

## Exploring perceptions of correctional climate among people in prison in New South Wales

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### Aims

To explore perceptions of correctional climate among people in prison in NSW, including differences across individual and contextual factors, and associations between measures of correctional climate and wellbeing.

### Methods

Data were collected through an online survey administered via digital tablets in 19 correctional centres in NSW. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted for validation of a bespoke measure of the quality of relationships with staff. Bivariate correlations, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVAs were used to examine associations among the measures and differences in perceptions. Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to assess associations between correctional climate measures and wellbeing.

### Results

The EFA found evidence for a single-factor structure for the quality of staff relationships measure. Bivariate correlations showed strong positive associations between procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety. There were significant differences in perceptions of correctional climate as a function of Aboriginal status, sentence status, and prison security level. Hierarchical regression modelling indicated that procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety were significantly associated with wellbeing, after controlling for individual and contextual factors.

### Conclusion

The results show promising indications for the measures of procedural fairness, staff relationships and safety in understanding people's perceptions of correctional climates. The findings suggest that ongoing efforts to monitor and improve upon these factors may be instrumental towards objectives to promote fair, respectful and safe correctional climates, with potential effects on wellbeing and other outcomes for people in prison.

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## INTRODUCTION

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An important objective of correctional agencies is to foster environments that promote the safety and welfare of people in prison. The intertwining dynamics of these environments, or correctional climates, are argued to play a significant role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of those in prison (Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Burek & Liederbach, 2021; Goomany & Dickinson, 2015; Ross et al., 2008; Van der Helm et al., 2014). Correctional climate, broadly defined as the set of structural properties, prevailing norms, and conditions within correctional centres (Burek & Liederbach, 2021), encompasses a variety of elements, including the physical environment, interpersonal relationships, both objective and subjective factors that contribute to a sense of safety and security, and fairness of institutional policies and practices (Lambert et al., 2010; Taxman & Gordon, 2009). These factors influence how individuals from diverse backgrounds interact in highly regulated yet often challenging conditions of imprisonment (Favril et al., 2024; Sykes, 1958).

Research shows that positive correctional climates are linked to reduced incidences of violence, improved mental health outcomes, better readiness for change, and greater success in rehabilitation and reintegration (Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Goomany & Dickinson, 2015; Tonkin et al., 2016). In this regard, understanding and improving prison climate is important for promoting a rehabilitative environment that benefits not only the people in prison but also the staff charged with their supervision and care, as well as the broader community. In line with priorities aimed at building rehabilitative prison environments, a key strategic focus for Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) is improving correctional climates to ensure those in custody and under supervision experience fairness, respect, and safety.

Procedural fairness, which relates to how fairly people in prison feel they are treated, as well as how fair they perceive decision-making processes to be (Jackson et al., 2010), is a core component for understanding people's perceptions of correctional climates. Procedural justice theory posits that individuals' perceptions of fairness in procedures, such as disciplinary actions, grievance handling, and rule enforcement, significantly influence their attitudes and behaviours (Tyler, 2006; Walters & Bolger, 2019). Tyler (2008) emphasises four key principles in this theory—voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthiness—that represent providing individuals an opportunity to *voice* concerns, ensuring decision-makers act with *neutrality*, treating individuals with *respect and dignity*, and institutional representatives demonstrating *trustworthiness* in their intentions (Mazerolle et al., 2014). When these principles are upheld, individuals in prison are more likely to perceive institutional authorities as legitimate, leading to greater compliance with rules and regulations (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Fair treatment also enhances trust in the criminal justice system (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018), which in turn promotes interpersonal relationships and reduces disruptive behaviours and misconduct within correctional settings (Reising & Mesko, 2009). Beyond compliance, procedural fairness cultivates a sense of procedural citizenship, where people in prison perceive themselves as stakeholders in the justice system (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This participatory role enhances institutional order, reduces conflict, and supports rehabilitation efforts through active engagement in constructive activities and programs (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021; Liebling et al., 2005). Additionally, perceptions of procedural fairness have been associated with lower levels of psychological distress (Abderhalden and Alward, 2024; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Howard & Wakeling, 2020; Liebling et al., 2005; Slotboom et al., 2011; Rousseau et al., 2009).

Similarly, the quality of relationships among and between people in prison and staff is an important aspect of the overall correctional climate, influencing not only how the environment is perceived but also how individuals behave within or as a function of these environments (Bosma et al., 2020; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). Positive staff–inmate relationships—characterised by empathy, open communication, and mutual respect—have been associated with key features of a supportive correctional climate, such as perceptions of fairness, safety, and rehabilitative opportunities (Bosma et al., 2020; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). Research demonstrates that such positive relationships are linked to better psychological adaptation, adherence to rules, and reduced misconduct and violence among people in prison (Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Crewe et al., 2011; Liebling & Kant, 2018; Peterman et al., 2021; Reisig & Mesko, 2009). In contrast, staff who hold negative views towards people in prison and perceive incarceration solely as a punitive measure often engage in more frequent use of force and disciplinary actions against people in prison, potentially fostering defiance and antisocial behaviour among them (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Evidence also indicates that perceptions of fairness and respect—key elements of procedural justice—are more influenced by daily interactions with staff than by material provisions and facilities within the prison (Bottoms & Rose, 1998; Butler & Drake, 2007; Liebling, 2011; Thaler et al., 2022), emphasising the importance of relational factors in shaping a supportive correctional climate.

Safety within correctional settings is a key component of the broader correctional climate that is closely associated with procedural fairness and relationships. Establishing a safe and secure environment involves not only physical protection (e.g., prevention of victimisation and violence) but also creating an atmosphere of trust and respect where individuals feel secure and valued (Palmen et al., 2022). This sense of safety is closely tied to

perceived fairness and quality of relationships within the facility, as interactions between people in prison and staff play an important role in fostering a safe and supportive environment (Bosma et al., 2020; Palmen et al., 2022; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). This integrated approach to safety—comprising physical security, respectful relationships, and consistent enforcement of rules—helps create a positive correctional climate that encourages engagement in rehabilitative programs and activities, with potential lead-on effects for reducing reoffending and promoting long-term public safety (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Crewe et al., 2011; Wallace & Wang, 2020).

Enhancing correctional climates is important not only for building humane, safe and rehabilitative environments but also for their enduring effects on mental health and wellbeing, both during and beyond people's time in prison (Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Van Ginneken et al., 2019; Ward & Stewart, 2003). Evidence suggests significantly lower wellbeing among people in prison compared to the general population, with elevated risks of suicide, self-harm, and mental health issues (Baranyi et al., 2022; Favril et al., 2022; Favril et al., 2024; Fazel et al., 2017; McTernan et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2021). For people in prison, wellbeing is influenced by a combination of both pre-prison experiences (e.g., trauma, social exclusion) and prison conditions (e.g., victimisation, mistreatment by staff, social isolation) (Armour, 2012; Dye, 2010). Positive aspects, such as perceptions of safety and supportive peer relationships, are associated with higher wellbeing (Van Ginneken et al., 2019; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020), while negative aspects like fear of victimisation and lack of social support contribute to psychological distress (Baidawi et al., 2016; Goncalves et al., 2016). Some studies suggest that treatment by staff and environmental stressors in prison can have a stronger impact on mental wellbeing compared to pre-prison experiences (Slotboom et al., 2011). Poor mental wellbeing

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creates challenges for the criminal justice system, including increased demand for healthcare services and higher institutional costs (Butler et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2016). These challenges could impede adaptation and transformation both during and after imprisonment, leading to issues like learned helplessness and reduced participation in rehabilitation programs designed to reduce reoffending (Bowler et al., 2018). Addressing these mental health and wellbeing needs of people in prison has been asserted to reduce reoffending rates, improve safety and public health outcomes, and result in economic benefits for society (World Health Organisation, 2021).

Given that a positive correctional climate correlates with better wellbeing and behavioural outcomes for both staff and people in prison (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Burek & Liederbach, 2021; Thaler et al., 2022; Van Ginneken et al., 2019; Wallace & Wang, 2020), there has been increasing international interest in assessing and improving environmental factors in prison settings. For example, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons utilises the Prison Social Climate Survey to assess factors such as interactions between staff and people in prison and perceptions of safety, and the UK's His Majesty's Prison Service evaluates various aspects of prison life and atmosphere (Tonkin, 2016).

In line with global efforts, CSNSW has implemented processes for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of correctional climates across NSW. By focusing on procedural fairness, staff relationships, and perceptions of safety, CSNSW aims to foster correctional climates conducive to positive change, rehabilitation, successful reintegration into society post-release and reduced rates of reoffending (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Wallace & Wang, 2020).

## The current study

Aligned with CSNSW strategic objectives to improve people's experiences of correctional climates,

Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics (CRES) is conducting an agenda of research to measure and examine key dimensions of these climates as perceived by people in prison and serving orders in the community. The current study aims to contribute to these objectives by providing an initial exploration of how individuals in custody perceive their environment, including perceptions of fair treatment, quality relationships with staff, and safety, as well as the properties of measures that tap into these constructs. To achieve this, we examined the validity and reliability of scales adopted by CSNSW to assess correctional climate and conducted analyses to explore their relationships with individual and situational factors in addition to experiences of wellbeing in prison. The findings are intended to provide an important foundation for ongoing evidence-based efforts to monitor and improve upon correctional climates within CSNSW and across correctional agencies.

The current study aims to address three key research questions:

1. Is there evidence for the validity of a bespoke measure of staff relationships in NSW correctional settings?
2. How do perceptions of correctional climates vary across individual and contextual factors?
3. Are there associations between respondents' perceptions of correctional climates and their experiences of wellbeing in prison?

## METHOD

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### Participants and Procedure

Data was collected via an online survey utilising the Alchemer survey platform, which was delivered on digital tablets available to people housed in most NSW correctional centres. The survey was made available to 6,150 individuals across 19 correctional

centres. The survey was open for responses for 3 weeks, with information about the purpose of the survey and how to access it provided via a Facility Message sent directly to all tablets.

Survey participation was voluntary, and respondents were asked to enter their Master Index Number (MIN) to allow their responses to be linked with individual and contextual data from the CSNSW Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS). OIMS serves as a central CSNSW database that collects and manages information about individuals in custody and under community supervision. A total of 1,614 individuals provided complete responses to the survey. For anyone who had completed at least 80% of each measure, missing data was imputed using linear interpolation, resulting in a maximum possible sample available for analysis of 2,119 individuals. This represents a valid response rate of 34.5%. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics and contextual variables.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of respondents ( $N = 2,119$ )

Characteristic	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>%</i>
Age at survey completion	37.41 (11.72)	
Gender		
Male		91.1
Female		8.9
Aboriginal status		
Yes		27.8
No		72.2
Relationship status		
Married/De Facto		33.6
Non-Partnered (Single/Divorced/Separated)		66.4
Dependent children		
Yes		18.8
No		81.2
Total time in custody (years)	4.70 (4.98)	
Sentence status		
Remand		27.7
Sentenced		72.3
Prison security level		
Minimum		14.4
Medium		19.3
Maximum		66.3

## Measures

### Procedural Fairness

The procedural fairness measure includes 10 items, covering four key elements of procedural justice: respect (3 items; e.g., “Staff members address and talk to me in a respectful manner”), neutrality (3 items; e.g., “Staff members try to be fair when making decisions”), voice (2 items; e.g., “Staff members listen to me before making decisions”), and trustworthiness (2 items; e.g., “Staff members show concern and understanding towards me”) (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021). A 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) was utilised to rate each item, with a higher mean score indicating stronger perceptions of procedural fairness. This measure demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .97.

### Staff Relationships

A bespoke measure was developed for the CSNSW context that covers four key elements of staff relationships. Noting the substantial overlap between procedural fairness and relational elements of interactions between staff and inmates, this measure focused on dimensions that have a more rehabilitative lens: staff motivate people towards change (3 items, e.g., “Staff members support people in their care to make positive change”), staff inspire hope by influencing prosocial goals (3 items, e.g., “Staff members support me to achieve my goals”), staff collaborate with people to achieve goals (3 items, e.g., “Staff members work with me towards mutually agreed upon goals”), and staff exhibit and enact an orientation towards rehabilitation (3 items, e.g., “Staff members seem motivated to help me become more ready for change”). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree), with a higher mean score indicating stronger perceptions of positive staff relationships. The measure was found to have good internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .98. Additional information about the

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development and validation of this measure is provided in the Results section.

### **Safety**

Safety was measured utilising items from the Essen Climate Evaluation Schema (EssenCES; Schalast et al., 2008), an established self-report tool designed to assess essential characteristics of the social and therapeutic atmosphere of prisons and other forensic settings. The EssenCES includes 15 items, as well as unscored opening and closing items, covering three identified dimensions of social climate: support from staff (5 items; e.g., “Staff members take a lot of time to deal with inmates”), inmates’ social cohesion and mutual support (5 items; e.g., “There is good peer support among inmates”), and experienced safety (5 items; e.g., “There are some really aggressive inmates in this unit”). Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Very much”). Higher total scores represent more positive views of each dimension and when all items are combined of the overall prison social climate. Cronbach’s alpha statistics were .70 for support from staff, .92 for inmate cohesion, .85 for safety, and .87 for the total EssenCES prison social climate. The experienced safety items were specifically utilised for measuring perceptions of safe correctional climates, and when assessed independently, the Cronbach’s alpha was .90, indicating strong internal consistency of this measure.

### **Wellbeing**

Wellbeing was assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), an instrument designed to assess the mental wellbeing of a population (Taggart et al., 2015). The scale was developed to capture a comprehensive spectrum of attributes associated with mental health and wellbeing (e.g., “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future”). The instrument comprises 14 items asking how often the respondent experiences each state, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = None of the time to 5 = All the time). Higher total scores

on the WEMWBS represent better mental wellbeing. The WEMWBS demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .95.

### **Analytical Plan**

To evaluate the factor structure of the staff relationships measure, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted. EFA was chosen as this is well suited for exploring the underlying factor structure of scales when the theoretical framework is not fully established (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). To ensure the data’s appropriateness for EFA, we calculated the Kaiser–Mayer–Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett’s Sphericity test. Convergent validity was also considered by examining correlations between procedural fairness, staff relationships and the EssenCES support from staff factor. Measures of procedural fairness and staff relationships were expected to show significant correlations with the EssenCES support from staff factor as these constructs are inherently linked to the quality of staff treatment and support as perceived by individuals in custody.

Associations between all measures were assessed using bivariate correlations. Average scores for each measure, as well as differences across individual (gender, Aboriginal status, relationship status, dependent children) and contextual (sentence status, prison security level) factors were examined using independent samples t-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA).

Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to investigate the association between measures of correctional climate and perceptions of wellbeing. In the initial Block, individual and contextual factors were introduced, followed by the inclusion of procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety in the second Block. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$  (two-tailed) for all analyses.

## RESULTS

### Development of the staff relationships measure

Acknowledging the distinct dynamics of correctional settings, a bespoke measure was developed for measuring staff relationships, drawing on a series of similar constructs previously utilised to assess agent of change relationships in correctional and therapeutic settings as well as relational aspects of hope and motivation for rehabilitation (e.g., Abler et al., 2017; Bosma et al., 2020; Luborsky et al., 1996; McGuire–Snieckus et al., 2017). Following a review of these constructs, 22 items were developed that covered four key elements of rehabilitative staff relationships: motivating people towards change, inspiring hope by influencing prosocial goals, collaborating with people to achieve goals, and exhibiting and enacting an orientation towards rehabilitation.

Utilising the sample of respondents with complete survey responses, all 22 items were subjected to Principal Axis Factor Analysis with direct Oblimin rotation. Two distinct factors were identified, with the only two reverse-scored items loading separately onto one factor. Despite the benefits of incorporating both forward- and reverse-scored items for addressing response bias, it is not uncommon for reverse-scored items to load on a separate factor because of potentially ambiguous response options or the variety of reasons an individual may disagree with a statement (Barchard & Russell, 2020). A primary goal of factor analysis is to identify a coherent factor structure through item reduction (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). In this case, the separation of the reverse-scored items presents challenges for the interpretability of the factor structure, with the two items also exhibiting the weakest factor loadings; as such, they were removed from the analysis. A subsequent factor analysis revealed a single-factor solution with good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .986$ ).

**Table 2.** Rotated principal axis factor matrix for the staff relationships measure items

Items	Loadings
They seem motivated to help me become more ready for change	.930
They support me to achieve my goals	.928
They support people in their care to make positive change	.928
They help me when I need guidance to achieve something important to me	.915
They work with me towards mutually agreed upon goals	.898
We agree on what is important for me to work on	.896
They encourage and acknowledge people's participation in rehabilitative activity	.892
They want me to achieve my goals	.890
They appear to believe people they deal with can be rehabilitated	.887
They encourage me to work together with them	.884
They seem to believe people they deal with deserve to be helped	.882
They encourage me when I start a course, education, or training	.864
<b>Eigenvalues of 1 and above</b>	<b>9.918</b>
Total variance explained = 81.09%	
KMO = .969	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ( $\chi^2(66, N = 1,614) = 27721.49, p < .001$ )	



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Item selection was also guided by examining correlation coefficients among all items, without a predetermined cutoff. A limited number of items had correlations below .7, with the weakest observed correlation being .679; therefore, further item reduction following this method was deemed insufficient. Ultimately, the final solution was based on a theoretical understanding of constructs (Surucu et al., 2022; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Therefore, to maintain a unidimensional structure that was theoretically representative of the four elements of staff relationships, the three top loading items from each dimension were retained. The final solution consisted of 12 items with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .981).

### **Associations between measures of correctional climate**

Table 3 presents correlations between the measures of correctional climate adopted by CSNSW, as well as other established psychometrics relating to prison social climate. According to guidelines for interpreting Pearson correlation coefficients, values ranging from 0 to .29 suggest a weak or small association, between .30 and .49 indicate a moderate association, and values of .50 or higher indicate a strong or large association (Cohen, 1988). A strong positive correlation was observed between procedural fairness and staff relationships, indicating that individuals who perceived fair treatment and decision-making processes within the correctional facility tended to also report positive staff relationships. The strong relationship between these measures also highlights an expected overlap between similar relational elements of both measures. Procedural fairness and staff relationships were also moderately correlated with safety, indicating that perceptions of fairness and supportive staff relationships are related to a better sense of safety within correctional centres.

Bivariate correlations were also used to examine convergent validity between our measures and other

theoretically relevant indices of correctional climate. In this study, the EssenCES 'support from staff' factor was used to establish convergent validity for the procedural fairness and staff relationships measures. These measures both exhibited strong positive correlations with the EssenCES support from staff measure. Both measures also had strong positive correlations with the full EssenCES measure of prison social climate, indicating convergence between measures applied by CSNSW and an established index of overall prison climate.

### **How do perceptions of correctional climates vary across individual and contextual factors?**

Table 4 provides a breakdown of scores on our measures of correctional climate across individual and contextual factors, following a series of independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs. There were no significant differences in perceptions of procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety across gender or relationship status (partnered vs. non-partnered). Aboriginal individuals reported significantly lower mean scores across measures of procedural fairness and staff relationships compared to non-Aboriginal individuals. However, there were no significant differences in ratings of safety as a function of Aboriginal status.

Sentenced individuals reported significantly higher scores for safety than those on remand, but no significant differences were observed for procedural fairness or staff relationships based on sentence status. Examining prison security levels, participants in minimum-security prisons reported higher procedural fairness compared to those in maximum-security prisons, while those in minimum- and medium-security centres reported significantly higher scores for staff relationships compared to those in maximum-security centres. Conversely, people in medium-security facilities reported the highest scores on the safety measure, followed by those in minimum- and maximum-security settings.



**Table 3.** Correlations between key measures of correctional climates

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Procedural fairness	–				
2. Staff relationships	.85***	–			
3. Safety	.33***	.33***	–		
4. Support from staff	.73***	.70***	.22***	–	
5. Prison social climate	.58***	.59***	.79***	.64***	–

\*\*\* $p < .001$ **Table 4.** Perceptions of correctional climates across individual and contextual factors

	<i>M (SD)</i>		
	Procedural fairness	Staff relationships	Safety
<b>Overall mean</b>	2.58 (1.16)	2.43 (1.12)	18.77 (5.34)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	2.57 (1.16)	2.42 (1.12)	18.72 (5.37)
Female	2.65 (1.10)	2.55 (1.10)	19.29 (5.06)
<i>t</i> , <i>p</i> -value	.90, .37	1.41, .16	1.40, .16
<b>Aboriginal Status</b>			
No	2.66 (1.15)	2.51 (1.10)	18.72 (5.36)
Yes	2.38 (1.16)	2.25 (1.13)	18.90 (5.29)
<i>t</i> , <i>p</i> -value	<b>–4.70, <math>p &lt; .001</math></b>	<b>–4.48, <math>p &lt; .001</math></b>	.67, $p = .50$
<b>Relationship status</b>			
Partnered	2.59 (1.16)	2.45 (1.11)	18.48 (5.37)
Non-Partnered	2.57 (1.16)	2.42 (1.12)	18.92 (5.32)
<i>t</i> , <i>p</i> -value	–.25, $p = .80$	–.46, $p = .65$	1.69, $p = .09$
<b>Dependent children</b>			
No	2.55 (1.16)	2.40 (1.11)	18.69 (5.37)
Yes	2.71 (1.16)	2.58 (1.13)	19.09 (5.21)
<i>t</i> , <i>p</i> -value	<b>–2.42, <math>p = .015</math></b>	<b>–2.67, <math>p = .008</math></b>	–1.28, $p = .20$
<b>Sentence status</b>			
Remand	2.61 (1.15)	2.40 (1.11)	17.72 (5.52)
Sentenced	2.57 (1.16)	2.44 (1.12)	19.16 (5.22)
<i>t</i> , <i>p</i> -value	.78, $p = .44$	–.67, $p = .51$	<b>–5.25, <math>p &lt; .001</math></b>
<b>Prison security level</b>			
Minimum	2.78 (1.08)	2.72 (1.09)	19.94 (5.22)
Medium	2.63 (1.11)	2.61 (1.07)	20.32 (4.91)
Maximum	2.52 (1.18)	2.32 (1.12)	18.08 (5.35)
<i>F</i> , <i>p</i> -value	<b>5.89, <math>p = .003</math></b>	<b>19.29, <math>p &lt; .001</math></b>	<b>33.17, <math>p &lt; .001</math></b>

## How are perceptions of correctional climate associated with experiences of wellbeing?

Additional analyses examined relationships between perceptions of correctional climate and the wellbeing of people in prison. Bivariate correlations revealed procedural fairness ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ), staff relationships ( $r = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and safety ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) all exhibited statistically significant

positive associations with wellbeing of moderate–large effect sizes.

A hierarchical regression analysis further examined how measures of correctional climate were related to wellbeing, while controlling for various individual and contextual factors (see Table 5). Age, gender, Aboriginal status, relationship status, having dependent children, total time in custody, sentence status, and centre security level were entered in Block

**Table 5.** Hierarchical Regression Analysis examining the association between measures of interest and wellbeing ( $N = 2,119$ )

Predictor	Wellbeing ( $\beta$ )	
	Block 1	Block 2
Age (years)	-.09***	-.08***
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	-.06*	-.02
Aboriginal status (0 = Yes; 1 = No)	.03	-.01
Relationship status (0 = Others, 1 = Married/De facto)	-.05	-.04
Dependent children (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.04	.02
Total time in custody (years)	.03	.07*
Sentence status (0 = Remand, 1 = Sentenced)	.09***	.06**
Prison security level (0 = min, 1 = med, 2 = max)	-.18***	-.08***
Procedural fairness	–	.08*
Staff relationships	–	.32***
Safety	–	.25***
$R^2$	.05	.32
$\Delta R^2$	.05	.06
$F$	12.01***	75.00***

Notes.  $\beta$  = Standardised beta coefficients; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

1 and the key measures of correctional climate were introduced in Block 2.

After accounting for individual and contextual variables, each of the correctional climate measures showed significant positive associations with wellbeing. Specifically, experiences of higher perceptions of procedural fairness, more positive relationships with staff, and a greater sense of safety, significantly predicted higher levels of wellbeing. The addition of the correctional climate measures significantly improved the model's goodness of fit and increased variance explained by 27%, resulting in a total explained variance of 32% ( $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F = 75.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings indicate that perceptions of correctional climate explained significant variance in people's ratings of wellbeing above and beyond individual or contextual factors.

## DISCUSSION

The current study offers an initial exploration of people's perceptions of correctional climates within CSNSW prisons, including experiences of procedural fairness, staff relationships and safety, as well as the

properties of measures used to assess such perceptions. Item development and selection processes for our bespoke staff relationships measure resulted in a refined 12-item scale capturing aspects that are associated with rehabilitative agents of change, including orientation to rehabilitation, inspiring hope, motivating change, and collaborating to achieve goals. Factor analysis of the final scale solution revealed a robust single-factor structure with high internal consistency, providing support for its validity and reliability in the CSNSW correctional context. Convergent validity was also confirmed through significant positive correlations among procedural fairness, staff relationships, and the EssenCES support from staff factor as well as the global EssenCES index of prison social climate. These findings help support the validity of these measures for capturing important relational constructs that are relevant to correctional climate.

Measures of procedural fairness and staff relationships were strongly associated, highlighting the centrality of relational factors to both of these scales. Despite this overlap, both measures

contribute a unique element in understanding people's perceptions of correctional climates, with procedural fairness representing perceptions of fair treatment and fair decision-making, and staff relationships capturing facets of the working alliance and rehabilitative orientations. The high correlation between these measures indicates that perceptions of fairness are closely tied to the quality of staff relationships, where fair procedures likely foster trust and collaboration (Liebling, 2005; Reisig & Mesko, 2009). Both procedural fairness and staff relationships also showed strong positive correlations with safety, which is consistent with other indications that a fair and interpersonally supportive climate contributes to individuals' sense of safety (Bosma et al., 2020; Palmen et al., 2022; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020, Wallace & Wang, 2020). These findings reinforce the interrelated nature of features of the prison social climate in how they contribute to overall perceptions of the correctional environment.

Perceptions of correctional climate were also found to vary across different individual and contextual factors. For example, Aboriginal individuals reported lower scores on procedural fairness and staff relationships, while sentenced individuals reported higher levels of safety. When considering security level, those in minimum-security centres reported the most favourable perceptions of procedural fairness and staff relationships, whereas those in medium-security prisons reported the highest ratings of safety. These findings are consistent with previous studies associating security level with perceptions of the correctional climate, with lower-security settings typically providing more opportunities for positive interactions and rehabilitative activities (Auty & Liebling, 2020). By comparison, medium-security prisons may offer a more stringent balance between these interactional elements and control. This balance could allow individuals to feel adequately protected while also benefiting from opportunities to positively engage

with staff, which can enhance their sense of safety (Wilkinson, 2020).

Additional analyses provide insights into the relationship between perceptions of correctional climate and the wellbeing of people in prison. Perceived procedural fairness, positive staff relationships, and an increased sense of safety were all significantly related to wellbeing. The findings highlight the potential for correctional practices relating to fair and transparent decision-making, respectful and supportive staff relationships, and a sense of physical security and safety in contributing to people's experience of wellbeing while in prison. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that relational and procedural dynamics have an important role in positive outcomes for people in prison (Bosma et al., 2020; Crewe et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2011; Palmen et al., 2022; Tonkin, 2016). For example, positive interactions with staff could enhance a person's sense of autonomy, which have been identified as important factors for psychological stability in correctional settings (e.g. Galouzis et al., 2023; Howard et al., 2023; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2017). It is perhaps unsurprising that perceptions of being safe and treated with respect and fairness would play a role in subjective wellbeing. Nonetheless, and while the influences of these factors are likely to be complex and interactional, the results give promising indications that improvements in these aspects of correctional climates may promote both the environmental and psychological conditions that are conducive to prosocial change.

Limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences about the relationships between features of correctional climate and wellbeing. The reliance on self-reported data may also be subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the complexities of the correctional climate. Additionally, the study's focus on NSW correctional settings may limit the generalisability of the findings

to other jurisdictions. However, despite these limitations, this study benefits from access to a large portion of the NSW custodial population, which enhances the representativeness of the findings and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how correctional climates are perceived by different people across different contexts.

## Conclusions

This study illustrates the important and interacting roles of procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety in understanding people's perceptions of correctional climates. The development and validation of a bespoke staff relationships measure offers an additional tool to complement existing measures in assessing these key elements within the NSW correctional context. The findings from the current study also provide early insights into individual and situational factors that contribute to people's experiences of correctional climate in NSW prisons, as well as the relationship between such experiences and subjective wellbeing. The ongoing monitoring and evaluation of NSW correctional climates will help inform evidence-based practices and policies aiming to promote safe, respectful and fair environments that are conducive to rehabilitative outcomes among people completing orders.

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