

Institutional withdrawal: Power through omission in late modern imprisonment

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This article argues that institutional withdrawal—the retraction of institutional infrastructure—is a distinctive mode of late-modern penal power. Drawing on fieldwork into peer-led induction in open prisons in England and Wales, it shows how withdrawal operates across interpersonal, procedural and organizational dimensions as institutional actors step back while retaining surveillance and sanctioning powers. Whether intentional or unintentional, withdrawal produces responsabilization by default, generating uncertainty and retreatist adaptations amongst those imprisoned, who carry responsibility without scaffolding. Far from signalling institutional failure, withdrawal reflects neoliberal logics of organizational retrenchment and responsabilization. Drawing on Goffman’s concept of abandonment and Merton’s account of retreatism, the article reframes late-modern imprisonment as governance through withdrawal, demonstrating how penal power persists through omission, producing iatrogenic harm.

Keywords: institutional withdrawal, responsabilization, penal power, open prison, peer support, retreatism

Introduction

Scholarship on the sociology of punishment has expanded considerably, moving away from universalizing grand narratives towards more fine-grained analyses of penal practices (Garland 2018). Building on foundational accounts of late-modern penality and governance (Feeley and Simon 1994; Garland 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2005), recent research has examined the subtleties of power within carceral institutions and the affective forms through which control is exercised (Crewe and Ievins 2021). Prisons govern both through coercion and

'soft power' (Crewe 2009; 2011a), where authority is exercised via emotional work, moral persuasion and the cultivation of self-regulating subjects. Research in this tradition explores the 'tightness' of late-modern imprisonment (Crewe 2011b): the experiential weight, intensity and psychological pressure generated by dense surveillance and omnipresent relational authority. However, this focus on intensification risks overlooking a counter-current defined not by the saturation of control but by its withdrawal.

This article develops the concept of institutional withdrawal: governance through the retraction of support and care, where penal power persists not through intensified presence but through patterned disengagement from institutional obligations involving prisoners' daily lives, needs and subjectivities, even as mechanisms of oversight and responsabilization remain intact. Drawing on 34 qualitative interviews with ex-prisoners and officers involved in peer-led induction (PLI) across three English open prisons, focused on men's early transition into open conditions, the article examines PLI as a diagnostic site where support obligations are redistributed. Induction is a high-stakes point of organizational contact; as a result, any thinning of institutional support becomes especially legible there. PLI formalizes this redistribution at a moment of heightened vulnerability, partially displacing tasks traditionally associated with staff, such as orientation, reassurance, procedural guidance and relational anchoring—onto peer mentors. This concentration of delegated responsibility makes visible the intersection of resource retraction, relational disengagement and responsabilization, revealing institutional withdrawal as patterned redistribution rather than mere absence. While grounded in the distinctive organizational conditions of open prisons, I treat withdrawal as a governance mechanism-level proposition that may help interpret other penal and justice settings where support recedes, but accountability persists.

Responsibilization is a governance strategy that reconfigures individuals as rational, self-governing actors responsible for managing their own conduct and risks (Garland 2001; Rose 1999). The shift from rehabilitative engagement to responsabilization in penal regimes has fundamentally altered the social contract of imprisonment, with prisoners expected to demonstrate change through personal accountability and self-management (Pyysiäinen *et al.* 2017). However, this premise often operates in a vacuum, as institutions and their actors often withdraw scaffolding, leaving prisoners burdened with responsibility yet deprived of resources and relational support. As Goffman (1961: 133) observed in his description of the 'betrayal funnel', entry into an institution is marked by 'abandonment, disloyalty, and embitterment'. He captured the experiential dimension of abandonment as carrying symbolic and personal meanings, highlighting the stripping away of relational support when its need is most acute. Leshem (2017) frames abandonment as a structural feature of neoliberal governance, describing the systematic withdrawal of institutional support under the guise of autonomy and efficiency.

The withdrawal of support results in what I term responsabilization by default, a key dimension of the institutional withdrawal examined in this article. Prisoners are held accountable for self-management yet deprived of the relational scaffolding and procedural support necessary to make such accountability viable. Their autonomy is hollow, unmoored from support. Participants described these settings not as liberatory but as sites of invisibility, insecurity and institutional withdrawal. While responsabilization highlights the ascription of responsibility and soft power captures the ambivalent presence of authority, both assume continuing institutional engagement—a presumption that breaks down in the contexts examined here. The language of responsabilization conceals both abandonment and prisoner retreatism; disengagement from the institutional goals and regime emerges not as resistance but as the outcome of institutional withdrawal.

Institutional withdrawal signals a transformation in penal power, where authority is exercised through omission rather than intervention. This retraction should not be mistaken for institutional collapse. Unlike actuarial justice (Feeley and Simon 1994), which implies strategic design, institutional withdrawal reflects the ambivalent architecture of late-modern imprisonment (Coverdale 2021): a system that responsabilizes while abdicating care, retains power without presence and governs through disengagement.

Despite their marginal place in penal scholarship, open prisons are an analytically powerful site for examining the dynamics of penal power and withdrawal. They function as transitional institutions between closed custody and release, structured around reduced security and prisoners' engagement in work and release on temporary licence (ROTL) to demonstrate readiness for reintegration. While closed prisons are characterized by dense staffing, omnipresent authority and routine surveillance, open prisons have fewer staff, greater spatial permeability and heightened expectations of self-management. In principle, this thinner architecture requires compensatory support such as an orientation rich induction with accessible staff, clear procedural guidance, consistent relational scaffolding to help newcomers translate autonomy into progression through ROTL, work and sentence planning. The intended experience is supported transition: prisoners stretched by new responsibilities but supported through uncertainty, able to access guidance without excessive oversight, experiencing the transition as challenging but navigable. This article demonstrates how governance operates through two interconnected mechanisms: responsabilization withdrawal and bureaucratic withdrawal. PLI is treated here not merely as a programme but as a governance technology through which institutional responsibilities are redistributed during a moment of heightened vulnerability. The article argues that these mechanisms constitute a broader condition of institutional withdrawal, in which accountability persists while relational and procedural infrastructure recedes.

Open prisons are intended to operate through scaffolded autonomy rather than saturated control, granting prisoners greater responsibility for navigating daily routines and progression. While open prisons intentionally grant prisoners greater autonomy than closed facilities, institutional withdrawal refers to the point at which this autonomy becomes hollow—when the intended freedom turns into a systemic abdication of support obligations. Withdrawal can manifest either through intentional policy (deliberate organizational stepping back to promote independence) or unintentional dynamics (such as resource scarcity or administrative fragmentation): in both cases it represents a mode of governance rather than simply 'less security.'

Open conditions thus illuminate a form of governance that is easily obscured in closed environments, revealing what imprisonment feels like when presence is no longer the default and where autonomy is required but not necessarily supported. While Crewe's frameworks theorize how prisoners experience authority with varying intensity and proximity, they assume continued institutional infrastructure. This article explores what happens when that infrastructure is withdrawn—a condition of governance that his frameworks do not capture. The present findings challenge the assumption that soft power travels unproblematically across different penal contexts. Institutional withdrawal was not an initial analytic category of the study. Rather, through iterative engagement with participants' accounts of early adaptation to open conditions, recurring patterns of institutional detachment across relational, procedural and organizational domains became visible. Withdrawal was developed abductively to capture these patterned dynamics and to connect them to wider debates on penal power. While grounded in the empirical conditions of open prisons, the framework identifies a governance mechanism that may illuminate other penal contexts where institutional support recedes, but accountability remains. By portability I refer to

the analytic mechanism rather than institutional equivalence. Any wider relevance is therefore framed as a mechanism-level proposition rather than a claim of cross-institutional sameness.

Drawing on classical insights from [Goffman \(1961\)](#) and [Merton \(1938\)](#), this article argues that weakened institutions erode normative regulation and intensify the corrosive effects of withdrawal. Goffman's concept of institutional abandonment captures the experiential dimension—how withdrawal feels to prisoners—while Merton's concept of retreatism explains their adaptive responses when institutional structures fail to provide legitimate means to achieve expected goals. Together, these concepts highlight how withdrawal displaces the integrative, relational and supportive functions that prisons claim to uphold. Examples include staff and peer supporters who are physically and emotionally unavailable, relational supports that are fragmented or hollowed out, and the burden of navigating the regime falling largely on the individual. Such experiences complicate dominant narratives of penal intensification ([Beckett and Murakawa 2012](#); [Cullen 1995](#)). In theorizing the concept of institutional withdrawal, the article engages with and extends scholarship on responsabilization ([Garland 2001](#)), soft power ([Crewe 2009](#); [2011a](#)) and configurations of penal authority ([Crewe et al. 2014](#)).

In practice, governance persists through conditions of abandonment ([Goffman 1961](#)); responsabilization deepens in the void of support ([Schreeche-Powell 2025a](#)); and retreatism ([Merton 1938](#)) among prisoners emerges as a structurally induced adaptation to institutional withdrawal. Rather than being over-governed, many prisoners in open conditions find themselves under-supported yet still subject to scrutiny and compliance expectations. In this sense, institutional withdrawal functions as a form of power—not a loss of authority but a retraction of institutional responsibility that governs through omission while continuing to enact punishment.

From coercion to withdrawal: Shifting modalities of penal control

Prisons have long been conceptualized as spaces of overt coercion governed through physical containment, rigid routines and surveillance ([Foucault 1977](#)). Classical accounts, such as [Goffman's \(1961\)](#) total institution, emphasize the totalizing nature of penal power. In recent decades, scholars have examined shifts in penal governance. Rather than relying solely on brute force, institutions increasingly employ techniques of psychological and emotional regulation, which [Crewe \(2009\)](#) terms 'soft power'. This 'Orwellian vision' of contemporary penalty ([Matthews 2005: 178](#)) reflects state priorities that focus less on strategies involving physical force and more towards perceptible forms of regulation. Within this framework, authority operates primarily by producing compliant, self-regulating subjects. Imprisoned individuals are expected to internalize institutional norms, manage their emotions and adopt prosocial identities, often under the guise of rehabilitative or risk-reduction interventions.

[Goffman \(1961: 13\)](#) noted that institutional responses often focus less on meeting individual needs and more on providing 'strategic leverage in the management of men'. This observation resonates strongly in contemporary prisons, where responsabilization and managerial logics have displaced pastoral functions. However, this assumes a functioning institutional apparatus, where staff and peers model prosocial behaviour and give support, interventions are delivered with fidelity, and case management systems provide consistent guidance. Empirical accounts from open prison settings suggest that these features are often noticeably absent. Rather than merely experiencing emotional governance, many prisoners describe the conditions to be like a void, characterized by inaccessible staff and peers, superficial interventions and a pervasive lack of clarity about rules and expectations ([Schreeche-Powell 2025a](#); [2025b](#)).

Crewe's body of work provides an essential foundation for understanding contemporary penal power. His soft power framework (2009; 2011a) reveals how prisons govern through intensive relational presence: emotional labour, moral persuasion and psychological self-regulation under conditions of 'tight' authority. Crewe demonstrates how soft power operates 'at a distance' from direct coercion, with prisoners self-regulating in anticipation of consequences rather than through moment-by-moment instruction. However, this 'at-a-distance' operation requires prison officers to mediate policies, administer systems and incentive and earned privileges (IEP) schemes, and maintain relationships. As Crewe emphasizes, prison officers are 'crucial in mediating the forms of psychological power', while soft power comprises regulation accomplished 'directly through staff-prisoner relationships' and through policies that 'officers assist or put into effect' (2011a: 456–7). Later work (Crewe and Liebling 2017; Crewe *et al.* 2014) has examined the 'heavy–light, absent–present' framework and more broadly theorized the reconfiguration of penal power in late-modern imprisonment. When staff authority is 'absent'—that is, when officers are unavailable, lack confidence or fail to perform protective functions—prisoners experience insecurity, even in ostensibly 'lighter' regimes. Crewe and colleagues showed that 'light-absent' prisons—where staff authority was under-asserted and governance became fragile—generated greater anxiety than 'heavy-present' prisons, where firmer control provided safety and predictability. The paradox is that more controlled prisons can feel more 'relaxed' because reliable authority creates secure, predictable environments.

This article introduces institutional withdrawal as a distinct governance condition that is not fully captured by existing frameworks. Rather than synthesizing soft power and responsabilization or extending the absent–present concept to new contexts, the article highlights the withdrawal of institutional infrastructure while maintaining accountability mechanisms. While the absent–present concept identifies varying degrees of staff confidence and availability within functioning institutional contexts (Crewe *et al.* 2014), withdrawal describes multi-level organizational disengagement that transcends interpersonal relationships. Three features distinguish withdrawal. First, it operates simultaneously across interpersonal, procedural and organizational dimensions. While the absent–present concept focuses primarily on staff visibility, confidence and engagement—withdrawal encompasses the retraction of procedural systems and organizational infrastructure that render staff presence meaningful. In Crewe *et al.*'s framework, when staff are absent, the institutional apparatus remains formally intact even if poorly enacted; however, when withdrawal occurs, the scaffolding itself recedes. Second, withdrawal refers to distance from the mediating infrastructure, not just from coercion. Soft power operates 'at a distance' from direct coercion, through mediators who administer policies, deliver interventions and sustain relationships (Crewe 2011a: 456–7). Withdrawal involves distance from these mediators and their systems: it is not a retraction from hands-on control but from the relational and procedural foundations that make psychological governance effective. Third, withdrawal functions as governance rather than institutional failure. Power persists through self-regulation, surveillance and the threat of sanction, yet institutional obligations have been withdrawn, resulting in the responsabilization by default described earlier.

The empirical analysis demonstrates these dynamics in practice. In open prisons, where minimal staffing, spatial permeability and reduced surveillance make organizational structures highly visible, the multi-level operation of withdrawal becomes apparent. Prisoners describe not merely absent or under-confident officers (the 'absent' dimension in Crewe *et al.*'s framework) but the hollowing-out of entire support systems, such as peer support schemes operating without institutional backing and administrative processes that leave men to navigate complex progressions without procedural clarity. The psychological opera-

tion of power persists prisoners self-regulate in anticipation of consequences, remain acutely aware of surveillance through risk assessments and fear regression to closed conditions. Yet this occurs amid the withdrawal of support structures, guidance mechanisms and relational infrastructure. The withdrawal of institutional presence does not equate to absent control or leniency (Matthews 2005). ‘Power is still power’, even, and perhaps especially, when it recedes (Schreeche-Powell 2025a). This reflects governance through withdrawal: power exercised through what institutions do not do.

Defining institutional withdrawal

Institutional withdrawal refers to a governance modality in which authority is exercised through organizational disengagement from support obligations while oversight mechanisms remain intact. This withdrawal operates across three interconnected dimensions:

Organizationally—institutional structures retract: resource allocation, staffing levels and policy priorities shift from relational care towards compliance and cost containment; *Procedurally*—systems hollow out: case management, administrative guidance and programme delivery recede, leaving opaque processes and unclear pathways; *Interpersonally*—institutional actors (officers, peers, managers) step back from relational work: prioritizing paperwork over presence, triage over support, throughput over engagement. While organizational and procedural conditions constrain what actors can do, withdrawal manifests through their daily practices.

These dimensions converge experientially with prisoners navigating regimes in which structures, systems and actors have simultaneously withdrawn their support. Prisoners retreat through physical withdrawal, social disengagement and opting out of procedures, which emerges as an adaptive response to this multi-level withdrawal. Unlike soft power, which emphasizes relational presence (Crewe 2011a), or responsabilization, which presumes continued institutional engagement (Garland 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2005), withdrawal describes conditions where prisoners self-manage due to a reduction in the organizational infrastructure that supports such self-management. This differs from Crewe *et al.*'s (2014) concept of ‘absent’ staff within functioning systems, as withdrawal refers to the retreat of the institutional architecture itself.

Explanations of withdrawal cannot be reduced to austerity or resource scarcity alone. Although these factors may structure disengagement, withdrawal refers to the experience of navigating an institution that remains formally present but operationally distant—where power persists through surveillance and the threat of sanction while the relational and procedural infrastructure has been retracted. Governance through withdrawal is a dynamic that is especially visible in open prisons but applicable wherever support infrastructure recedes and accountability expectations remain.

A useful distinction can be made between intentional and unintentional forms of institutional withdrawal. Intentional withdrawal refers to deliberate strategies that involve stepping back from guidance, support or oversight to promote independence, transfer responsibility or reduce direct intervention. Unintentional withdrawal arises from organizational limitations—staffing shortages, administrative delays and organizational fragmentation—that inadvertently leave individuals without access to support or decision-making processes. Although analytically distinct, these forms of institutional withdrawal often converge experientially as individuals navigate expectations under conditions of institutional distance, limited information and diminished relational guidance.

Methods

This article draws on a qualitative study of PLI within the open prison estate of England and Wales (Schreeche-Powell 2025a). The study was designed to explore men's experiences of transfer from closed to open conditions, with particular attention to early adjustment, emotional wellbeing and the experience of authority during this transitional period. Rather than beginning with a predefined conceptual framework, the research sought to understand how newcomers made sense of open conditions, how responsibility and autonomy were structured in practice, and how institutional support was experienced at a moment widely understood as pivotal for progression. PLI was examined as one institutional mechanism operating within this transition, allowing analysis of how responsibility, guidance and relational presence were organized in practice. The research therefore asked: (1) how men experienced and interpreted their transfer into open conditions; (2) how PLI intersected with emotional wellbeing, adaptation and perceptions of safety; and (3) how authority and responsibility were experienced across prisoners, peer mentors and staff during early transition.

The original study included 34 participants: 27 ex-prisoners who had transferred to one of three open prisons in southern England and participated in PLI schemes, and seven prison officers directly involved in facilitating PLI. The ex-prisoner sample comprised 27 men aged from their 20s to 60s: 16 White, nine Black, and two Asian. Seven had previous open prison experience, while 20 were first-timers. The men had often experienced prison transfers: nine reported more than ten transfers, seven between five and nine, and 11 between one and four. Lengths of stay varied: six men remained in the same open prison for over 2 years and 21 for between 13 and 24 months. The staff sample comprised seven White officers, three with over a decade's service and four with under 4 years' experience.

Data were collected between 2020 and 2024 through semi-structured interviews, which were chosen for their flexibility in generating rich, contextualized accounts (Geertz 1973). Interviews followed an iterative process consistent with grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2014). Interview guides were organized around participants' experiences of transfer and early adaptation to open conditions, exploring domains such as support, responsibility, safety, procedural clarity, staff contact and emotional adjustment—domains from which withdrawal patterns later emerged. Ex-prisoners were invited to describe their expectations prior to transfer, first-night and induction experiences, concerns relating to safety, dignity, family contact and wellbeing, and their interactions with staff and peer mentors. Prompts explored perceptions of responsibility, autonomy, access to information and guidance, and the relational dynamics between prisoners, staff and 'induction insiders'. Staff interviews examined their experience of delivering induction, institutional expectations, peer mentor roles and how responsibility was distributed in practice. Interviews were narrative in style, encouraging participants to attribute meaning to events rather than respond to fixed-response questioning. They typically lasted 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with fieldnotes to preserve contextual detail.

The ex-prisoners were recruited purposively through social media, prison reform organizations and my existing networks from prior prison research, facilitating trust-building. Staff were also recruited purposively, using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. This approach prioritized depth, reflexivity and thick description over representativeness.

The original study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). Coding was conducted in stages—open, axial, and selective—drawing on coding principles from Miles and Huberman (1994) and grounded theory traditions. This article constitutes a

secondary analysis, re-examining the data through thematic organization to identify withdrawal mechanisms. This secondary analysis emerged during further engagement with the dataset, which revealed previously overlooked dynamics that warrant focused thematic exploration. The focus on institutional withdrawal therefore builds directly on domains explored in the original interviews: support, responsibility, relational presence and procedural clarity—rather than imposing a conceptual frame disconnected from the data.

The analysis followed an inductive, iterative process informed by [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) approach to thematic analysis. I read and coded transcripts line by line to capture participants' accounts of navigating the open prison environment, encounters with staff and experiences of support—or its absence. Initial codes (e.g. unclear processes, staff and peers not available, left to figure things out, peer reliance, organizational opacity) were compared across cases and clustered into broader categories through constant comparison. Across the transcripts, recurring clusters of these codes coalesced around a shared pattern of institutional detachment, which provided the analytic foundation for identifying 'withdrawal' as a central organizing theme. As these patterned descriptions accumulated, abductive engagement with concepts of responsabilization and institutional presence helped to refine the emergent analytic frame. Through successive rounds of coding, two interconnected themes crystallized: bureaucratic withdrawal and responsabilization withdrawal. These themes were not imposed a priori but emerged from recurring accounts of institutional detachment from relational, informational and procedural support. The concept of institutional withdrawal was developed to capture this patterned disengagement across cases and to connect inductively derived themes to existing debates on penal power. I conducted all of the analysis and revisited it reflexively to ensure transparency in linking empirical material to conceptual claims.

Methodological considerations and limitations

Several methodological considerations shaped the design and scope of this study. First, the sample was purposively recruited and relatively small ($n = 34$), prioritizing depth and contextualized understanding over statistical representativeness—consistent with the interpretive goals of qualitative methodology. Purposive sampling facilitated access and trust-building but may have resulted in a sample oriented towards those with more critical experiences of PLI or greater willingness to share such accounts. Strikingly, no participant—across ex-prisoner and staff interviews—offered consistently positive accounts of PLI, though some acknowledged that the underlying principle retained merit if properly resourced and supported. The lack of uniformly positive accounts may reflect genuine systemic issues or sampling bias; both possibilities require acknowledgement.

Second, the ex-prisoner accounts were retrospective, collected post-release between several months and four years after their time in open prisons. This temporal distance enabled more reflective narratives but means the findings capture how withdrawal was remembered rather than real-time dynamics. This interpretive distance does not invalidate the analysis; rather, it highlights forms of withdrawal that were sufficiently consequential to remain narratively salient. However, it does mean the study identifies patterned experiences rather than attempting to comprehensively map all instances of withdrawal within these settings. Future in situ observational research could usefully complement these retrospective accounts.

Third, the study deliberately focused on how PLI was experienced by newcomers during transition and therefore did not include interviews with peer mentors. This sharpened the analytical lens on institutional withdrawal as experienced by those subjected to it but lim-

ited insight into how peer mentors understood their own roles, constraints and positioning within the institutional ecology. Their perspectives may reveal whether peer mentors experience forms of responsabilization, role ambiguity or institutional strain that parallel—or diverge from—the experiences reported by newcomers. Future research incorporating peer mentor accounts could highlight how withdrawal is enacted, negotiated and potentially resisted within the staff—peer mentor—prisoner relational triangle, enriching understanding of PLI's operational dynamics and the distribution of institutional burdens across differently positioned actors.

Fourth, although three open prisons were included, each had distinct institutional cultures, regimes and staffing configurations. Although this variation increased confidence in the identified patterns not being site-specific artefacts, the findings reflect withdrawal dynamics within these particular contexts rather than across the open estate as a whole. The study makes no claims to statistical representativeness but offers a conceptually informed analysis of recurrent patterns that can inform broader debates about penal governance. As Martel (2004: 170) observes, qualitative samples can yield '(in)valuable insights about the particular' that resonate beyond their immediate empirical setting.

Finally, ethical considerations were central to the research design. Although the ex-prisoner participants were no longer imprisoned at the time of the interviews, they remained potentially vulnerable due to the lingering effects of institutionalization and systemic disempowerment (Nickel 2006). The study received ethical approval from my university and adhered to core ethical principles: avoiding harm, obtaining informed consent, protecting privacy and confidentiality, and avoiding deception (Diener and Crandall 1978). To address the power imbalances inherent in researcher—participant relationships—particularly when participants have histories of institutional subjugation—I drew on Dickson-Swift *et al.*'s (2007) reflective framework, employing careful self-disclosure, rapport-building, reciprocal dialogue and transparency about the research purposes and processes. This approach did not erase asymmetry but aimed to mitigate its effects and create conditions for open, ethically grounded conversations. I assured all participants of confidentiality, gave them the opportunity to withdraw or decline to answer any questions, and offered access to support services if the interviews brought up distressing memories.

Findings

PLI and institutional withdrawal in open prisons

PLI is presented in official discourse as a progressive, empowering model designed to help prisoners navigate the transition into a penal establishment—in this case, from closed to open conditions—a move that introduces new freedoms but also new procedural demands around ROTL and employment.¹ In theory, peers are well positioned to provide practical guidance and emotional reassurance because they have already completed this transition. PLI is rooted in national safer-custody priorities emphasizing improved reception environments, enhancing early support and expanding peer-based roles across the estate.

Participants' accounts described a quite different experience. Rather than feeling supported, newcomers often found themselves in a setting where institutional actors were noticeably less present. The shift from staff-led to peer-led delivery meant that much of

¹ PLI aims to improve the quality of life for prisoners by promoting responsibility, supportive relationships and a caring environment, empowering prisoners to collaborate in reception/induction, offering reassurance, and disseminating accurate information about the regime. Peers are selected and vetted; content is delivered jointly by staff and peers; with completion verified and senior management oversight intended.

the early guidance was provided by peers, while staff played a minimal and largely administrative role. Peer involvement often replaced staff contact rather than complementing it, leaving peers as the sole source of information—available only briefly, minimally and without relational follow-up.

In the open prisons examined, withdrawal was not a single or uniform process. Participants described formally positioned actors (prison officers and staff) and quasi-formally positioned actors (peer mentors) stepping back in distinct ways. Staff withdrawal was experienced through reduced visibility, limited contact and prioritization of paperwork over dialogue—dynamics participants consistently linked to austerity, depleted staffing and managerial pressures. Newcomers also encountered peer withdrawal, where mentors provided only minimal guidance, disengaged after completing forms, or limited their involvement to brief, procedural interactions rather than offering relational support. Although these different forms of withdrawal operated through distinct mechanisms, they converged into a hollowed-out institutional presence: fewer opportunities for clarification, thinning relational scaffolding and a lack of reliable guidance during the transition into open conditions. This was not the paradoxical ‘absent–present’ of a tightly controlled regime; instead, the institution’s formal presence remained while the practical and relational anchors ordinarily supplied by its actors receded. Participants entered environments that appeared freer on the surface yet felt precarious, with unclear expectations and limited institutional anchoring.

Withdrawal unfolded through overlapping forms varying in intentionality and level of formality. Some withdrawals were purposeful—framed as promoting independence or efficiency—while others emerged unintentionally due to scarcity, fragmentation and routine operational pressures. These intentional and unintentional forms of withdrawal converged in practice, shaping how prisoners encountered responsabilization and disengagement.

Mechanisms of institutional withdrawal

Responsibilization withdrawal and displacement

Prisoners experienced the responsabilizing strategies of open prisons not as supportive but exposing. Newcomers repeatedly described being ‘cut adrift’ during induction, left to navigate complex processes alone while staff and peers withdrew behind the rhetoric of self-management. Peer mentors occupied a distinct structural position; while I did not interview mentors directly, ex-prisoner and staff accounts suggest that responsibility for induction labour was devolved downward and blurred across roles. What was framed as empowerment amounted to enforced disengagement, where visibility and guidance were absent. Pauley articulated this directly:

Whenever the screws and peers couldn’t be arsed to answer a question or help out or do something for me they just kept saying it was up to me to find out, or it was my responsibility to find out/sort it [...] but if I knew how or if they had told me things I needed to know then I wouldn’t have asked in the first place! (Pauley)

Other participants echoed this sense of responsibility without orientation:

I’m all for being left alone to do stuff [...] but I still needed some support and information to get me to the point where I could, and I didn’t get it [...] they were too busy sitting in the office. (Del)

Alan similarly captured the emotional strain produced by responsabilization:

What's the point of having peers and staff if they ain't gonna help? [...] It stressed me out even more. I didn't know what to do or how to go about doing it. (Alan)

Staff responsabilized prisoners in ways that did not align with the induction programme, pushing the entire burden of contact and progression onto them:

... OMU² don't come to you [...] it's your responsibility to contact them and find out what you need to do and submit the forms otherwise your progression and going out will be delayed. (James)

Steve was told the following by staff:

.... you need to start doing things for yourself ... you're gonna be going on day release in the community soon and you ain't gonna have no-one to wipe your arse for you then.

This language of 'your responsibility' and 'do it yourself' recurred across participants' accounts of induction encounters with staff and peers. For some, the expectation of self-management in an unfamiliar environment became overwhelming. Steve described this vividly:

Peer support was a myth [...] in a strange environment after years in a different nick, and I was told to crack on with it and figure things out myself [...] I just wanted to go back [...] I was stressed to fuck by it all. (Steve)

Newcomers arriving from closed prisons perceived induction peers as privileged gatekeepers with unusual access and influence:

They had access to all areas in the prison [...] reception, OMU, other areas of the prison that most of us can't go to. (Danny)

Others depicted induction mentors as effectively running the show.

The induction orderlies run the show [...] The kangas let them do whatever they like [...]. (Pauley)

Mentors were also described as becoming disengaged once their immediate responsibilities were completed.

They were only interested in fucking me off out the door so they could get on with cooking their dinner and association [...] questions just went unanswered—they were invisible. (Joey)

Staff, meanwhile, were seen to collude with this arrangement, tolerating mentors' access and behaviours because it smoothed operations and minimized their own workload:

If we keep them happy things go according to plan. (Officer Kev)

² OMU: 'Offender Management Unit' – responsible for ROTL.

The ex-prisoners perceived this displacement of responsibility and authority as leaving them exposed, anxious and dependent on peers whose motives were often questioned.

Manipulators [...] out for themselves. (Joey)

This dynamic highlights how responsabilization and displacement operated in tandem: duties that once belonged to staff were displaced onto newcomers under the guise of responsibility, while professional roles were contracted out to peers as a managerial solution. Authority was not only abdicated but, at times, redirected to serve the motivations of staff and mentors. These accounts show that responsabilization withdrawal does more than redistribute responsibility; it creates conditions of abandonment, leaving prisoners with obligations but no scaffolding.

Bureaucratic withdrawal: Engaging through paperwork, not people

Newcomers commonly encountered paper-heavy, people-light contact. Several described staff postures as time pressured and process focused, with interpersonal engagement giving way to paperwork. As Jimmy put it:

They give you no time. They sit on their arse drinking coffee in the office. (Jimmy)

The ex-prisoners frequently characterized induction as signature-seeking, with forms and records taking precedence over genuine dialogue:

They just want your squiggle [signature] to say you've read it and they are covered. (Rich)

First-night processes were similarly experienced as mechanical, oriented towards throughput rather than providing reassurance. Billy described how his distress was reduced to a bureaucratic issue:

I was so stressed [...] they said see healthcare in the morning and that it was just a bit of anxiety. (Billy)

Human needs were handled in a bureaucratic and impersonal manner; however, in this context bureaucracy often appeared less as an all-encompassing apparatus than as a weak substitute for relational contact.

Many participants repeatedly contrasted *information* with *understanding*. Peter described being given material that served the institution's needs but failed his own:

It wasn't what I needed [...] when I needed it [...] it was more suited to them [staff and mentors]. (Peter)

Others described stalling in the face of uncertainty, experiencing paralysis by having to complete forms without explanation and guidance. Across all accounts, bureaucratic withdrawal was not just about the presence of forms but also the omission of dialogue. The ex-prisoners described induction as a process where 'being seen' meant being processed, with compliance secured through signatures rather than conversations. Information was available but often poorly timed or misaligned, producing confusion rather than clarity.

Staff's reliance on paperwork allowed them to demonstrate compliance and protect themselves in audits, but it hollowed out the moments when prisoners most needed relational support. Instead of reassurance, men received documents; instead of engagement, they received signatures. The bureaucracy maintained control while simultaneously withdrawing the human presence that prisoners sought.

Living induction under withdrawal: Ambiguous autonomy and retreat

Responsibilization withdrawal and bureaucratic withdrawal converged to produce a distinctive climate of ambiguous autonomy, in which prisoners were granted freedom and responsibility but felt exposed, anxious and unsupported. Many participants described the early days in open prison as a high-stakes transition marked by entry shock:

I was scared shitless [...] the consequences of not getting it were gonna mess things up for me and my family. (Joey)

I was so close [...] I could see the high security prison across the road, I knew I could end up back there anytime. (Peter)

Fear was compounded by uncertainty over expectations and processes. In response, a clear pattern of prisoner retreat emerged, manifested through physical avoidance, social withdrawal and disengagement from formal processes. Harvey framed physical withdrawal directly:

I didn't wanna get anything wrong [...] I made the move to stay out of the way in my cell. (Harvey)

Steve reported affective retreat:

I thought I was past being scared [...] but here I was the same guy who can't deal with his shit. (Steve).

The shift from tightly managed closed to open conditions left some men exposed without scaffolding, despite being reassured by staff and peers that 'You've been in a few times so [...] you'll pick things up quick.'

Peter described retreating from processes altogether, unable to 'keep asking questions no one answered', and he eventually 'just stopped trying'. Ally articulated a similar emotional withdrawal: 'I just wanted to say fuck it and do nothing.'

Some men gravitated towards informal networks rather than the official scheme, recounting that peers were focused on throughput:

As soon as I signed their paperwork, they did a Houdini and vanished. (Rich)

They couldn't wait to get me out the door. (James)

The ex-prisoners also questioned peer motives, suggesting that support was compromised by self-interest and the informal advantages peers gained from their roles.

These forms of emotional, social and procedural withdrawal illustrate that retreat was not hypothetical; instead, it was enacted in patterned ways as a direct response to institutional actors stepping back.

Producing withdrawal: Staff perspectives on managerialism, scarcity and the hollowing out of contact

Officers consistently located their induction work within a rule-bound, audit-heavy environment, emphasizing compliance with prison service instructions (PSIs) and performance targets.

We have to follow the guidelines as set down by the PSI and management. (Officer Woody)

The operational translation of PSI 07/2015 was clear: first-night safety checks and mandated documentation took priority, even when broader adjustment needs were unaddressed. As one officer put it:

As long as [we] hit the first-night requirements that's the priority. (Officer Kev)

Officers described first-night work as triage, centred narrowly on self-harm/suicide risk and recording outcomes on the custodial system:

Doing a first night interview and putting a comment on the prisoner's P-NOMIS is the best I can do with the time I've got. (Officer Kev)

Ex-prisoners experienced this as a mechanical pass-through:

It was like a conveyor belt [...] one after the other, in and out job. (Steve)

Officers recognized the gap between policy and practice but pointed to time scarcity:

Ideally, we would like to spend more time with them and do more, but we just don't have the time [...]. (Officer Kev)

Behind the triage was a target regime that officers felt viscerally. Induction was embedded within 'Decency & Health' metrics and subject to intense managerial oversight:

They are relentless [management] the only time we see them is when they are chasing us up for not meeting a target [...] always the negatives, the things that affect them. (Officer Emily)

The emphasis on meeting auditable indicators—'arse-covering and crossing off another thing on their [management] action plan' (Officer Kev)—shaped decisions regarding what could be counted rather than what was needed. Staff described being pulled into 'doing things right' (forms, records) rather than 'doing the right thing' (needs-led engagement).

Austerity and staffing pressures framed these choices. Officers narrated depleted landings, rising administrative loads and competing operational demands that forced induction to be narrowed into a minimum viable product. In this climate, peers became a capacity solution, which officers referred to as 'contracting out':

We have to rely on the peer supporters to do a lot of what we should do. (Officer Kev)
I wouldn't tell them this, but they are a godsend [...] we haven't got the bodies [...] they free us up. (Officer Emily)

Officers acknowledged that management recognized the workload benefit, 'sold to the prison' as efficient and cost-effective. This transfer created ambiguity about who was responsible for induction outcomes. Some officers accepted everyday quid-pro-quo arrangements with induction peers to keep the system moving:

At the end of the day they help us out dealing with the prisoners, so we do our bit for them. Last thing we need is a bunch of pissed off mentors on our case. (Officer Kev)

While officers framed peer mentors as supportive adjuncts, mentees viewed them as privileged gatekeepers with unusual access to staff and offices, which fuelled suspicion and

resentment. The staff understood the scepticism but continued to value peer mentors for smoothing operational friction.

Officers also reported having limited voice in the induction design. They described a top-down policy pipeline in which interventions arrived prefigured, with little space for bottom-up feedback:

I've been in the job too long now to bother trying to talk to them [management], they ain't interested in what we've got to say [...]. (Officer Woody)

Others emphasized that listening would improve delivery:

If they bothered to ask us or listened when we tried to feedback and acted upon it [...] things would be so much better. (Officer Emily)

The cumulative effect was disempowerment, reduced discretion and low morale, all of which officers linked to proceduralizing care.

From the officers' perspective, managerialism and scarcity hollowed out contact in three ways:

Narrowing the remit to auditable first-night checks at the expense of broader adjustment needs (such as anxiety and information gaps). *'The main thing is we check they aren't going to cut up or string up'* (Officer Kev). After this point, contact often receded.

Shifting labour to peers as a pragmatic fix. Officers presented this as necessary, yet acknowledged practical trade-offs—uneven quality, informal bargains and blurred lines between help and leverage: *'the peers are there to supplement us'* but *'they free us up'* (Officer Kev/Officer Emily).

Prioritizing paperwork over presence. Officers repeatedly referenced PSI compliance and P-NOMIS entries as the things that 'had to be done', even when they would have preferred relational work: *'the best I can do is a quick first night interview'* (Officer Kev).

Officers did not express indifference so much as structural constraint. They described an induction ecology where targets, audits and limited staffing defined the boundaries of action, with peer labour serving as an elastic buffer. Mentees' frustrations echoed officers' own sense that the process took priority over care.

Staff perspectives depicted an induction process optimized for compliance and stability rather than a time-intensive relational orientation. Officers described doing what counts (and can be counted) under managerial pressure while outsourcing what could not be fitted into their limited available time. The result was a hollowing out of contact: safety checks without sustained engagement, documentation without explanation and peer-mediated workarounds that kept operations running but diminished the institutional presence that newcomers needed most.

Responsibilization and bureaucratic withdrawal reveal that institutional withdrawal is patterned rather than incidental. Their significance lies in how they reconfigure roles and what they produce: abandonment, confusion and moral injury. Far from representing a benign absence, institutional withdrawal generates harm that echoes and intensifies the pains of imprisonment. Practices framed as progressive—autonomy, trust and reduced supervision—can become sources of distress and disempowerment under conditions of institutional withdrawal.

Across both prisoner and staff accounts, the induction process in open prisons emerged as a space where the institutional presence had been reduced and redistributed. Prisoners

too much, they created conditions in which failure became more likely; withdrawal itself became punitive.

Although Crewe's work on soft power (2009; 2011a) and the heavy–light, absent–present framework (Crewe and Liebling 2017; Crewe *et al.* 2014) provide important foundations, the withdrawal described here differs by encompassing multiple organizational levels. Crewe's soft power framework analysed governance through intensive presence in closed prisons, while the absent–present framework showed how interpersonal absence—such as unavailable staff, weak control and chaotic wings—created insecurity and hollowed-out support in private-sector prisons. The present study reveals how withdrawal operates simultaneously across interpersonal, procedural and organizational dimensions in open prisons, where a thin institutional infrastructure makes these dynamics especially visible. Prisoners encountered not only the interpersonal absence described by Crewe and colleagues but also organizational withdrawal—the substantive removal of procedural cues, systemic clarity and institutional anchoring across multiple levels.

Withdrawal in practice: Retraction, substitution and responsibility

Goffman's work reminds us that institutional practices can unsettle a person's sense of self when support, recognition and guidance are withdrawn. Open prisons are not 'total institutions' in Goffman's strict sense; their permeability and emphasis on autonomy mark them as organizationally distinct. However, the participants' experiences echo aspects of his analysis of abandonment and situational withdrawal: individuals were left to navigate early transition amid diminishing institutional support, and the recession of staff and peers produced a sense of exposure that resonates with his insights into how institutions can erode orientation and self-assurance.

Goffman (1961) emphasized that institutional responses to human needs are often burocratized through routinized, impersonal procedures, but the pattern observed here differs in important ways. The open-prison bureaucracy did not saturate daily life as it does in a total institution; instead, it served as a substitute for presence. Procedural compliance replaced relational engagement, turning bureaucracy into a mechanism through which withdrawal was delivered. In this sense, bureaucratic withdrawal extends rather than contradicts Goffman's insights: it shows how forms of bureaucracy can operate not as totalizing control but as a mode of institutional retraction, enabling the prison to appear procedurally compliant while human support recedes.

What emerged was governance-through-withdrawal, producing emotional strain and a vacuum of care with stalled progression and regression waiting in the wings. Emotional and behavioural cues were stripped away; individuals navigated expectations without guidance or relational anchoring resulting in a psychological landscape marked by uncertainty and exposure. Responsibility was demanded but no direction was provided. As Goffman (1961) observed, entry into an institution is often marked by experiences of mortification, degradation and abandonment. Newcomer's spoke of anxiety, exposure and self-doubt intensifying rather than easing during induction. Their early days in open conditions were experienced as high-stakes moments in which mistakes carried profound consequences, yet guidance was scarce and reassurance largely absent. This produced what several participants described as a sense of being 'on your own with rules', where freedom was formally granted but not emotionally supported.

Withdrawal gained its punitive force through its emotional timing. Induction is the moment when orientation, reassurance and 'how this place works' should be most prominent; however, they were at their thinnest in the open prisons. In an environment where institutional anchors had receded, the ex-prisoners described managing risk by controlling their

visibility: keeping their heads down, avoiding interaction and disengaging from formal processes that felt both unclear and consequential. It was not that open conditions were 'too free' but rather that freedom without scaffolding became emotionally taxing. In the void of reliable points of contact, the safest option often became strategic minimalism—saying less, asking less, appearing less—because being noticed carried potential costs while being supported was never assured.

Prisoner retreat as structural consequence

Merton's (1938) retreatism helps explain how institutions espoused supportive goals but withdrew means to achieve them. Such withdrawal produces what can appear to be prisoner defiance but is instead adaptive retreat—manifestations of fatigue, resignation and rational disconnection. Institutional withdrawal thus precedes and produces prisoner retreat, mirroring Goffman's framing of situational withdrawal as patterned response to abandonment. The patterns observed—retreating from peer induction and prison life, avoiding opaque processes, relying on informal networks—look like disengagement but are reactions to institutional withdrawal. This echoes Sykes's (1958) insight that deprivation produces predictable adaptive responses, known as the 'pains of imprisonment', and Toch's (1997) finding that institutional indifference triggers emotional withdrawal.

Prisoner retreat was the cumulative consequence of institutional abandonment. This structurally induced withdrawal operated through both scarcity and strategic adaptation. Officers, constrained by austerity and targets, outsourced induction labour to peer mentors as a pragmatic response to scarcity. This arrangement served mutual interests: officers reduced their workload and avoided conflict, while peer mentors gained privileges, access and informal advantages. Newcomers perceived mentors as 'manipulators [...] out for themselves', who minimized support while leveraging advantages. Withdrawal thus emerged through both organizational scarcity and actor self-interest; institutional actors were constrained, but within these constraints they made strategic choices that protected their positions while abdicating their support obligations to prisoners.

Under risk-averse governance shaped by austerity, responsibility remains while scaffolding is removed, and institutional withdrawal precedes prisoner retreat. Retreatism is thus imposed by abandonment; the 'self-managing' subject is created through structural neglect. The harms described here are best understood as iatrogenic rather than incidental. Withdrawal did not simply fail to prevent distress; it predictably produced it by removing scaffolding at the precise point when vulnerability and uncertainty were heightened. Practices framed as progressive—such as PLI, reduced staff contact and autonomy as 'normalization'—became mechanisms through which harm was generated when institutional presence receded. Injury emerged not through excessive intervention but through omission: stalled progression, heightened anxiety and retreatist coping were not surprising side effects but patterned outcomes of governing through withdrawal.

The limits of soft power

Institutional withdrawal calls for reassessing the limits of soft power. While soft power explains imprisonment as regulation through moral appeals, emotional leverage and incentivized compliance (Crewe 2009; 2011a), it requires institutional presence. In therapeutic programmes, sentence planning and officer interactions, conduct is shaped through engagement. Withdrawal, by contrast, signifies a breakdown in the very conditions soft power depends on. While soft power operates 'at a distance' from direct coercion, it requires proximity to institutional mediators—officers who administer systems, write reports and maintain

relationships. Withdrawal involves distance from both: prisoners self-regulate (the psychological operation of power persists) but the mediating infrastructure has receded. In open prisons, individuals are left adrift in depopulated regimes, and some feel 'forgotten' as they navigate progression with little support. This highlights a limitation of soft power accounts: they are less equipped to explain what happens when institutional infrastructure materially and procedurally withdraws, as in open prisons.

Crewe's frameworks were developed primarily in closed prisons, where relational density, routine contact and institutional presence are far more pronounced than in open prisons. Applying the concept of soft power to open prisons therefore requires caution: the empirical conditions that enable it—sustained engagement, emotional attunement and the 'tightness' of relational authority—are only intermittently present in these settings. This is not to suggest that soft power is absent in open prisons: in areas such as ROTL, incentives and sentence planning, moral persuasion and self-surveillance remain salient. However, in the domain of early transition and PLI examined here, institutional engagement has receded to the point where withdrawal, rather than soft power, emerges as the dominant modality of governance. Withdrawal is the dark twin of responsabilization: instead of micromanagement, it leaves individuals to self-manage amid conditions of silence, uncertainty and emotional austerity.

Neoliberal governance here denotes a specific rationality: obligations are shifted downward while support is reduced, reframing success or failure as an individual accomplishment or deficit. The state does not withdraw from punishment but from obligation—autonomy becomes a regulatory demand rather than a supported capacity. This produces responsabilization by default, where individuals are compelled to self-manage while institutions retain the authority to sanction the consequences—these dynamics combining to illustrate 'abandonment without care' (Leshem 2017: 622).

Withdrawal as structural governance

The findings showed that institutional withdrawal encompassed material, spatial, functional and affective retraction. These were often justified by appeals to autonomy, desistance or the normalization of prison life. However, in practice they produced a vacuum of support in which prisoners were left to self-manage in conditions of withdrawal, thus naturalizing deprivation as a form of empowerment. In this sense, withdrawal operated iatrogenically, as the system inflicted harm while ostensibly pursuing benign goals of efficiency, normalization and responsabilization. Emotional strain, stalled progression, and retreat were not unintended side effects but predictable outcomes of governance through withdrawal. In these open conditions, withdrawal therefore represents not a weakening of penal power but its reconfiguration into a form that governs by withholding care while maintaining expectations of compliance and self-management.

The strains that participants identified—uncertainty, abandonment and dislocation—illustrate the disintegrative pressures that erode orientation and connection. In open prisons, withdrawal also reflects the prioritization of bureaucratic throughput over relational infrastructures of care. As the institutional capacity to provide support diminishes while responsabilization persists, individuals are left to manage demands without the means to meet them. Institutional withdrawal thus functions as a carceral microcosm of strain: a governance strategy in which retraction is structurally produced and, in turn, generates conditions that foster retreatism, alienation and harm. This clarifies why withdrawal is not a loss of power but a reconfigured modality. Withdrawal marks a shift from intervention to the strategic withdrawal of care, responsibility and presence, causing injury through abandonment and governance through withdrawal.

These findings should be understood within their methodological scope. As detailed in the methods section, retrospective accounts from a purposive sample capture how withdrawal was remembered rather than real-time organizational dynamics. While limiting claims to comprehensive mapping, it strengthens confidence that the forms of withdrawal identified were sufficiently consequential to remain narratively salient. The absence of peer mentor perspectives sharpened the focus on withdrawal as experienced by those subject to it. However, future research incorporating their accounts could enrich understanding of how withdrawal is enacted and negotiated across differently positioned actors.

Conclusion

The concept of institutional withdrawal represents a distinct mode of carceral power, characterized not by saturation and intervention but retraction and the systematic withholding of support. In contrast to traditional forms of penal control and frameworks such as soft power, it highlights how power functions through disengagement, omission and ambiguity, expanding criminological understandings of power in late-modern penality. The prison, particularly in its open form, no longer merely disciplines through presence but governs through silence and abandonment.

Drawing on Goffman's concept of abandonment and Merton's concept of retreatism, this article has traced how withdrawal constitutes a systemic condition in which prisoners are left to self-manage under opaque pressures. Retreatism is structurally induced by institutional withdrawal rather than reducible to individual pathology or resistance. Although often framed as empowering, these conditions generate iatrogenic harm, institutional betrayal and social fragmentation. The findings point to important policy implications: scaling back institutional presence without providing robust, needs-driven support embeds disadvantage. Autonomy must be scaffolded through engagement, procedural clarity and relational investment.

The analysis suggests that withdrawal cannot be understood simply as policy oversight, but a modality of governance, reflecting broader neoliberal shifts towards responsabilization and minimal intervention. Comparative evidence from Scandinavia, the United States and Australia suggests that similar dynamics of institutional withdrawal may operate across penal systems, shaped by austerity and neoliberal governance. While this has not been established empirically in the present study, it points to the value of investigating withdrawal through comparative analysis.

Grounded in open prisons, the framework of withdrawal is also potentially portable across the criminal justice system. Probation, youth justice, policing and community rehabilitation may operate under comparable logics of relational withdrawal, resource retraction and responsabilization by default, making them promising sites to test whether withdrawal travels as a mechanism beyond prison. This portability lies in its ability to illuminate forms of governance where institutions scale back engagement. As such, institutional withdrawal provides both a vocabulary to describe open imprisonment and a lens that may facilitate understanding of late-modern penality across institutional forms. Future research should therefore examine how withdrawal manifests in these different settings, as the dynamics will differ. Understanding these variations is crucial for assessing how withdrawal reconfigures power, progression and rehabilitation. Just as penality once shifted from the physical to the psychological, it may now be receding into the bureaucratic and invisible—hollowing-out while remaining present. If left unacknowledged, institutional withdrawal risks becoming a defining feature of late-modern punishment: a form of governance through omission that produces iatrogenic harm and erodes the foundations

of support and rehabilitation. This raises a difficult question: when does withdrawal itself become a form of punishment?

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Shadd Maruna, Caroline Chatwin and Phil Carney for their generous discussions and reflections on this article. Appreciation is also extended to those who contributed to ongoing debates about retaining the original conceptual term 'penal withdrawal'. The author is also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful feedback.

Funding

The corresponding author received no funding for this work.

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