



From Backseat to Pillar:

The Evolving Role of Social Workers in Lithuanian Prisons and Its Structural Challenges

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Context of Lithuanian prisons

(adapted from Urrea Canales, Reyes Torres & Acosta Oidor, 2026)

Staff and prisoner ratio

“Indeed, the numbers of custodial staff present in prisoner accommodation areas in the prisons visited were so **disastrously low** <...> that the CPT could not avoid the impression that **staff (and the management) of the prisons visited had been left to struggle**, from day to day, with **totally insufficient human resources**, without adequate funding, and without the necessary support from the Lithuanian authorities.” CPT on Lithuania, 2024.

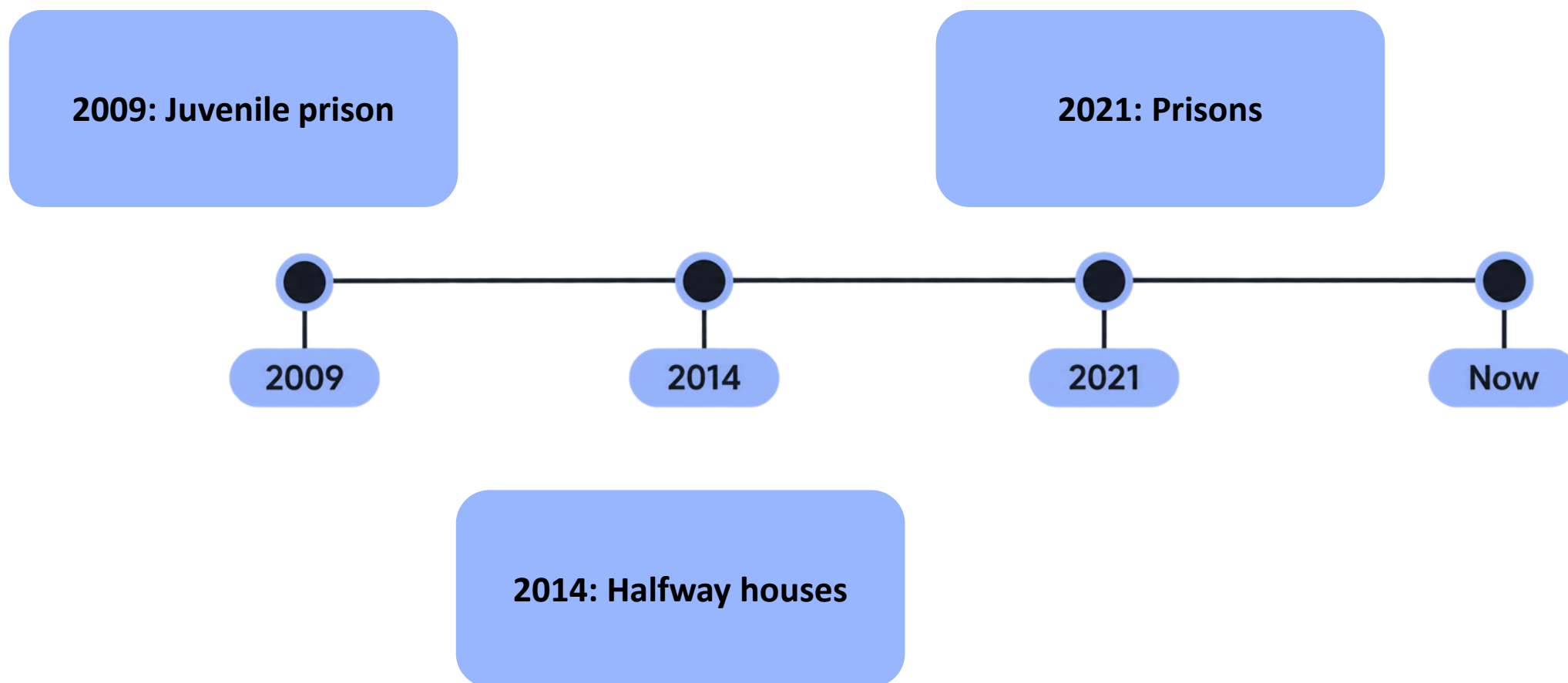
Infrastructure

Most living arrangements are dormitory-type, meaning that **up to 20 prisoners can share one room** (Sakalauskas et al., 2020). Earlier reforms aimed at building new, modern prisons failed. Old, Soviet-era prisons **lack spaces for purposeful activities and counselling**.

Security

Dormitory-type living enforces a subculture, an informal prisoner order (Piacentini & Slade, 2015). **Drug flow** remains one of the biggest issues to control in prisons (Lankauskas, 2022).

Social workers in the system of Lithuanian prisons



2009

2014

2021

Now

In 2022, the **Strategic Activity Guidelines of the Prison Department under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania for 2022–2030** provided for the establishment of four teams within the resocialisation units of Lithuanian prisons to work with sentenced persons.



Research project: NARYS

12 MONTHS

Oct 2025 – Sep 2026

Financed by the Research
Council of Lithuania

4 team members

PI: Dr. Rūta Vaičiūnienė

Aim: to analyse the practical implementation of measures for *maintaining, strengthening, and restoring* prisoners' social ties in Lithuanian prisons — from the perspectives of both social workers and inmates.

Review international
good practice in prison
social work & family-
oriented methods

Examine current practices, challenges and quality
from social workers' view
&
Assess whether measures match inmates' needs

Recommendations & a
sustainable social work
in prison model

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design: semi-structured interviews



Analytical lens

ROLE THEORY (Kahn et al., 1964)

What happens to a social worker?

Role overload • role conflict • role ambiguity

SYSTEM OF PROFESSIONS (Abbott, 1988)

What happens between professions?

Jurisdiction • professional boundaries • substitution

STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY (Lipsky, 1980)

What happens when reform ambitions exceed organisational capacity?

Resource scarcity • competing demands • coping/adaptation

‘Our main task’: findings

Social workers came to Lithuanian prison system with one main aim: **support and integration service**.

Support and integration service – a set of interrelated services aimed at helping individuals adapt to the social environment, obtain the necessary information and access to the social support system, restore and/or strengthen relationships with close relatives and/or partners, develop their ability to address emerging social and other problems, regain and/or acquire skills necessary for employment, and, more broadly, facilitate their comprehensive social integration.

(Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania and Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020).

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But because we now have, well, quite a lot of work, many programmes, all sorts of activities, **our main task [the integration service]—the reason we came here to work—has, at this point, been pushed quite far from the forefront, probably down to third or fourth place.** We have not had such situations in our prison yet, but there are cases where a sentenced person is released and, well, the integration service has simply not been provided. It may seem that they have completed the programmes, had motivational interviews, become motivated, but our main task has not been carried out amidst all of that... <...> **It [the integration service] has been overshadowed by other duties.**

- Social worker, Pravieniškės 2nd prison

'Social workers can do that': findings

A recurring theme in the literature on prison social work is the tension between care and control, where by social workers are caught between a rehabilitative, welfare-oriented role and the disciplinary, security-driven demands of the custodial environment (Urra Canales, Reyes Torres & Acosta Oidor, 2026; Emprechtinger & Richter, 2026).

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“<...> but, well, there's — well — that programme 'Tik tu ir aš' ['Just You and Me'], or the anger management programme, well, those are purely meant for psychologists, and we shouldn't be doing that. **But since there are no psychologists, there's no one to run them, so we run them.**”
-Social worker, Alytus prison

“Previously, it was officers from the Security Management Unit who delivered [prisoners'] identity documents to the bank, **but they took that over and refused to keep doing it anymore. They said: 'Social workers can do that.'** But then it turned out that when a social worker [goes]... it's better if someone in uniform comes instead.”
- Social worker, Pravieniškės 1st prison

“Over time, **our range of services has expanded.** So really, we carry out a great many of these functions here. **We ourselves no longer understand what we're supposed to do and what not to do.** Really, how should I put it? Social workers here do everything.”

-Social worker, Alytus prison

‘More harm than good’: findings

‘At Marijampolė Prison, **only one psychologist was employed out of 10 approved positions, working at just 0.5 FTE**. During the inspection, the specialist reported that she worked at the prison four afternoons per week, for a total of 20 hours per week. She stated that she was able to consult between two and five individuals per day; however, on some days she was unable to carry out any direct work because she had to prepare documentation and participate in the activities of the Crisis Intervention Team. As she was unable to perform all of the functions assigned to her, she prioritised counselling prisoners at risk of self-harm and suicide.’ (Seimas Ombudsperson, 2025).

As of 31 December 2025, **705 sentenced prisoners** were serving their sentences in Marijampolė Prison (Lithuanian Prison Service).

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“It seems to me that this is just **too complex for us**. This is practically the work of psychotherapists, because, well, suicide... people who are suicidal... <...> and people with addictions, I mean, this goes very deep. We can do something on a superficial level, but sometimes **I felt that we might actually do more harm than good.**”

- Social worker, Pravieniškės 2nd prison

“**SW:** When it comes to those trainings, I really don’t like that particular group, if we’re talking about ‘SeNAT’.

Researcher: About ‘SeNAT’?

SW: Yeah, but everything up to that point is fine with me.

Researcher: But you didn’t have a choice about ‘SeNAT’?

SW: No, I didn’t. **It was probably forced on us**, and during the programme the trainer herself clearly said that we, well, can’t deliver it. **Social workers can’t run programmes like that.**”

- Social worker, Pravieniškės 2nd prison

SeNAT - A group-based cognitive behavioural programme for offenders who have committed sexual offences against children.

'Losing it': findings

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Yeah, so you either come to terms with that or you don't work, but, well, since this is a job that we like, we still do it, we try to achieve that quality, but it, well, really isn't what it should be, because we have to go for quantity rather than quality. **There is no quality anymore.** -Social worker, Pravieniškės 2nd prison

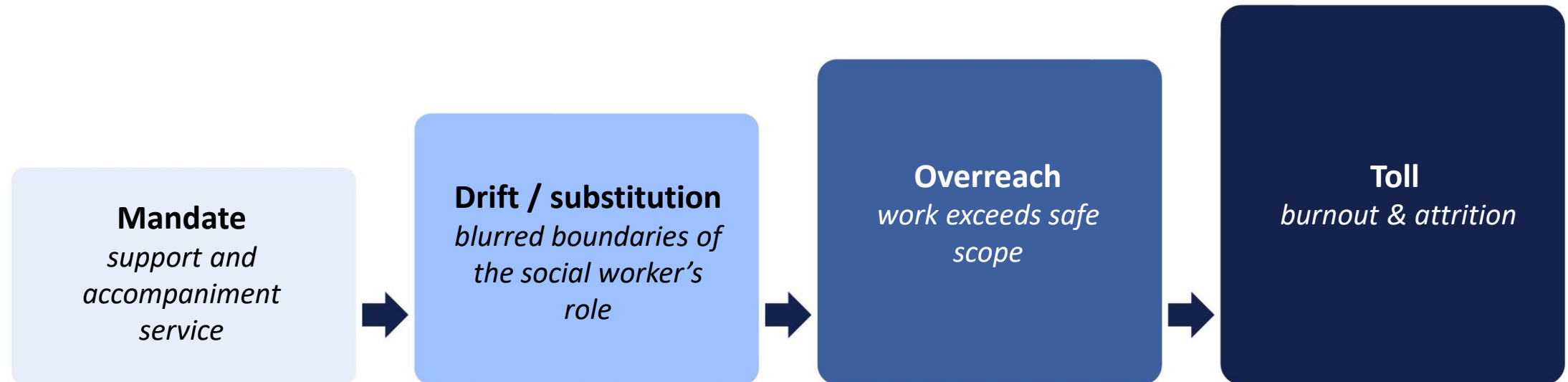
There are all kinds of days when you think: **“Do I really need this? Why am I working here?”** -Social worker, Pravieniškės 2nd prison

You just can't get everything done, and you see that, well, you simply don't have the time anymore, and at home I really started... **I'd come back and still be living that work, thinking about what I hadn't done.** The work just keeps dragging on, so then I simply took a month off. I took a month's holiday, **muted the work chat on Facebook, and completely forgot about this whole side of things. I didn't even [smiles] drive past here.** - Social worker, Marijampolė prison

I'll put it crudely – **some people are already losing it from doing so many things at the same time.** Well, so there was, of course, resistance from the staff. Definitely not just in our prison. Well, but what can you do now? Everything has settled down and it's, “If you want to work – work, if you don't – leave.” That's what you were told very clearly, so... - Social worker, Alytus prison

Even those trainings are kind of an obstacle for me, because there are deadlines here, there are timeframes, there is an insanely high level of responsibility. So, say, leaving those 130 or 120 people in the institution, you feel that responsibility, that you're responsible not for 2, not for 5, not for 30, not for 50, but for 120 people. Do you really manage to notice everything in time, even, right? Submitting documents or responses, or deadlines... **So, yeah, that clashes with that feeling and even with the desire to improve, to run additional programmes, because I feel a greater responsibility for what I leave behind and what I carry here.** - Social worker, Alytus prison

Conclusions and thoughts



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Let's keep talking

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