these instruments, by design, translate complex experiences into structured response categories. They provide a valuable map, but necessarily a partial one.

Climate measurements capture perceptions, not neutral or objective conditions. Those perceptions are shaped by many factors that extend beyond individual attitudes: institutional strain, staff culture, leadership practices, population turnover, daily routines, and the emotional atmosphere on the day the research team enters the prison. They also reflect the opportunities and pressures inside each unit – who is available to participate, whose voice is represented, and how safe individuals feel expressing their views.

Equally important is what climate measures cannot capture. They do not fully reflect sudden events, short-term disruptions, or transient tensions that never-

theless define the daily experience of imprisonment. Nor can they express subtle relational cues: tone, hesitation, atmosphere, that often emerged during qualitative work and shaped our understanding of a unit's moral climate. For that reason, interpreting climate results requires constant reference back to the institutional context in which the data were produced. The scores alone cannot explain themselves; they must be read through the lens of the system-wide pressures and unit-level dynamics described in Section 4.

5.2 The constraints of time, space, and institutional rhythms

The fieldwork for this study unfolded across fourteen units over a longer period, from February to June 2025, meaning that the climate we measured reflects the system during that specific interval, under the particular pressures operating then. Prisons are dynamic institutions, and conditions can shift quickly: overcrowding can rise or fall within days, staffing patterns can change, and sudden incidents can transform the atmosphere of a unit. Climate research therefore cannot provide a timeless snapshot. It captures how people experienced prison life during the fieldwork window, not how they will experience it months later.

This raises an unavoidable methodological dilemma. A single-day, system-wide measurement would, in theory, offer a perfect snapshot of one moment in time, but it is practically impossible in a system with fourteen units of different sizes, regimes, and geographic locations. Conducting the research over several months, as we did, makes the study feasible, but it also means that units are not observed under identical external conditions. Events outside the prison, seasonal fluctuations, policy debates, or local incidents may influence how prisoners and staff perceive their environment at different points in the fieldwork period.

This tension cannot be eliminated. It is an inherent feature of system-wide climate studies: the scale of the fieldwork makes simultaneity impossible, and the dynamic nature of prison life makes perfect comparability across time unrealistic. Rather than viewing this as a flaw, it should be understood as part of the empirical reality of how climate is produced and experienced. Climate measurement therefore requires an interpretive sensibility that acknowledges temporal variation, while still recognising that meaningful system-level patterns can be identified even when institutions are visited sequentially rather than simultaneously.

With regard to time, another facet should be considered. Repeated measurement is widely understood in international literature as an important feature of prison climate research, both for identifying change over time and for supporting institutional learning. Climate tools such as MQPL and the Prison Climate Questionnaire are often described as suitable for monitoring the quality of prison life and for capturing

fluctuations in perceptions of safety, respect, and legitimacy across different periods (Bosma et al. 2020, van Tiem et al. 2025). While studies emphasise the value of longitudinal insight, they rarely prescribe specific intervals, reflecting the operational reality that system-wide climate assessment is resource-intensive and depends on the cooperation, stability, and capacity of prison administrations (Liebling et al. 2019, Johnsen et al. 2011). In practice, jurisdictions that do repeat climate surveys often do so several years apart, balancing analytical desirability with organisational feasibility.

Slovenia's own climate-measurement tradition reflects this pragmatic approach. Earlier Moos-based studies were typically conducted at five-year intervals, a pace aligned with the size of the system, the need to avoid overburdening prisons, and the limited resources available for large-scale research. With the introduction of MQPL+ and SQL, more frequent measurement is theoretically attractive given the increasing volatility of prison conditions and the growing analytical emphasis on relational and experiential dimensions of prison life. However, a system-wide MQPL+ study remains a substantial logistical undertaking. A two- to three-year cycle would possibly offer a feasible compromise – frequent enough to capture meaningful shifts in climate, but realistic in terms of staffing, operational demands, and the methodological bandwidth required to conduct high-quality mixed-method research.

Another important feature to be considered is geography. Together with prison size, they shaped both access and interpretation. Small open and semi-open units, sometimes holding fewer than twenty prisoners, operate with different rhythms and interpersonal dynamics than large closed facilities with several hundred people (Johnsen et al. 2011a). Remote units required longer travel times and often offered narrower time windows for organising groups. Larger prisons, by contrast, demanded multiple visits simply to reach different wings or regimes. These differences inevitably influence who can participate, how quickly groups can be assembled, and how representative participation can realistically be in each setting (Johnsen et al. 2011a).

Operational rhythms added another layer. Staff shortages, shift structures, court hearings, internal movements, and daily routines shaped availability in ways that could not be fully controlled. The research team addressed these constraints through flexible scheduling, on-the-spot sampling, and repeated visits, but the unevenness of institutional routines still affected the texture of the data. This is not a methodological weakness; it is part of the empirical reality of imprisonment in Slovenia and likely elsewhere.

5.3 Integrating methods: Complementarity and tensions

A central feature of our study is its integration of multiple measurement tools across the entire prison system. By administering both the long-standing Moos-based climate questionnaire and the newer MQPL and SQL instruments, alongside focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic observation, the project creates a unique dataset that links Slovenia's four decades of climate measurement with an internationally recognised, relationally oriented framework. This dual approach offers an uncommon opportunity: it enables the construction of a "bridge" between two different conceptualisations of prison climate, preserving the longitudinal value of earlier work while opening the door to cross-national comparison. Such continuity is rare in prison research, where methodological shifts often interrupt the ability to interpret change over time.

Yet combining these tools requires interpretive caution. The Moos scale and MQPL+ do not measure identical constructs. Moos captures environmental and organisational dimensions (control, autonomy, support) while MQPL+ is rooted in the relational and moral quality of prison life, emphasising perceptions of respect, fairness, trust, legitimacy, and staff professionalism (Crewe 2011, Liebling et al. 2011). The value of using both instruments lies not in numerical equivalence but in the possibility of mapping conceptual correspondences, identifying where dimensions converge or diverge, and constructing an interpretive "translation key" between eras. This might make it possible to read new MQPL+ findings in light of historical trends while avoiding the fallacy of treating different constructs as interchangeable.

The mixed-method design also provides essential depth for interpreting climate scores. Discrepancies between survey patterns and qualitative findings are well-documented in prison research: structured questionnaires capture individual perceptions, whereas interviews, focus groups, and observation reveal shared narratives, contested interpretations, and the "texture" of everyday life (Jewkes 2014, Liebling et al. 2011, Liebling & Arnold 2004). In our study, themes such as staff shortages, unpredictability, interpersonal strain, and the experiences of foreign nationals appeared more vividly in qualitative material, while MQPL+ items related to legitimacy or moral performance produced patterns not immediately visible in group discussions. Such divergences reflect the strengths and limitations of each method. When read together, they should offer a fuller account of how climate is experienced and produced.

Structural characteristics of the Slovenian system also shape representativeness. Literacy constraints among prisoners or rather groups of prisoners, linguistic diversity, regime restrictions, and staff shortages all influenced who participated in the quantitative elements and how. These are not unique to Slovenia: international work shows that adapting prison surveys across cultural and linguistic contexts

requires methodological care, particularly when literacy levels or language barriers can affect validity or participation (Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). Qualitative methods mitigate some of these constraints by giving voice to individuals and groups who might otherwise be underrepresented or excluded, strengthening the interpretive robustness of the dataset.

Finally, the system-wide qualitative material allows us to locate quantitative perceptions within the broader operational environment. Observational notes on staff working conditions, leadership styles, unit stability, and population pressures help explain variation in both Moos and MQPL+ scores across institutions. In this sense, qualitative insight does not merely supplement the quantitative data; it is essential to understanding how climate is produced, why similar institutions diverge, and how organisational strain or interpersonal culture shape the moral performance of a prison (Crewe 2025, Liebling et al. 2011, 2021).

Taken together, the integration of Moos, MQPL+, SQL, and qualitative methods positions this study as a rare example of longitudinally anchored, system-wide climate research. It offers an opportunity to combine the historical depth of Slovenia's climate-measurement tradition with the analytical strengths of contemporary relational frameworks, while recognising the interpretive care required to weave these strands together. The resulting dataset will enable insights that are both backward-looking and outward-facing, but only if approached with methodological sensitivity and awareness of the limitations and tensions inherent in mixed-method climate analysis.

5.4 Climate as perception and institution

Prison climate research operates at the intersection of individual experience and institutional structure. Climate scores reflect how people perceive their environment: how safe, respected, supported, or fairly treated they feel. Yet these perceptions are always shaped by institutional conditions: staffing levels, organisational routines, leadership practices, unit stability, population pressures, and the broader penal trajectory. Understanding climate therefore requires navigating the tension between "climate as perception" and "climate as institution".

On one hand, climate is inherently subjective. Prisoners and staff interpret the same environment differently depending on their histories, vulnerabilities, expectations, and relationships. The literature is clear that climate measures capture lived experience rather than material conditions alone (Liebling et al. 2011, Liebling & Arnold 2004). A unit may have adequate resources yet be experienced as coercive or unsettled; another may face structural constraints yet foster a sense of dignity and fairness.

On the other hand, perceptions do not arise in a vacuum. They are produced through institutional practice. Leadership style shapes how authority is exercised and felt. Staff shortages affect predictability and care. Overcrowding increases tension and reduces meaningful activity. The presence of many foreign national prisoners influences communication and social distance. Historical legacies, such as Slovenia's sociotherapeutic heritage, continue to shape expectations of autonomy, participation, and relational quality. Climate scores therefore need to be interpreted as institutional outputs as much as subjective impressions: they tell us something about how policies, routines, working conditions, and cultures become psychologically and morally meaningful to those who live and work in prisons.

This duality becomes especially important in a small and interconnected system like Slovenia's. Small changes in staffing, population mix, or leadership can quickly alter the atmosphere of a unit. Conversely, strong institutional cultures can persist across fluctuating conditions. Interpreting climate thus requires sensitivity to both the micro-dynamics of relationships and the wider operational and political context. Qualitative insight is essential for navigating this tension: it allows us to see when a climate score reflects a transient event, when it reflects structural strain, and when it reveals deeper cultural patterns that quantitative instruments alone cannot uncover.

Recognising that climate sits at the crossroads of perception and institution is fundamental for reading the findings that will follow. It clarifies that climate measures are neither purely subjective impressions nor objective indicators of institutional performance, but the lived intersection of both. This interpretive stance enables a more nuanced understanding of variation across units and provides a grounded basis for linking individual experiences to organisational realities.

5.5 Comparative implications

Interpreting climate data across prisons and jurisdictions requires caution (Pascaud & Kazemian 2025). MQPL+ provides a shared vocabulary, but climate is shaped as much by institutional context as by the constructs measured. Differences in size, population mix, staff culture, histories, and operational pressures influence how dimensions such as respect or safety are experienced (Neubacher et al. 2023). Variations in scores, therefore, reflect distinct structural and relational conditions, not simple differences in performance.

In Slovenia, these issues are heightened. A small, interconnected system, a legacy of sociotherapy, and the recent concentration of foreign nationals in some facilities create dynamics with few direct parallels elsewhere. The contrast between

a 20-person open unit and a 600-person closed facility illustrates why a side-by-side comparison requires sensitivity to context rather than relying solely on numerical differences.

The adoption of MQPL+ nonetheless enhances Slovenia's capacity for international comparison. Its relational focus aligns with broader European work on legitimacy and the quality of prison life. Yet cross-national comparison is meaningful only when differences in history, staffing, population heterogeneity, and institutional strain are taken into account. Without this grounding, contrasts risk flattening complexity or misattributing variation to the instrument.

By combining longitudinal Moos data with MQPL+, our study offers a rare opportunity to place Slovenian findings in both historical and comparative perspective. Doing so, however, requires recognising that climate is a context-dependent expression of institutional life and must be interpreted through an institutional, relational, and cultural lens.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to document what it means to measure prison climate in a system that is small, interconnected, and operating under sustained institutional pressure. Slovenia's long history of climate measurement provided a strong foundation, but also required a methodological shift: the Moos scale could no longer capture the relational and moral dimensions central to contemporary understandings of prison life. Introducing MQPL+, SQL, and a substantial qualitative component made it possible to retain longitudinal value while adopting a framework better suited to the lived experience of imprisonment.

Designing and carrying out system-wide fieldwork underscored how closely climate is tied to the operational realities of the moment. Conditions such as overcrowding, staff shortages, population turnover, and linguistic diversity shaped not only everyday life inside prisons but also the practical space available for research. These realities confirmed the importance of a mixed-method approach. Surveys gave structure, while interviews, focus groups, and observation revealed dynamics that cannot be reduced to scores.

Our experience also reinforced that prison climate is never simply an objective measure of conditions, nor merely a collection of individual impressions. It is always both: a meeting point between how people feel and how institutions function. In a compact system like Slovenia's, where even small organisational changes can have system-wide effects, understanding climate requires close attention to relationships, culture, leadership, and the wider penal context. This interpretive

sensitivity allows climate research to function as a tool for reflection rather than as a simplistic basis for comparison.

Despite the constraints, we believe the Slovenian context offers an unusually rich opportunity for prison-climate research. By linking a long-standing climate tradition with a relational and internationally recognised framework, we may have created the basis for a genuinely longitudinal and comparative approach. Regular future cycles can build on this foundation, refining methods and deepening understanding of how prison life is shaped and felt.

Our aim in this paper has been to share not only the decisions we made, but the realities we encountered: the practical and emotional dimensions of doing research behind prison walls. We hope this contributes to a broader conversation about how prison climate can be studied responsibly in systems marked by constraint, complexity, and change, and how such research can support more thoughtful, humane, and grounded reflection on everyday life in custody.

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