

2. Challenges in Prison Research

2.1 Access

Prisons are highly secured and monitored environments that not only confine individuals but also restrict external access.³² As a result, conducting empirical research in such settings proved difficult and depended heavily on institutional approval. Largely, I was granted access with the expectation that my project should prove valuable to the institution. Negotiations regarding access determined not only whether I was permitted to enter the institution in the first place, but also the conditions under which I was able to conduct my research. Consequently, the research process was marked by persistent uncertainty regarding the continuity of access and the extent to which the material I collected could ultimately be used in the published thesis.

³² Nina Sarah Etter, *Counting to Counter: Eine geographische Fallstudie über (die Dokumentation von) Elternschaft in den vier Justizvollzugsanstalten des Kantons Bern* (Master's thesis, Universität Bern, 2025).

This dependency had important epistemological implications. The material I was able to produce was shaped by institutional control over access, visibility, and selective disclosure. Even when access was granted, it remained partial, curated, and tightly managed.

Photography was prohibited in all prisons except during the workshop documentation. This restriction shaped not only what could be documented, but also how: in order to preserve spatial and atmospheric impressions, I recorded observations from the prison environment in sketches. These became a necessary and, ultimately, a methodologically distinct form of documentation.

The fieldwork also revealed how access itself can be “staged”. While staff at some institutions spoke with notable openness and honesty, others presented curated and controlled representations of their facilities, thereby avoiding critical inquiry. This demonstrates that access does not necessarily mean transparency. Even when I was permitted to enter the prison, what I was allowed to see, document, ask, and later use remained mediated and selective.

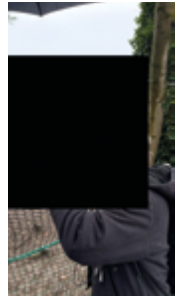
These dynamics became particularly visible during the participatory workshop I conducted in PD3. Although the workshop was designed as an open and participatory research setting, every stage of the process remained shaped by institutional conditions: who was allowed to participate, what I was permitted to document, how the material had to be anonymized, and whether it could ultimately be used. The workshop therefore became not only a method for investigating and producing knowledge about prison architecture, but also a concrete example of how access, visibility, and representation are controlled within the prison system.

Access to PD3 was facilitated through ST, who had also introduced me to two other prisons. In preparation for the workshop, RS, my contact person in the prison, requested an information sheet that could be distributed to potential participants, allowing them to gain an understanding of the workshop in advance. However, I had no influence over the selection of participants or the criteria by which they were chosen.

In addition, I requested permission to document the workshop. It was important to me that the workshop outcomes would not stand by themselves, isolated from the setting in which they were produced. I therefore proposed capturing close-up images and video recordings of participants' hands, focusing on gestures, movements, and interactions while ensuring anonymity. This request was approved. Being permitted to film the workshop was both unexpected and significant for the project, as it allowed me to document not only the process itself, but also the atmosphere of the workshop and its architectural setting through hand movements, sound, and spatial interaction.

However, the documentation process was significantly shaped by the conditions in the field. Even before entering the building, the act of filming revealed the sensitivity and ambiguity of the prison environment:

Massimo (cameraman) and I walk up to the prison gate and then follow a narrow path along the side of the building to capture footage of the architecture. The path is squeezed between the prison wall and a row of single-family houses. The proximity and direct juxtaposition of houses—with gardens and children's swings—feels absurd. It is as if two worlds are colliding. From their homes, residents have a direct view of the prison building, which is enclosed by barbed wire. Behind the prison, a church tower topped with a cross rises into view. We film a small open garden with chickens that shares a fence with the prison. After a few minutes, I notice someone watching us from a window in the administrative wing. Gradually, more figures appear at the windows, observing us. One of them is on the phone.



I have a strong sense that something is wrong. I feel watched and tense. Still, we continue filming, as capturing the exterior of the prison is very important for the project. As it is just before noon, we return to the gate and ring the bell at reception. The gate opens, and we cross the

forecourt toward the entrance I remember from my previous visit. Here, too, we are scrutinized from the windows above. VB greets us with the words: “You’ve just triggered a police response. Filming the building is strictly prohibited. Anyone seen filming or taking photos is considered suspicious and will be immediately instructed by the police to delete the footage.” He adds, “I would have appreciated it if you had coordinated this with us beforehand.” I immediately apologize and explain that it was an honest mistake and that I was not aware that photographing or filming the building from the outside was not permitted. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD3)



Figures 2 (left) and 3: Documentation process during field research at PD3. The prison building has been censored at the request of the institution.

Furthermore, the documentation process made the power dynamics of the workshop visible, since the act of filming transformed a participatory moment into a situation where observation, supervision, and research overlapped. My discomfort revealed the ethical and methodological tension of conducting participatory research in prison settings, where even attempts to create space for participants’ expression remain shaped by institutional control, visibility, and asymmetrical power relations.

We—RS, the second guard, Massimo, the other inmate, and I—stand around one of the participants as he takes a print from the phone. Massimo is filming. I feel uncomfortable. The situation feels unnatural: five people watching one person. It gives the impression that he is the object of research, even though my focus is on the architecture and its material elements. I find myself wanting to change the situation, to shift this dynamic, but I know that I can’t. I try to position my body in a way that might ease the tension. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD3)



Figure 4: Workshop documentation at PD3.

The institutional rules also directly shaped my design research approach – most notably by forcing unusual camera angles when documenting the workshop inside the prison, as these images show.

The institution retained authority over whether and how the material had to be censored, and whether I was permitted to use it at all.

After all the participants have left the room, only RS, VB, Massimo, and I remain. RS and VB examine the prints and erase any existing names or cell numbers. RS then asks me to hand over the camera’s SD card, explaining

that he and VB will review the material in his office. While they are gone, I tidy up the room and gather the prints and materials.

I feel nervous and anxious; my body is tense. I worry that I may not be allowed to use the video footage. Although this had been agreed upon with RS in advance, he now seems to have serious reservations. I feel at the mercy of the situation and become acutely aware of how much the form and depth of my thesis depend on the rules of the system. After some time, RS returns and informs us that the footage of the building must be deleted, which he proceeds to do in front of us on his laptop. He then explains that he does not feel comfortable with the video material and that we should therefore work exclusively with the photographs. He does not want us to leave the building with the video files on the SD card. DC re-enters the room and explains that he has just spoken with the media office. Since Massimo and I have signed a confidentiality agreement, we are legally obliged to handle the material in accordance with its terms. Therefore, we are permitted to use the video footage. The SD card is returned to us, and we are escorted back to the entrance. Massimo and I walk the short distance across the courtyard to the entrance gate, which opens automatically in front of us and closes again behind us. We walk side by side in silence for a few moments until I feel a palpable tension leave my body. I experience an immense sense of relief—both because we are allowed to keep the video material and because the workshop ultimately unfolded successfully. On the train ride home, we realize how exhausted we are, and how much the day has drained our energy and nerves. (Meyer-Clason, 2025, Fieldnotes, PD3)

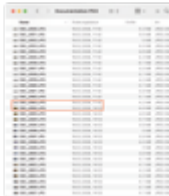


Figure 5: Screenshot of the image folder showing a gap in the file numbering between 11:42 and 14:02. Although documentation continued until approximately 11:58, shortly before the meeting at 12:00, the institution deleted the footage taken during this period. Documentation resumed after the meeting at 14:02.

These moments show that the workshop was not only a site of participation, but also a site where institutional control over visibility, documentation, and knowledge production became directly tangible.

2.2 Positionality

While the previous section focused on the institutional conditions of access, this section reflects on my own position within those conditions. Prisons are in many aspects a “sensitive field of re-

search”³³ characterized by pronounced asymmetries in power, which operate on multiple levels: between researcher and institution, between researcher and incarcerated individuals, and within the institutional structures themselves. My position was therefore marked by a double dependency. On the one hand, I relied on the institution to gain access and to make the research possible at all; on the other hand, my research was concerned with people whose agency is structurally limited by that same institution. I was not outside the power relations I was analyzing: as a researcher and designer, I depended on institutional permission, negotiated the limits of documentation, and had to respond to situations of discomfort, uncertainty, and control as they unfolded.

This created an ethical tension throughout the research process. The incarcerated individuals I encountered have voices and perspectives, but the channels through which these can be communicated are restricted or closed. I approached them as contributors to the research and at the same time had to respect the constraints that prevented me from revealing their identities. Making their perspectives visible was always accompanied by the requirement to render specific aspects invisible.

Entering carceral spaces meant crossing a threshold into a quite different set of rules and conditions – a major shift that underscored the responsibility of engaging with this environment critically and respectfully. This thesis therefore includes my own reflections from my field notes on how knowledge is produced within, and shaped by, these power dynamics. Field notes are particularly relevant in this context because they make room for places, relations, events and sensory experiences.³⁴

33 Irene Marti and Ueli Hostettler, *Hinter den Mauern: Einblicke in die ethnografische Gefängnisforschung*, Bulletin SGS/SSS, no. 153 (2018): 26–32.

34 Ann-Karina Henriksen and Anna Schliehe, *Ethnography of Young People in Confinement: On Subjectivity, Positionality and Situated Ethics in Closed Space*, Qualitative Research 20, no. 6 (2020): 837–853.