Towards peer support among prison staff: insights from a peer mentoring pilot

This article presents key insights from *M4Pris*, a European peer mentoring initiative designed to support newly recruited prison staff in navigating the demands of correctional work. Against a backdrop of high staff turnover, workplace stress, and limited early-career support, the project piloted a structured peer mentoring programme across four countries: Denmark, Portugal, Romania and Greece. Drawing on academic research, good practices, and extensive fieldwork—including interviews and focus groups with prison officers—the M4Pris consortium co-developed a context-sensitive mentoring model focused on both emotional and professional support. This article outlines the development process, explores the challenges faced by new prison staff, and introduces the core features of the mentoring blueprint.

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Introduction

Working in a prison environment has long been associated with high levels of occupational stress, job dissatisfaction, and staff turnover. In recent years, these challenges have only intensified due to increasing complexity in prison populations and demands on correctional services. Across Europe, concerns over limited workplace wellbeing and, in some contexts, inadequate staff training remain prominent (Vereycken & Ramioul, 2019). These pressures disproportionately affect new prison officers, who often face a steep learning curve and limited structured support upon entering the profession.

Recognising the need for early, meaningful support mechanisms, the M4Pris project sets out to explore the potential of peer mentoring as a means of easing the professional integration of new prison staff. While peer support and mentoring are relatively common in inmate-focused interventions, similar schemes for prison staff remain rare. Yet, initial evidence suggests that mentoring relationships among staff can foster stronger job commitment, improve mental wellbeing, and reduce levels of stress and burnout (Butler et al., 2019).

M4Pris—Mentoring for Prison Staff—is an Erasmus+ funded initiative (2022–2025) that brings together organisations from Denmark, Portugal, Romania, Greece, and Belgium, each contributing sectoral or methodological expertise. The project consortium includes: BrainLog and the Danish Prison Federation (Denmark), Aproximar – Cooperativa de Solidariedade Social (Portugal), Sindicatul al Poliţiştilor de Penitenciare and Asociaţia Vis Juventum (Romania), the Athens Lifelong Learning Institute (Greece), and HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society at the University of Leuven (Belgium). Together, the partners aimed to co-create and pilot a flexible, context-sensitive peer mentoring model tailored to the specific challenges of correctional work.

This article outlines the development process and conceptual underpinnings of the M4Pris mentoring model. It begins by describing the multi-step methodology used to inform programme design, including a literature review, interviews with prison staff and a validation workshop. Next, it explores the distinct psychosocial and operational challenges faced by prison staff—particularly newcomers—and how peer mentoring can help address these. Finally, the article presents the core features of the M4Pris mentoring blueprint, as co-developed and tested by project partners, and offers preliminary reflections from the piloting phase.

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Evidence-Based Programme Development

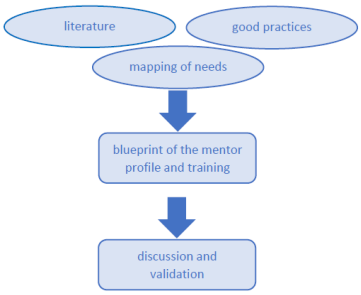
The development of the peer mentoring programme was guided by a structured, evidence-based approach, comprising several key phases.

The initial phase combined a state-of-the-art literature review with the identification of promising practices in the field. Academic and grey literature on mentoring and peer support—particularly in correctional contexts—was reviewed, comprising a total of 39 articles, to extract key insights into programme design, mentor roles, recruitment strategies, and training content. In parallel, the consortium examined 8 existing mentoring initiatives for prison staff to identify effective approaches, mentor profiles, and lessons learned from real-world experiences.

Next, a needs assessment was conducted to capture the perspectives of prison staff regarding mentoring and peer support. Semi-structured interviews with 31 junior officers were carried out in Denmark, Portugal, Romania, and Greece. These consultations provided in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by new staff members, the kinds of support they require, and how a mentoring relationship could address these needs.

Building on this foundation, the M4Pris consortium co-developed a flexible blueprint for a peer mentoring programme tailored to correctional settings. The blueprint included a clearly defined mentor profile, a training framework, and guidance on structuring the programme. The proposed model was validated through internal review .

More detailed findings from the literature review, interviews, and the development of the mentoring blueprint are presented in Op De Beeck et al (2024).



Finally, the mentoring programme was piloted in the partner countries. A pre- and post-intervention survey was administered to mentors and mentees to evaluate the programme's impact on staff wellbeing, integration, and confidence. These findings will inform the further refinement of the model and support future scaling and innovation efforts.

Understanding the pressures of prison work

The stressors to which prison staff are subject are numerous and constant. As incidents can always happen, this sense of unpredictability and the absence of margin for error adds to the level of stress experienced. One of the interviewees formulated this as follows: *"Just when things seem quiet and well and you think the shift is going to go smoothly, a fuse can be lit when you least expect it. So, you must be sharp and constantly observe what is going on."*

The unique work environment places a heavy burden on prison staff. They must manage demanding interpersonal relationships, navigate stressful social encounters, and handle critical events. Additionally, they are responsible for supervising individuals who may be uncooperative, manipulative, or even violent

(Griffin et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2015; Farnese et al., 2016). Not to forget the high job demands such as the workload, understaffing, shift work, overtime and role ambiguity (Farnese et al., 2016, Jessiman-Perreault et al., 2021). In addition, over the course of their career, prison staff, are likely to be confronted with potentially traumatic events and situations involving harm, such as violent incidents, self-injury and even death (Barry, 2017; Boudoukha et al., 2011; Viotti, 2016; Walker et al., 2017).

As the stressors are multiple in nature, so are the consequences. The impact is noticeable on both the individual as well as the organisational level. On the individual level potentially resulting in mental and physical problems such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, burn-out, substance abuse,... Not only their health, but also their wellbeing and life quality is on the line (Kotejoshyer et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2002, 2006, 2020, 2021). Stressors experienced on the job can spill over to life outside of work generating different types of work-(family)life conflict. Quoting an interviewee: *"Adapting to this new life was quite difficult. The different characters of the people you meet in your work as a penitentiary policeman. I believe I have struggled very hard with detachment from the problems encountered at work in my spare time."* On the organisational level it can trigger early retirement, increased job turnover, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction and decreased job performance (Keinan and Malach-Pines, 2007).

These stressors and reality shock are especially burdensome for newcomers (Farnese et al., 2016, Jessiman-Perreault et al., 2021). Drop-out rates are high, even during the first months on service. *"We see this in the first two to three months of activity and there were situations in which they did not stay even for a month and submitted their resignation."*

What difference can mentoring make?

The stressors described above, combined with the challenge of introducing newcomers to the unique demands of prison work, highlight the need for structured forms of support. These needs include not only practical guidance but also emotional and psychosocial support—particularly, though not exclusively, during the first months on the job.

Experienced prison staff can play a vital role in creating a supportive environment and transferring knowledge. Mentoring offers a structured approach to delivering this kind of support, providing a methodology through which seasoned colleagues can assist new recruits. While research on mentoring in prison settings remains limited, available studies suggest promising outcomes. For instance, Farnese et al. (2016) found that mentoring in a law enforcement context can help reduce the intention to leave the job. Similarly, Butler et al. (2019) reported increased job satisfaction, higher organisational commitment, and reduced stress among staff who participated in peer mentoring.

Workplace mentoring typically serves two interrelated functions: a psychosocial function and a career-oriented, job familiarisation function (Kram, 1985; Eby et al., 2007; Haggard et al., 2010). The first refers to all types of psychosocial support related to attitudes, motivation and interpersonal relationships at the workplace. It entails motivating, affirming, giving emotional support, etc. A quote from an interviewee reflecting the positive impact of this: *"I had an experience with a colleague who gave me positive feedback after a period with an inmate. It was not a critical period, but there had been a bad atmosphere. It was nice that the colleague talked to me about it and told me that I handled it well."* The career-oriented and job familiarisation function is about introducing one at the workplace, sharing job-specific skills and tips and tricks, giving work related advice, familiarize one with the workplace culture, etc. *"It's a whole new world. You have to figure out how to do things."* and *"It was special to get into prison at first. A closed world. In the beginning, you had to get used to the manners, rules and procedures. There were many things to learn."* illustrate how new prison staff that were interviewed perceive (the need for) support.

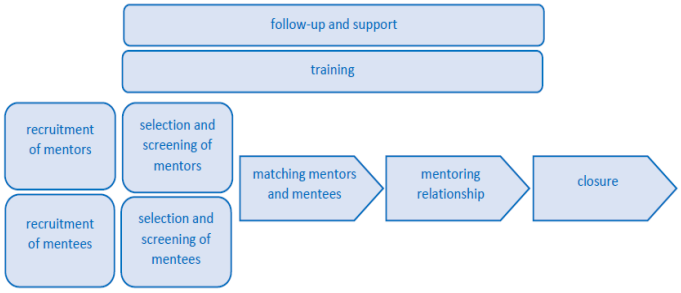
These two mentoring functions are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are complementary—and together they align closely with the needs identified in the early stages of employment.

Developing the blueprint for a peer mentoring programme for prison staff

The insights drawn from academic literature, international good practices, and interviews with junior prison staff and mentors formed the foundation for developing a blueprint for a peer mentoring programme for prison staff. In collaboration with all project partners, the core components of the blueprint were discussed and validated. This participatory process led to a shared and supported model, designed to be applicable across diverse national contexts while remaining adaptable to the specific characteristics of different European prison systems. Rather than creating a rigid, one-size-fits-all programme, the blueprint was deliberately developed as a transferable and flexible framework.

The cornerstone of the blueprint was a clear definition of what mentoring for prison staff should entail within the scope of the M4Pris project. Considering recurring and mutually affirming elements in academic literature, good practices and interviewee statements, the project partners agreed on the following definition: *'A more senior colleague providing emotional support, sharing job related information, institutional knowledge and helps to develop skills in an informal manner and on a voluntary basis with a less experienced or new colleague in his/her department'* (Op De Beeck et al: 2024).

Another crucial fundament of the blueprint was outlining the structure of such a programme. Typically, a mentoring programme consists of several key elements. According to De Cuyper (2020) these are: 1) the recruitment of mentors and mentees, 2) the selection of mentors and mentees, 3) the matching of the mentors and the mentees, 4) the mentoring relationship and 5) the closure. Providing follow-up and support to the mentor-mentee duo and a training are also vital to the quality of a mentoring programme.



A next step was clarifying these key elements tailored to the mentioned needs and the prison context in collaboration with all project partners.

A first fundamental question was: who is the mentee? Given the demanding nature of the role of a prison officer, M4Pris focuses primarily on individuals who are new to the job. However, the notion of "new" can be interpreted broadly. Staff who transfer from one prison to another, or who move from an adult facility to a youth detention centre, also face significant adaptation challenges. In consultation with all project partners, the blueprint therefore broadens the definition of a mentee to include both those entering the profession for the first time and those who are new to a different institutional or contextual setting.

An important design consideration was whether participation in the mentoring programme should be mandatory or voluntary. Each option has its implications. Without sufficient participation, the programme cannot function. One project partner also made the consideration that people possible might not want to take part in such a programme when it is not mandatory as 'being in need' of mentoring can be considered as weak. Not wanting to be labeled as 'weak' might be a hindrance for newcomers entering such a programme. On the other hand, , coercion is unlikely to foster the kind of engagement and trust that mentoring relies on. After careful deliberation, the M4Pris partners opted for a voluntary model, emphasising the importance of intrinsic motivation.

A mentoring programme is not complete without a mentor. Building on the definition of mentoring, we described the mentor role as follows: "*the role entails giving job-related as well as psychosocial support. It is sharing the specific institutional knowledge and transferring practical skills related to work in a prison in order to facilitate job familiarization. It is supporting mentally and emotionally in all kinds of situations. Concretely it is about being a role model*

who enables learning by example, motivating and encouraging, affirming and confirming and giving advice and feedback". (Op De Beeck et al, 2024:26).

A mentor can be either a supervisor or a peer. However, the former is often seen as problematic in the context of mentoring, which is fundamentally about supporting, encouraging, and facilitating the mentee's development (Scandura, 1998). When the mentor holds a supervisory role, potential conflicts may arise—particularly if they are responsible for issuing direct orders or formally evaluating the mentee's performance. Given that mentoring also involves offering psychosocial support, there is a strong rationale for assigning mentors who are peers. Ideally, these are colleagues with several years of relevant experience, capable of drawing on practical knowledge and lived expertise to guide and support new staff in an informal and trustworthy manner. Nonetheless, within the M4Pris partnership, no consensus was reached on this point. As a result, the blueprint leaves room for both supervisors and peers to act as mentors, depending on what best suits the organisational context.

Effective matching between mentors and mentees is critical to a successful programme. While the process can be pragmatic, it should account for interpersonal compatibility and mutual trust. Staff interviewed during the M4Pris project emphasised the importance of overlapping shifts: *"It is on the shifts where you probably learn the most. You learn how to act and how to act practically in different situations."* Thus, where possible, pairing officers who work the same shifts is advisable. Although not always feasible, regular and early contact remains essential. As Wittenberg (1998) notes, mentoring relationships often falter when insufficient time is invested. In terms of duration, a period of six months to one year is most commonly recommended (Kotejoshyer et al., 2021; Namazi et al., 2021). This was also recommended in the M4PRIS project.

Research on mentoring confirms that mentor training is essential for effective and high-quality mentoring (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2014). For this reason, the M4Pris project developed a dedicated training component. However, references outlining the specific content of such training are scarce. Drawing on examples from other contexts, potential training topics were discussed collaboratively with the project partners. It was agreed that training should begin with an introduction to the concept of mentoring—clarifying its purpose, benefits, and how it differs from related practices such as coaching or tutoring. The training should also address core competencies required of mentors, including communication, interpersonal, pedagogical, and organisational skills. Communication skills involve active listening and providing constructive feedback. Interpersonal skills relate to building trust, breaking the ice, and motivating others. Pedagogical skills include conveying knowledge, acting as a role model, and identifying learning needs. Organisational skills cover setting mutual goals and managing the mentoring relationship effectively and efficiently. For each of these competency clusters, training topics were defined and translated into specific learning objectives. The resulting training package is available on the M4Pris website.
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Piloting the peer mentoring programme

The blueprint serves as the theoretical foundation of the peer mentoring programme. Building on this framework, the mentoring programme—including a training for both mentors and coordinators—was further operationalised by the project partners. Between January and July 2025, the programme was piloted in four partner countries: Denmark, Portugal, Romania, and Greece. In total, up to 200 mentor–mentee duos were formed, and more than 120 mentors received training.

While the evaluation is still ongoing, early indications suggest that both the mentoring programme and the associated training are being positively received by participants. In Romania, for example, participants reported lower stress levels and an improvement in overall wellbeing. Mentees also described gains in professional development, particularly in terms of feeling more integrated and confident. Mentor–mentee pairs noted strong mutual trust and support throughout the process. Preliminary feedback from the Danish and Portuguese pilots likewise points to overall satisfaction with the programme, accompanied by constructive suggestions for refinement and improvement.

Conclusion

The M4Pris project set out to address a persistent gap in the support available to prison staff—particularly those new to the profession. While the pressures of correctional work are widely recognised, structured responses to the psychosocial and professional challenges faced by staff have remained limited. Through the development of a flexible peer mentoring programme, M4Pris offers a promising approach grounded in collaboration, lived experience, and evidence-informed design.

What is already becoming clear is that mentoring can play a meaningful role in supporting new staff—helping them feel more connected, confident, and prepared for the realities of the job. As correctional services across Europe continue to face recruitment and retention challenges, peer mentoring may prove to be a small but significant step toward a more supportive and resilient prison workforce.

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