

Social order behind bars: the interplay of formal and informal norms among inmates in Italian prisons

Abstract

This study examines the informal norms governing inmate behavior in Italian prisons and the interplay between formal and informal systems. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with “experts according to Article 80 of Italy’s Penitentiary Law,” key prison stakeholders responsible for evaluating inmate behavior and developing rehabilitation programs. The findings reveal that inmates establish internal social hierarchies, governed by informal norms (inmate code) that dictate behaviors such as respecting hierarchies and adhering to the code of silence. Violating these norms leads to informal sanctions, ranging from social exclusion to violence. This code emerges from both the importation of external subcultural norms and the inmate’s adaptation to the prison environment, serving as both a survival strategy and a response to alienation. The study also highlights the complex and often conflictual interplay between formal and informal norms, with inmates typically prioritizing informal rules. This dynamic often hampers social reintegration. Therefore, the study advocates for a balanced and flexible approach to prison management that bridges the gap between formal and informal norms, alongside targeted rehabilitation programs and practical reintegration opportunities, to align inmate behavior with societal values and support successful reentry into lawful society.

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Introduction and background

Every society relies on norms (both formal and informal) to regulate behavior and maintain order, enforced through mechanisms of control and sanctions: a society without such a framework is inconceivable.¹ Formal norms, such as laws and bureaucratic procedures, are codified and enforced through institutional mechanisms to prevent conflicts and uphold public order, forming the basis of what is known as “formal social control.” Informal norms, on the other hand, are rooted in traditions, social values, and interpersonal dynamics, guiding behavior and fostering social cohesion through moral or social sanctions, referred to as “informal social control”.²⁻⁴

As Ross⁵ noted, formal social control plays a critical role in ensuring adherence to societal norms, with institutions such as courts and correctional facilities serving to uphold justice and equality. However, informal mechanisms, such as social responses including approval, isolation, or stigmatization, are equally significant in shaping individual behavior, as people often seek acceptance within their social groups.⁶ The relationship between formal and informal norms (and their associated mechanisms of control) is inherently dynamic, characterized by both complementarity and conflict.^{7,8} While these systems often work together to promote social cohesion and maintain order, tensions can arise when informal norms clash with legal regulations, as is frequently observed within criminal subcultures.⁷

Prisons provide a unique context for examining the dynamics between formal and informal norms. Indeed, a society can be understood as a group of individuals sharing a common geographical space who, through their interactions, establish systems of cooperation and collaboration. In this sense, the prison community can also be regarded as a society, comprising individuals who coexist within the confines of penitentiary institutions. Within this distinctive social structure, individuals develop what has been termed “carceral citizenship”,⁹ a form of citizenship defined by unique restrictions, obligations, and privileges specific to incarcerated or

formerly incarcerated individuals. This concept underscores the highly structured and regulated nature of life behind bars, where both formal and informal norms significantly shape the lived experiences of inmates.

The prison, characterized as a “total institution”,¹⁰ exemplifies what Foucault¹¹ described as “panopticism”, a system of relentless surveillance and constant subjugation to authority, functioning as a mechanism of “incapacitation.” This environment profoundly impacts the identities of inmates, fostering an almost complete disconnection from the outside world and often resulting in alienation.¹⁰ This alienation is encapsulated in the concept of the “mortification of the self,” which describes the systematic erosion of inmates’ personal identity. This process is driven by the loss of privacy, continuous surveillance, and the dismantling of pre-existing social and personal habits.¹² Over time, individual differences and personal needs are overshadowed by the collective norms and expectations of the prison subculture.¹³

Donald Clemmer¹⁴ summarized this phenomenon as “prisonization,” a term that refers to the transformation individuals undergo when compelled to live in a rigidly controlled environment. This process results in the loss of autonomy and the abandonment of prior habits, replaced by the norms, customs, and values that dominate inmate subcultures. Through an interactive process, inmates develop and internalize their own informal system of norms, comprising specific values and behavioral rules. This informal framework operates alongside the formal regulatory system within the prison.

Studies have long demonstrated that inmates rely on a code to establish informal rules.^{15,16} Commonly referred to as “prison culture,” this system is shaped by the isolation of incarceration and adherence to a standardized code.^{15,16} As noted earlier, this prison culture is often imported from the outside world by individuals embedded in deviant or criminal subcultures.¹⁷ Prison culture shares key elements with “street culture,” particularly the normative systems of gangs, such as a strong aversion to “snitching” and the use of violence to gain or

maintain social status.¹⁸ For inmates from socially deprived contexts, the prison environment often reinforces values and norms already familiar to them, reflecting the carceral state's deep entanglement with broader societal structures.¹¹

Sykes and Messinger¹⁹ were among the first to describe the inmate code, which emphasizes: i) loyalty to fellow inmates, ii) serving one's sentence without complaint, and iii) displaying toughness in interactions. More recent research has revisited this topic, documenting the presence of a prison subculture and showing how this informal code regulates interpersonal communication and the use of violence, both inside prisons and on the streets.⁷

The dynamics of interaction and socialization among inmates are critical to understanding how the prison environment shapes behavior. Albert Bandura²⁰ argued that criminal behavior, like any other, is learned through social interaction, particularly by observing and imitating behaviors that are rewarded or positively valued.²¹ Similarly, Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association posits that individuals become criminal when exposed to an excess of definitions favoring lawbreaking. The norms of a reference group play a fundamental role, as individuals tend to internalize behaviors deemed acceptable within their environment, even when these contradict formal norms.²² In this sense, the prison society often functions as a "school of crime," where antisocial behaviors are reinforced, new deviant habits are learned, and techniques for criminal activity are exchanged. This dynamic is particularly concerning for individuals serving short sentences, as they may be exposed to inmates with extensive criminal histories, increasing the risk of harmful influences. Additionally, the longer inmates remain incarcerated, the more deeply they adhere to the norms of the prison code.¹⁴

Adherence to or deviation from informal norms is crucial in inmate relationships, often linked to informal rewards and sanctions. Fear of these sanctions (often involving violence or oppression) reinforces conformity to the prison subculture. Violence, in this context, is viewed as a necessary tool for maintaining order and reaffirming roles, rather than as a source of chaos.²³ The system of informal norms not only shapes interpersonal relationships but also impacts the social status of inmates within the prison hierarchy.^{7,19,24} Some inmates gain higher "value" based on the nature of their crimes. For instance, those convicted of sex-related offenses face strong social disapproval from both inmates and free individuals, often resulting in their placement in protected sections to safeguard them from harm. These individuals occupy the lowest ranks of the prison hierarchy.²⁵

Prison culture itself is also subject to change. The increasing presence of foreign inmates has transformed prisons into multi-ethnic and multicultural environments, introducing a variety of sociocultural backgrounds, habits, and customs. This diversity often sparks cultural conflicts that can destabilize the delicate balance within prison society. Building on Sellin's framework, prisons often become sites for primary conflict, where behaviors are viewed as acceptable or unacceptable depending on cultural perspectives, and secondary conflict, where subcultures emerge within a dominant cultural system.²¹

This research, as discussed in the following section, aims to examine informal norms within prisons and their interaction with formal systems, with a focus on their coexistence. While the concepts discussed are applicable to prison contexts globally, this article specifically examines the dynamics of normative interaction within the Italian prison system. Therefore, a brief overview of the Italian context is essential before proceeding. In Italy, prisons are categorized into "*Case Circondariali*" (District Houses, hereafter "DH"), which are primarily for inmates awaiting trial or serving short sentences,

and "*Case di Reclusione*" (Reclusion Houses, hereafter "RH"), which house individuals serving longer sentences and those with definitive convictions. This analysis includes both types of institutions. Italy also has a classification system for penitentiary circuits based on security levels: high security, medium security, and reduced custody for low-risk inmates. This study considers inmates from both medium-security ("common" inmates) and high-security circuits. However, it does not include inmates under the special detention regime of Article 41-bis of Law No. 354 of July 26, 1975 (i.e. the Italian Penitentiary Law), which applies to individuals involved with prominent roles in criminal organizations, particularly mafia-related activities. As detailed in the methodology section, these inmates follow a distinct subculture that warrants separate analysis.

Aim and methodology

As anticipated in the introduction, the aim of the study is to explore the interplay between formal and informal social norms among inmates in Italian prisons from a criminological perspective. More specifically, the objective is to answer to the following research questions:

- I. RQ1. What informal norms, if any, govern the social behavior of inmates in Italian prisons?
- II. RQ2. How does the interaction between formal and informal social norms among inmates in Italian prisons operate?

The (qualitative) methodology involved conducting 7 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. This technique presents substantial benefits in reaching the study aim. First of all, interviews offer the distinct advantage of fostering personal interaction between the researcher and the respondent, creating a more engaging and dynamic environment. This direct engagement allows the researcher to clarify any ambiguities or misinterpretations of the questions. Beyond verbal responses, the researcher can also observe non-verbal cues, providing valuable insights into the respondent's behavior and environment. Additionally, interviews often elicit more spontaneous and genuine responses, as the researcher has the opportunity to establish trust and rapport with the respondent.²⁶

The stakeholders selected for the interviews are the so-called "experts" according to Article 80 of Italy's Penitentiary Law (L. 354/1975). This group includes professionals with specialized expertise in psychology, social work, pedagogy, psychiatry, clinical criminology, cultural mediation, and interpreting. Their role involves assisting prison administration staff by conducting scientific assessments of inmates' personalities to develop individualized rehabilitation programs aimed at social reintegration. Given their ongoing, direct contact with inmates and their responsibility to observe and evaluate inmate behavior and the social dynamics that influence it, these experts offer a uniquely valuable perspective. Their insights provide essential qualitative information for achieving the study's objectives.

To encourage respondents to share their experiences freely and spontaneously, their names and specific references to the institutions where they work or have worked are omitted. The following codes are used to identify respondents in the results section, along with brief background details:

- I. Expert 1: Jurist, psychologist, and clinical criminologist. Currently engaged in university research. Previously worked as an expert in three small to medium-sized penitentiary institutions (both DHs and RHs) in central Italy.

- II. Expert 2: Psychotherapist, forensic psychologist, and clinical criminologist. Currently serves as an expert in a large penitentiary institution in northern Italy and has previous experience in institutions (both DHs and RHs) of various sizes in both northern and central Italy.
- III. Expert 3: Clinical criminologist. Currently serves as an expert in a large penitentiary institution (RH) in northern Italy. Previously worked in a therapeutic community for offenders.
- IV. Expert 4: Psychotherapist, forensic psychologist, and clinical criminologist. Currently serves as an expert in various medium-sized penitentiary institutions (both DHs and RHs) in central Italy. Previously worked as a psychologist specializing in managing inmates with psychiatric disorders in a medium-sized penitentiary institution in central Italy.
- V. Expert 5: Psychologist and clinical criminologist. Currently serves as an expert in two large penitentiary institution (both DH and RH) in northern Italy. Previously worked in a therapeutic community for offenders.
- VI. Experts 6: Psychologist, specialist in the field of neuropsychology. Currently serves as an expert in a medium-sized penitentiary institution (DH) in central Italy.
- VII. Expert 7: Psychotherapist and legal psychologist. Currently serves as an expert in a small penitentiary institution (DH) in central Italy and as a consultant in criminal trials. Previously worked as an expert in a medium-sized penitentiary institution (DH) in central Italy.

The experts were contacted with clear information about the study's objectives and asked for their willingness to participate. Once they agreed, remote interviews were scheduled using digital meeting platforms. The interviews were recorded with the respondents' prior consent. In-depth interviews followed a flexible approach, where "the researcher has a general list of topics to be explored but exercises great discretion and flexibility in the manner, timing, and direction of questioning".²⁶ The interview guide focused on the following themes: the context in which the experts operate, formal social rules for inmates and their enforcement procedures, informal social rules among inmates and informal social control within their context, and any potential conflicts between the two systems. The semi-structured format allowed for adjustments and follow-up questions based on the flow of each interview.

Like all research methods, interviews have limitations that must be acknowledged when interpreting the results, despite efforts to minimize them. One limitation is that the sample may not fully represent the entire Italian prison system. Although we sought input from a diverse range of experts across different institutions, the findings may reflect the specific contexts in which the respondents work rather than offering a comprehensive view of all prisons nationwide. Additionally, despite assurances of anonymity, some interviewees may be reluctant to share sensitive or delicate information. A final limitation concerns the scope of the analysis. As noted in previous sections, inmates serving sentences under Article 41-bis of Italy's Penitentiary Law, commonly referred to as the "hard prison regime," were excluded. This regime, which applies only in special sections of a limited number of institutions, targets inmates convicted of crimes related to leadership roles in mafia-type organizations, a relatively small subset of the overall prison population. Article 41-bis enforces strict isolation from other prisoners and imposes severe, highly specialized restrictions designed to sever the inmate's social ties with their criminal organization. The decision to exclude these prisoners

was based on the unique nature of their detention conditions and the distinct subcultures associated with individuals in high-ranking positions within mafia-type groups. Including them would have introduced complexities that fall outside the scope of this study, which focuses on the general inmate population.

Results and discussion

Before addressing the two key research questions guiding this study, it is crucial to provide some background on the types of prisons (DH or RH) and the prison security levels (medium and high security) in Italy. The interpretation of the findings hinges on the context in which social dynamics among inmates unfold. Therefore, this section aims to outline the specific environment in which the interview responses are situated, ensuring the results discussed later are properly contextualized.

The interviewed experts highlight significant differences between prison types (DH vs RH) in terms of inmate typologies and treatment approaches. These differences relate to the composition of inmate groups, interpersonal dynamics, and the rehabilitation opportunities available, all of which depend on the unique characteristics of each institution. Notably:

"In DHs, there is considerable diversity due to the presence of inmates on remand, awaiting trial, appealing convictions, or lodging further appeals, alongside those serving definitive sentences, including long-term ones who should ideally be in RHs. This creates a constant turnover, resulting in a dynamic and often unstable environment. By contrast, RHs are more stable, with fewer internal changes." [Expert 1]

The varying lengths of prison sentences are a major factor contributing to the tension and instability in district houses (DHs). As one expert explains,

"In reclusion houses (RHs), inmates have a clearer understanding of what lies ahead: they know how many years they will serve, understand the reasons behind their sentence, and can plan for their future accordingly" [Expert 4].

This greater clarity often translates into fewer critical incidents and disciplinary violations in RHs. According to another expert,

"Disciplinary infractions are rare in a RH because many inmates are serving long sentences and have an interest in maintaining a peaceful environment (...) Even protests tend to follow formal channels. For example, there might be an inmate council that addresses issues with the educational staff or directly with the warden. Protests are usually structured and organized" [Expert 7].

In contrast, the situation in DHs can be quite different, particularly when structural deficiencies lead to perceived violations of inmate rights. In such cases, inmates often resort to more disruptive forms of protest.

"In district houses, especially when there are structural shortcomings that undermine inmates' rights, prisoners feel justified in engaging in acts of protest (...) These protests often involve self-harm, refusing therapy, or refusing to return to their cells" [Expert 7].

Differences are also evident in inmate typologies and social dynamics across different facilities and security levels. For example, inmates in high-security circuits tend to be more socially integrated, often having stable housing, families, and some degree of economic security.

“Inmates in high-security circuits are more likely to have a home, a family, and financial stability. In contrast, those in medium-security are often marginalized, lack residency permits, and have no family support within the area.” [Expert 1].

High-security settings also emphasize a strict inmate code, as discussed earlier in the section on prison society, which promotes self-reliance and resilience. As one expert notes,

“In high-security, real men know how to do their time: they don’t show weakness, they don’t need to see a psychologist, and they only request medication if they are genuinely ill. In medium-security, inmates seek help for everything: they ask for cigarettes because they can’t afford them, request meetings with psychologists, and similar things” [Expert 3].

The rules governing daily life also differ significantly between security levels. In high-security facilities, the daily routine is well-structured and often filled with various activities, while in medium-security, there is a general lack of organization. One expert describes it as follows:

“In high-security, the day starts very early, followed by personal and cell cleaning. After that, inmates either go to the gym or take a walk outdoors with others. In medium-security, on the other hand, there are people who stay in their cells all day, sleeping.” [Expert 3]

Another important consideration concerns the composition of the inmate population in these two types of facilities, both in terms of the offenses committed and nationality. As an expert notes,

“District house inmates convicted of minor offenses, such as drug trafficking, which predominantly involve individuals from North Africa, Albania, and Romania. This diverse ethnic makeup can lead to tensions and conflicts between different cultural groups.” [Expert 4]

Ethnic identity also plays a role in the internal organization of inmates.

“Ethnicity becomes almost a shorthand for distinguishing groups: Italians, Albanians, Moroccans. Entering an unfamiliar environment and finding someone from the same nationality with whom you can share something fosters a sense of belonging.” [Expert 5]

Another crucial factor in prison life is the interaction between inmates with varying levels of prior incarceration experience.

“There is a significant difference between people who have never been in prison and those with multiple incarcerations. Some inmates in RHs may be much calmer than those in DHs. First-time offenders are often more confused, desperate, and at higher risk of suicide.” [Expert 4]

This variability in inmate experiences is closely tied to their adaptation to the prison environment, a process that can have different outcomes. On one hand, adaptation to formal rules can support rehabilitation and reintegration.

“This adaptation can lead to positive changes, encouraging a critical reassessment of one’s life path, or it can push toward deeper criminalization.” [Expert 1]

On the other hand, adapting to the prison’s informal rules can negatively impact behavior.

“Some inmates use their time in prison to refine their criminal techniques. Those awaiting trial, who do not have access to educational, work, or other programs, spend much of their time

locked in cells. During socialization, they focus on learning the best strategies for drug dealing.” [Expert 4]

Thus, adaptation to the prison environment can take on a criminogenic dimension when inmates internalize and adopt the informal rules known as the inmate code. The primary aim of this research was to examine the presence of this code in the Italian prison system and to explore its content by analyzing specific informal norms.

Informal norms in Italian prisons (RQ1)

Interviews results highlighted that inmates in prison tend to establish their own internal social organization. One of the key sets of informal rules that emerged concerns the formation and maintenance of internal hierarchies. While the exact criteria for creating these hierarchies or selecting leaders remain unclear, it is evident that the arrival of a new inmate with leadership potential (whether due to notoriety in the local criminal scene or specific personality traits) can destabilize the existing order, sometimes escalating into internal unrest. As one expert explains,

“Just as there are revolts against prison authorities, there are also internal uprisings. Generally, this happens to overturn the order and reestablish roles within the inmate hierarchy.” [Expert 1]

A clear system of seniority governs these hierarchies. Newly arrived inmates typically face a subordinate status, with limited choices and, in some cases, exploitation.

“Newly arrived inmates are treated much more submissively, with fewer freedoms. Often, unpleasant dynamics arise, as they might be exploited to run errands or pay for damages. The newcomer is always the one who, in some way, has to overcome this kind of initiation rite.” [Expert 6]

Inmates serving long sentences often demand preferential treatment.

“There’s always the inmate with more years of detention behind them, the older one, or the one with significant criminal status outside. This is often tied to financial resources: in prison, what extra goods you can access comes from commissary purchases, which only those with money can afford. It’s all interconnected. An inmate without commissary privileges is unlikely to lead but may be used for physical labor. The laborer is usually someone with no money but with physical strength, someone who gets placed in a cell with someone who has money. It’s all very primal because the resources are primal. The law of the strongest is tied to a set of factors.” [Expert 7]

Another crucial factor in securing privileged positions within the hierarchy is access to valuable goods for barter. As one expert notes,

“The power of exchange in prison is essential. Having something to trade increases power.” [Expert 1]

The nature of the crime also influences an inmate’s position in the hierarchy. Those convicted of crimes against women or children, especially sexual offenses, are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

“More than an unwritten rule, it’s a value system: for regular inmates, sexual offenders are considered deviants.” [Expert 1]

Similarly, inmates who collaborate with authorities, often labeled as “snitches,” face significant stigma. In both cases, this social disapproval can lead to physical or psychological violence, requiring formal protection measures such as placement in special units.

Thus, it is clear from the interviews that within Italian prisons there is a specific “inmate code”. Two primary generative processes through which these norms develop have emerged. In the first process, the system of informal norms and values is imported from the outside, from previous social and criminal contexts.

“There are people who come from a deviant culture (...) and bring those rules and values into the prison.” [Expert 1]

“Especially in high-security circuits, there are inmates belonging to mafia organizations who maintain the typical attitudes of this culture.” [Expert 4]

In the second process, the system of norms and values is shaped in response to the prison reality, adapting to the specific dynamics and restrictions of the penitentiary context.

“(...) these informal norms may result from a process of prisonization and adaptation to the prison environment.” [Expert 1]

Creating or adapting to a system of norms based on shared values among individuals within a prison context not only represents a strategy for physical survival but also for moral survival; it becomes an adaptive response to a condition of alienation.

“Prison is a situation that marginalizes and depersonalizes a lot, so sharing a common sense is essential.” [Expert 5]

When analyzing the specific norms that apply across the contexts explored in this study, the principle of “respect” stands out as the first to emerge. This principle is understood as an attitude of obedience toward those who hold power among inmates, following the hierarchical logic previously described. The same principle also structures the relationships between inmates and prison staff, creating a shared understanding between both the institutions and the prison subcultures. This is one of the rare instances where formal and informal rules align. However, it is crucial to note that, in these environments, the concept of respect for authorities is often employed in a utilitarian manner, aimed at securing specific advantages, rather than being an authentic, reciprocal value.

“Police officers understand that treating inmates with respect can encourage their cooperation; similarly, inmates understand that addressing officers politely and respectfully rather than with conflict increases their chances of getting the responses they seek.” [Expert 2]

Another norm that emerges from the expert contributions and appears to be common across all the contexts analyzed is the principle of *omertà* (i.e. “code of silence”), understood as an unspoken pact that binds inmates together, compelling them to protect one another by hiding evidence or information that could incriminate them or result in punishment. Linked to the earlier principle, this rule dictates that being a “man of honor” (someone worthy of respect) means never cooperating with the authorities or assisting in the arrest of another individual.

“Omertà is a very present value, not only in high-security sections: cooperating with justice also means reporting those who traffic drugs or objects within the prison or those who plan assaults. If an inmate doesn't want to pick a side and avoid trouble, it's at least necessary that they stay out of other people's affairs.” [Expert 2]

“Another important rule is not to associate with informants.” [Expert 1]

Another important rule is to avoid associating with inmates who, as mentioned earlier, occupy the lowest ranks in the prison hierarchy, i.e. those who have committed particularly reprehensible crimes,

especially acts of violence against women or children, particularly when of a sexual nature. This broader framework is further complemented by behavioral rules that govern interactions within individual cells, guided by the principles of “peaceful coexistence” and “maintaining a quiet life in prison.” For example, the prohibition of unauthorized items, such as drugs or alcohol, is enforced. The reasoning behind this rule is to avoid formal sanctions if such items are discovered during a search, especially when no one assumes responsibility for them, due to the *omertà* that binds inmates together. As a result, inmates generally adhere to rules that ensure respect for individuals, property, and shared spaces, fostering peaceful coexistence. However, there are individuals who, due to their personal characteristics, tend to generate tension and conflict.

Interplay between formal and informal norms in Italian prisons (RQ2)

The interaction between formal and informal norms that emerges from our study is often complex and conflicted, driven by a utilitarian calculation based on the benefits derived from choosing one option over another [Expert 5], as well as the severity of formal sanctions compared to informal ones [Expert 1]. Although there are overlaps, sometimes even coinciding, between formal and informal norms, the rationale behind each prohibition or principle differs. For example, the production of homemade alcoholic substances, which is common in Italian prisons, is prohibited both by formal prison regulations and by the inmate code, which implicitly disapproves of it.

“If, during a search, alcohol is found in a cell shared by four people and no one claims ownership, all four will be punished.” [Expert 1]

In this case, while the institution views denouncing the guilty party as an act of responsibility, rewarding the behavior as it challenges the informal norm of *omertà* among inmates, the same action is considered a breach of informal codes, exposing the inmate to informal sanctions. These consequences can range from social exclusion by cellmates, forcing the individual to relocate, to the spread of defamatory rumors within the prison, and even physical violence, which can be lethal.

Possessing a forbidden item, such as a cell phone or weapon, represents a serious violation of formal rules, yet it grants power and respect in informal dynamics. This example underscores how the underground economy within the prison profoundly shapes interaction dynamics and power relations among inmates. Specifically:

“In prison, nobody does anything for free: if someone offers help, they can be sure to receive a reward in return... The legal regulations prohibit the possession of money within the prison to prevent the trafficking of illicit goods and to avoid the development of relationships based on economic power. In contrast, the informal prison system revolves around the power of exchange, used to gain both legal and illegal advantages.” [Expert 2].

When examining formal and informal reactions, a clear conflict arises: on one hand, there are disciplinary sanctions and reports, which can lead to an extension of the prison sentence as a formal penalty; on the other, there is the respect of fellow inmates, the power of exchange, and the ability to defend oneself. In fact, a frequent conflict between norms is evident from the interviews. As one expert noted,

“There is a conflict... The instinct to create a space for gathering and forming a group prevails, even at the expense of the imagined goal of freedom, but then other dynamics come into play” [Expert 6].

At times, the conflict becomes inseparable, and adhering to the informal norm is driven by “survival”. This is especially true for

individuals from certain communities or ethnic minorities, such as the Sinti and Roma cultures.

“They risk being distanced from their family. In these cases, conforming to the official rules means not only separating from their family but also facing total stigmatization” [Expert 1].

In other cases, there is no real conflict, as these individuals do not consciously choose between different normative systems. For them, the subcultural system is the only reference point they know, and around it, they have “built their identity” [Expert 5]. As one expert explained:

“These experiences are part of their life; they grew up in that context. Since childhood, they have suffered violence for the smallest mistakes and now they react the same way—with violence—because it is the only behavior they were taught. Some even go so far as to say they were born to be criminals” [Expert 3].

A concrete example is that of a 24-year-old inmate, described by an expert as:

“(…) completely illiterate, who had been in almost every prison in Italy. His main problem was the difficulty in managing frustration, which led him to constantly engage in acts of disorder. He came from a subculture where those values were not just subcultural, but absolute values” [Expert 1].

These situations reveal deep and often irreconcilable conflicts, where adapting to the formal system of norms becomes impossible because the informal system is a core aspect of these individuals’ identities.

“(…) that system of rules and values represents who they are. A person truly exists only when they identify with something; depriving them of that something means depriving them of their own existence. Remaining connected to that value system becomes a matter of survival. It is the peak of the conflict: in order to adapt to formal rules, they end up completely erasing their identity” [Expert 1].

As a result, choosing to adhere to the formal normative system requires a profound change (almost a radical transformation) of these individuals’ identities.

Summarizing the insights from the interviews up to this point, when confronted with the conflict between formal and informal rules, inmates typically prioritize the latter for two key reasons: first, due to the fear of informal sanctions, which are often more intimidating than formal ones, and second, because they frequently fail to even recognize the conflict, as the values of the prison subculture represent the only framework they are familiar with.

Experts emphasized the importance of reversing the current trend and encouraging the adoption of formal rules. To achieve this, the most effective intervention is to engage directly with inmates, helping them understand the negative impact of their actions, the consequences they have caused, and, most importantly, showing them concrete alternative paths.

“There needs to be a whole process of reintegration into society, which should also include work. A person enters prison, goes through a process of adjusting to the internal rules, which is necessary to reflect and reconsider past actions. So, a period of detention and adjustment is needed, but the real change in a person takes place when they are given space to observe during the period of semi-liberty or probation with social services.” [Expert 7]

Gradual reintegration is crucial, prioritizing alternatives to imprisonment while maintaining contact with the outside world and allowing the prisoner the opportunity to engage in society:

“Evolution comes through experience, so there can be no evolution if the experience you live is one of imprisonment. There may be development in terms of conservative skills: they learn to adapt better to the prison environment. It’s also about perception: the state of consciousness of a person in prison is different from that of a person who leaves those walls. So we may be talking to someone who, just before their release, is firmly convinced that they won’t do certain things anymore, but the truth is that as soon as they leave prison, they wake up.” [Expert 7]

However, due to the normative conflict, which often leads inmates to adapt to the informal rules of the prison, significant effects on treatment arise. This can result in the exclusion of contact with the outside world, as one expert pointed out:

“Data consistently show that recidivism rates are higher among prisoners who lack access to alternatives to incarceration, highlighting the importance of gradual reintegration. However, when prisoners, driven by fear, conform to informal rules in times of conflict, their behavior is often deemed non-compliant and sanctioned. This punitive response can block access to alternative measures to incarceration, resulting in extended interactions with other inmates. Paradoxically, this prolonged exposure can reinforce ties to the prison subculture and its norms, further entrenching the very behaviors that hinder rehabilitation.” [Expert 1]

Thus, due to this normative conflict, many rehabilitative treatment programs remain confined within the prison walls, where alternatives to incarceration and parole are granted with difficulty and usually after prolonged detentions. This is why the evaluation of an inmate’s behavior and the decision to sanction non-conformity with formal rules is critical. Flexibility is always desirable to avoid undermining the inmate’s entire path by labeling a behavior as incorrect from a formal perspective:

“The prison ecosystem is so complex that it requires case-by-case evaluations. There are situations where, formally, it would be appropriate to apply a certain type of sanction, but treatment-wise, that sanction at that moment might not be functional to the prisoner’s rehabilitation.” [Expert 1]

On the other hand, disciplinary sanctions for non-compliant behavior with formal rules are necessary to maintain order and security within the institution. Too much discretion, however, could negatively affect the dynamics among inmates:

“...other prisoners, seeing someone who committed an infraction without being punished, and unaware that there has been a thoughtful evaluation behind the decision, might interpret it as favoritism or a signal that they can act without consequences.” [Expert 2]

This highlights the significant interplay between formal and informal rules and their effects on both treatment and security management within the institution.

Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to understand what informal norms (if any) govern the social behavior of inmates in Italian prisons (research question n. 1) and how the interaction between formal and informal social norms among inmates operates (research question n. 2). Concerning the first research question, results confirmed in Italian

context what was observed in other countries.^{7,15,19} Interviews revealed that inmates in prison establish an internal social organization, characterized by informal hierarchies governed by seniority. Those serving long sentences and those possessing valuable goods for barter receive a preferential treatment. Conversely, inmates convicted of crimes against women or children, particularly sexual offenses and those who cooperate with authorities (“snitches”) face severe stigma and marginalization.^{7,19,24,25} This informal society is regulated by an unwritten “inmate code” that enforces key norms, such as respecting hierarchies (obeying leaders and avoiding the stigmatized) and adhering to *omertà*, a code of silence that compels inmates to shield one another by withholding evidence or information. Violations of this code incur sanctions ranging from social exclusion to physical violence, sometimes even with fatal consequences.

The inmate code arises from two interconnected processes. First, the importation of norms and values from broader criminal and social contexts, as previously observed by the literature.^{17,18} Second, their adaptation to the constraints of the prison environment. This system serves as both a physical and moral survival strategy. When not previously internalized, adherence to these informal norms often arises as a response to the isolation and alienation that individuals experience during incarceration.^{12,13}

Regarding the second research question, interviews highlighted the intricate interplay between formal and informal systems in Italian prisons, whose norms often conflict. Informal norms frequently clash with formal rules, creating tensions that undermine institutional goals. Even when formal and informal norms overlap (e.g., either prohibiting or encouraging certain behaviors), their underlying rationale usually differs. Inmates’ decisions about which normative system to follow are often guided by utilitarian considerations, weighing the benefits and severity of formal sanctions against those of informal ones. However, inmates tend to prioritize informal rules due to the immediacy and severity of sanctions within the prison subculture, which often surpass formal punishments in impact. For many inmates, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, informal norms represent their primary framework for behavior.¹¹ Rejecting these norms can feel akin to rejecting deeply ingrained values and social bonds, such as those tied to family and community, which are central to their sense of identity. Overcoming this conflict requires profound personal transformation, a process that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many.

The dominance of informal norms has significant implications for the institutional goal of social reintegration. Experts emphasize the importance of interventions aimed at bridging the gap between formal and informal systems. Encouraging inmates to internalize formal norms and fostering genuine attachment to institutional values (not just compliance for convenience or to avoid punishment) can help inmates feel accepted by society and institutions beyond prison walls. At the same time, the interplay between these systems also complicates social integration, as many reintegration programs are available only to inmates who adhere to formal norms, excluding those aligned with informal ones. Thus, this study underscores the need for a nuanced approach to prison management that addresses the root causes of normative conflict. Aligning institutional policies with rehabilitation goals is essential to fostering an environment that supports personal growth, social reintegration, and long-term reductions in recidivism. A rigid, inflexible focus on formal rules risks alienating inmates and perpetuating cycles of reoffending, while excessive leniency can undermine institutional order and erode trust. Striking the right balance is key to effective rehabilitation strategies.

Individualized programs should focus on helping inmates understand the consequences of their actions, providing tangible alternatives to criminal behavior, and supporting gradual reintegration into society. Alternatives to incarceration, such as employment programs (particularly those outside prison), are crucial. These initiatives help inmates build genuine connections with lawful society, weaken their attachment to the prison subculture, and facilitate a gradual detachment from it. True rehabilitation requires experiences that mirror real life. As stated in the *European Prison Rules* (2006, p. 5, R. -2006- 2, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on January 11, 2006): “*life in prison must be as similar as possible to the positive aspects of life in free society.*” Social reintegration, therefore, should occur in an environment that prepares inmates for life outside prison, fostering genuine connections and long-term change.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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