

Research Brief

Comparing experiences of correctional climates among people on remand and serving custodial sentences

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AIMS To examine differences in perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing among individuals on remand and those serving custodial sentences, and how these perceptions are related to subjective experiences of wellbeing.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS We utilised self-report survey data from 2,538 people in NSW correctional centres to examine perceptions and experiences of procedural fairness, quality of staff relationships, safety and wellbeing based on individual and contextual factors for people in custody.

Individuals on remand reported higher perceptions of procedural fairness, while sentenced individuals reported greater perceived safety and wellbeing. Among sentenced individuals, those who had spent more time in custody tended to report more favourable perceptions of procedural fairness, staff relationships, and wellbeing. Time in custody was not significantly related to perceptions of the correctional climate for people on remand.

Regardless of sentence status, females reported more positive perceptions of staff relationships and better wellbeing compared to males. People who identified as Aboriginal reported less favourable perceptions of procedural fairness and staff relationships, but higher scores on safety compared to non-Aboriginal people.

All three measures of correctional climate were significantly and positively related to subjective experiences of wellbeing for both people on remand and those serving custodial sentences. The strength and pattern of these relationships were similar across both groups, suggesting that all three measures of correctional climate are universally important for wellbeing in custody, irrespective of sentence status.

We conclude that the lack of stability and certainty about the future faced by people on remand may contribute to differences in perceptions and experiences of the correctional climate, particularly with respect to safety and wellbeing. Enhancing people's wellbeing through building safe, fair and supportive correctional climates is important for all people in custody, though the mechanisms through which this is done should be considered in terms of the unique individual and contextual factors that people experience when entering and progressing through the system. The findings from this study contribute to growing evidence around the importance of positive correctional climates and helps inform correctional practices that are more inclusive and responsive to different custodial populations.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional climate—a multifaceted concept encompassing the physical environment, the fairness of institutional policies, quality of interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of safety—influences the experiences and outcomes of people in custody (Burek & Liederbach, 2021; Goomany & Dickinson, 2015; Lambert et al., 2010; Taxman & Gordon, 2009). Research suggests that more positive correctional climates are generally associated with improved mental health and wellbeing, reduced violence, increased readiness for change, and better rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Goomany & Dickinson, 2015; Tonkin et al., 2016), though the strength and consistency of these associations differ across settings and populations. Recognising these benefits, Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) has prioritised enhancing correctional climates through ongoing monitoring and evaluation of key factors, including procedural fairness, staff relationships, and perceptions of safety, aligning with international best practices to promote a more rehabilitative environment for those in prison (Tonkin, 2016).

Procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety are interrelated elements that collectively shape the correctional climate. Procedural fairness—perceptions of fair treatment, transparency, and consistency in decision-making within the institution—is foundational to fostering trust and compliance (Jackson et al., 2010). Research supports that when people in prison perceive they are treated fairly and that decision-making processes as fair, it builds trust in authorities and encourages greater willingness to comply with institutional rules (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Reising & Mesko, 2009; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Positive staff relationships, characterised by trust, respect, and support between correctional staff and people in prison, have been shown to enhance rehabilitation efforts and reduce misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). Simultaneously, a safe and secure environment that ensures both physical and psychological safety promotes stability and wellbeing within correctional settings, creating a foundation for positive outcomes (Palmen et al., 2022). Findings from CSNSW’s initial exploration of these factors indicate that they significantly shape experiences of people in prison (Islam et al., 2024).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of correctional climate, existing studies focus mainly on individual-level differences and often overlook how broader structural and institutional factors influence individuals’ experience in prison. Sentence status, for example, represents one such key determinant that may influence how individuals perceive their correctional climate, as individuals on remand—who are awaiting court appearances or sentencing—encounter distinct challenges compared to those who are sentenced. In New South Wales, the proportion of individuals held on remand has risen substantially in recent years, from 27.9% in December 2013 to 43.7% as of December 2024 (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), 2025). Unlike most sentenced individuals, those on remand face significant uncertainty about their court outcomes, separation from support networks, frequent court appearances, and the psychological shock of sudden imprisonment (Baughman, 2017; Hassan et al., 2011; Hawton et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2014). Often treated as though guilty despite not being convicted, they frequently experience the same restrictive conditions as sentenced individuals, which can result in feelings of unfair treatment and increased distress (Hawton et al., 2014).

Moreover, systemic inequalities, such as limited access to education, work opportunities, and rehabilitative programs, further differentiate remand experiences from those of sentenced individuals (Schönteich, 2018). These restrictions arise from a presumption that remand is temporary, yet many endure prolonged pretrial detention, sometimes exceeding their eventual sentence length. This gap in structured case management, combined with the psychological strain of prolonged uncertainty and reduced access to services, has been associated with disproportionately elevated levels of psychological distress and self-harm among individuals on remand (Andrade et al., 2024; Andrade et al., 2023; Hawton et al., 2014).

Time in custody—regardless of sentence status—may also influence how individuals engage with the correctional climate. Greater familiarity with the prison environment over time may change expectations, coping strategies, and interactions with staff and peers (Butler, 2019; Martens & Crewe, 2025; Seel et al.,

2024). Furthermore, the relationship between time in custody and correctional climate may be moderated by sentence status, given the varying legal, emotional, and institutional contexts encountered by individuals on remand and those who are sentenced. Individuals on remand have generally spent shorter periods in custody compared to those who have been sentenced, but their time is often marked by acute stress, isolation, uncertainty, and adjustment problems (Baughman, 2017; Walker et al., 2014). Conversely, those who are sentenced may benefit from a clearer institutional trajectory and increased access to structured activities over time. There are, however, limited studies that empirically explore how time spent in custody interacts with sentence status to influence individuals' prison experiences. This gap highlights the need for empirical investigation into whether time spent in custody is linked to distinct patterns of perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing.

AIMS

The primary focus of this study is on differences in perceptions of correctional climate between individuals on remand and those who are sentenced; however, it is also important to consider whether certain subgroups within these cohorts, such as Aboriginal people and women, experience distinct challenges that could further influence their experience in custody. For instance, both groups are disproportionately represented in correctional settings in NSW and have been key drivers of recent remand population growth. Aboriginal people who make up approximately 3% of the general NSW population, accounted for 32.3% of the adult prison population as of December 2024 – the highest proportion ever recorded (BOCSAR, 2025). This overrepresentation is especially notable in the remand population, where the number of Aboriginal people rose by 28.8% between December 2022 and December 2024. During the same period, the number of women in prison also increased by 5.4%. These statistics underscore the need to examine how sentence status intersects with both Aboriginal identity and gender to shape experiences of correctional climate.

While prior research has underscored the significance of correctional climate, much of the existing literature has focused on the general prison population, often treating subgroups like individuals on remand, Aboriginal people, and women as covariates rather than exploring their unique experiences (Orjiakor et al., 2017). Findings from CSNSW's preliminary research have revealed significant variations in correctional climate perceptions among different groups, including individuals on remand, Aboriginal people, and women (see Islam et al., 2024). However, a deeper investigation of these variations is necessary to promote fair, respectful, and safe correctional settings by addressing the distinct challenges these groups face. Exploring these differences offers an opportunity to better understand the specific needs of these groups and inform inclusive, culturally responsive, and equity-focused policies and practices.

This study, conducted as part of a broader research agenda by Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics (CRES), contributes to CSNSW's strategic objectives aimed at improving individuals' experiences of correctional climates. It explores how perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing differ between individuals on remand and those who are sentenced, as well as how these perceptions vary among Aboriginal individuals and women. Moreover, it examines whether time spent in custody shapes these perceptions differently depending on sentence status.

This study aims to address four key research questions:

1. How do perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing differ between individuals on remand and those who are sentenced?
2. Does time in custody influence perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing differently based on sentence status?
3. Within remand and sentenced populations, do Aboriginal individuals and women perceive correctional climate and wellbeing differently?
4. Do the associations between correctional climate and wellbeing vary by sentence status?

METHODS

Data was collected through an online survey administered using the Alchemer survey platform. The survey was made accessible on digital tablets available in 26 NSW correctional centres where tablets are routinely used. A total of 9,089 individuals in custody were invited to participate in the survey, which was open for responses for 3 weeks over February and March 2024. Information about the purpose of the survey and instructions on how to access it were communicated to potential participants via a Facility Message sent directly to their tablets.

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Respondents were asked to provide their Master Index Number (MIN) to enable the linkage of their responses with demographic data from the CSNSW Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS). OIMS is a central database used by CSNSW to collect and manage information about individuals in custody and under community supervision. To ensure data quality, responses identified as likely reflecting 'careless or insufficient responding' were excluded from the final dataset.¹ The final sample consisted of 2,538 individuals, yielding a response rate of 27.9%. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample, as obtained from OIMS.

Table 1. Selected background characteristics of the sample

Variable	Full sample (N = 2,538)	Remand individuals (n = 913, 36.0%)	Sentenced individuals (n = 1,625, 64.0%)
	% / M(SD)	% / M(SD)	% / M(SD)
Age (years)			
≤25	14.6	18.1	12.6
26-35	33.2	37.6	30.7
36-49	34.9	33.8	35.5
50-64	13.9	8.9	16.7
65+	3.5	1.6	4.5
Gender			
Male	89.4	86.7	90.8
Female	10.6	13.3	9.2
Aboriginal status			
Non-Aboriginal	70.6	68.6	71.8
Aboriginal	29.4	31.4	28.2
Relationship status			
Partnered (Married/De Facto)	32.3	32.0	32.4
Unpartnered (Single/Divorced/Separated)	67.7	68.0	67.6
Dependent children			
No	49.6	47.3	50.9
Yes	50.4	52.7	49.1
Time in prison (current episode)			
Mean (months)	26.97 (42.95)	7.42 (8.64)	37.95 (50.04)
Range (months)	<1-469	<1-72	<1-469
Time in prison (categorised)			
< 3 months	25.6	40.8	15.3
3-6 months	17.0	19.7	15.1
6-12 months	16.3	18.1	15.1
12-24 months	19.2	17.3	20.4
24-72 months	22.0	4.1	34.0

¹ Careless or insufficient responding was assessed using a protocol that included three tests: 1) speed, where responses were limited to 2 seconds or less per page for at least two pages; 2) response consistency, measured by the standard deviation across items; and 3) multivariate outlier detection, based on Mahalanobis distance. If responses failed the speed or consistency tests, they were automatically excluded. In cases where both speed and multivariate outlier criteria were met, the response was reviewed for any obvious pattern or issue and was eliminated if necessary.

The self-report measures administered via the survey included:

Procedural fairness	A 10-item measure covering four key elements of procedural justice: respect (3 items; e.g., “Staff address and talk to me in a respectful manner”), neutrality (3 items; e.g., “Staff try to be fair when making decisions”), voice (2 items; e.g., “Staff listen to me before making decisions”), and trustworthiness (2 items; e.g., “Staff show concern and understanding towards me”) (Barkworth & Murphy, 2021). A 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) was used to rate each item; higher scores indicate stronger perceptions of procedural fairness. The measure was previously validated with a CSNSW custodial sample and demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .97; Islam et al., 2024). Additionally, Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFAs) from a test-retest study further support its validity (Islam et al., in preparation).
Staff relationships	A bespoke 12-item measure that covers four key elements of staff relationships with a rehabilitative lens: motivate change (3 items; e.g., “Staff support people in their care to make positive change”), inspire hope (3 items; e.g., “Staff support me to achieve my goals”), staff collaboration (3 items; e.g., “Staff work with me towards mutually agreed upon goals”), and rehabilitative orientation (3 items; e.g., “Staff seem motivated to help me become more ready for change”). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree); higher scores indicate stronger perceptions of positive staff relationships. This measure was previously validated with a CSNSW custodial sample and had strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .98; Islam et al., 2024).
Safety	Safety was measured using the experienced safety subscale from the Essen Climate Evaluation Schema (EssenCES; Schalast et al., 2008), a well-established self-report tool designed to assess essential characteristics of the social and therapeutic atmosphere of prisons and other forensic settings. The EssenCES includes 15 items, covering three identified dimensions of social climate: support from staff (5 items; e.g., “Staff members take a lot of time to deal with inmates”), inmates’ social cohesion and mutual support (5 items; e.g., “There is good peer support among inmates”), and experienced safety (5 items; e.g., “There are some really aggressive inmates in this unit”). The experienced safety subscale specifically assesses perceptions of safety within the correctional climate. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Very much”), with higher scores representing more positive views of safety. In this study, the subscale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$).
Wellbeing	Wellbeing was assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), a 14-item instrument designed to measure mental wellbeing in populations (Taggart et al., 2015). The scale captures a broad spectrum of mental health attributes (e.g., “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future”) and uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = None of the time to 5 = All the time). Higher scores indicate better mental wellbeing. The measure demonstrated strong internal consistency in this study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Descriptive statistics were first computed to explore the background characteristics of participants, disaggregated by sentence status. Independent samples t-tests were then conducted to examine the group differences in perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing between individuals on remand and sentenced individuals. Effect sizes (Cohen’s *d*) were calculated to assess the magnitude of observed differences. One-way ANOVAs were conducted separately within the remand and sentenced groups to

examine whether time since entry in the current episode was associated with differences in perceptions of the measures of interest. It should be noted here that time in custody was grouped into categories (e.g., <3 months, 3-6 months, 6-12 months, 12-24 months, and 24-72 months) for data visualisation (e.g., bar diagram), while it was used as a continuous variable for statistical analyses (e.g., ANCOVAs and regression) to preserve analytical precision.²

A series of 2x2 ANCOVAs were conducted to explore whether differences in perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing between remand and sentenced groups varied as a function of gender (male vs female) and Aboriginal status (Aboriginal vs non-Aboriginal), while controlling for time in custody. These analyses examined main and two-way interaction effects (e.g., gender × sentence status; Aboriginal status × sentence status) to determine whether subgroup experiences varied across sentence status. Partial eta squared (η^2_p) was used as a measure of effect size.

Finally, hierarchical linear regression analyses were performed to assess whether the relationships between correctional climate dimensions and wellbeing differed as a function of sentence status. In Block 1, all individual level covariates as well as time in custody and sentence status were incorporated to establish a baseline model. In Block 2, each correctional climate dimension and its interaction with sentence status were included in three separate models. Separate models were used due to multicollinearity issues between the climate dimensions, as variance inflation factors (VIF) values exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 5.³ All correctional climate dimensions were mean centred prior to computing interaction terms to reduce multicollinearity. The statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed) for all analyses.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing by sentence status

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distributions of correctional climate dimensions and wellbeing for individuals on remand and sentenced individuals. Responses on procedural fairness were distributed across the full range of the scales, with notable clustering around the midpoints. Staff relationships scores were approximately similar across both groups, suggesting consistent experiences in this domain. Safety scores demonstrated a greater concentration of higher values, particularly among sentenced individuals, reflecting their significantly more positive safety perceptions. Wellbeing scores followed a normal distribution for both groups, though sentenced individuals had a higher concentration of scores at the upper end of the scale, indicating relatively higher levels of wellbeing.

² Analyses involving time in custody were restricted to participants who had spent between 1 and 72 months in custody to allow for comparable timeframes between individuals on remand and sentenced individuals and minimise the effect of extreme values. This range represents the full distribution of remand respondents ($n = 913$) and a large portion of sentenced individuals ($n = 1,351$ of 1,625). Just 270 sentenced individuals (17%) were excluded from these analyses who had spent more than 72 months in custody.

³ Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) are used to determine the presence of multicollinearity among predictors. A VIF > 5 suggests variables are highly correlated, while VIFs between 1 and 5 suggest moderate correlation and should still be investigated further (Daoud, 2017). In the current study, VIFs for procedural fairness and staff relationships were > 6, suggesting the presence of multicollinearity and necessitating the use of separate models.

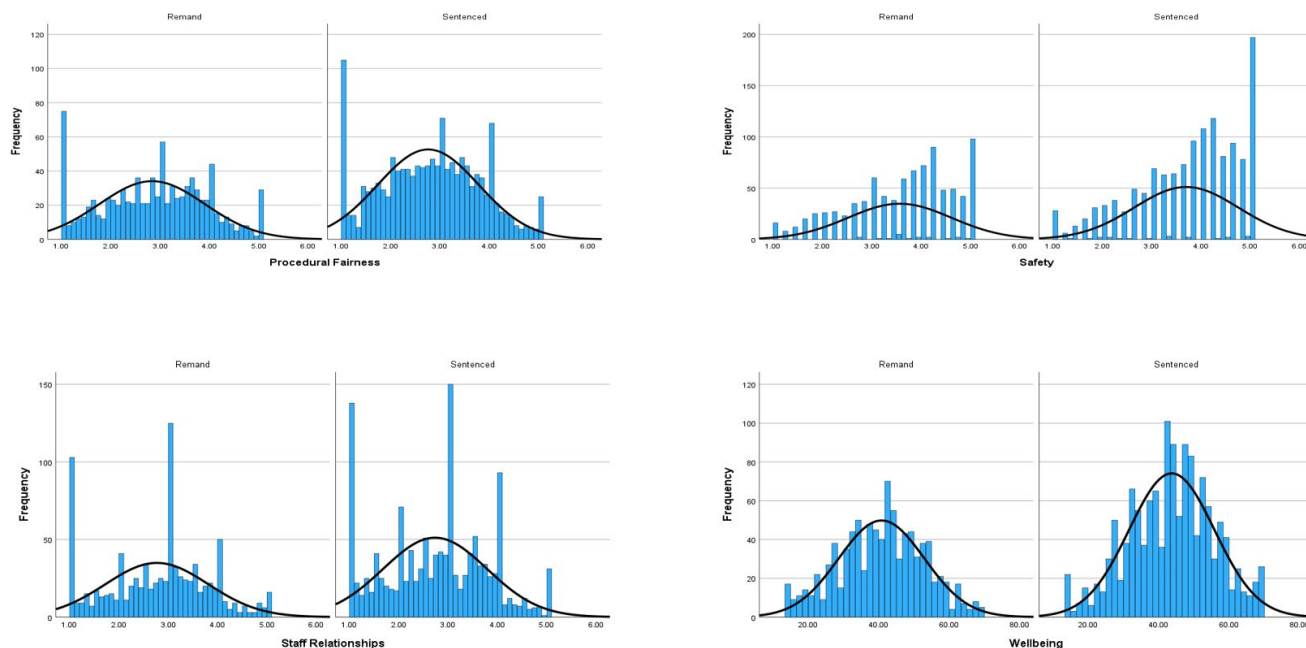


Figure 1. Frequency distributions of procedural fairness, staff relationships, safety, and wellbeing by sentence status.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to explore variations in perceptions of measures of interest between individuals on remand and those who were sentenced (see Table 2). Results revealed small but statistically significant differences across several measures.⁴ Individuals on remand reported slightly higher levels of perceived procedural fairness compared to sentenced individuals, although the effect size was small ($d = .09$). Conversely, sentenced individuals reported higher perceptions of safety than individuals on remand, also with a small effect size ($d = .10$). The largest difference was observed in wellbeing, with sentenced individuals reporting significantly higher wellbeing than those on remand. This difference was significant and had a small to moderate negative effect size ($d = -.31$). No significant group differences were observed in perceptions of staff relationships.

Table 2. Comparisons of correctional climate and wellbeing measures by sentence status

Variable	Sentence status		<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	Remand <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Sentenced <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Procedural fairness	2.84 (1.09)	2.75 (1.04)	2.09*	.09
Staff relationships	2.76 (1.07)	2.73 (1.08)	.79 ns	.04
Safety	3.57 (1.05)	3.68 (1.06)	-2.47**	-.10
Wellbeing	40.52 (12.67)	44.33 (12.33)	-6.82*	-.31

Note: * $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ns = not significant.

Table 3 demonstrates the correlations between the three correctional climate dimensions and overall wellbeing for people on remand and those who had been sentenced. Procedural fairness and staff relationships demonstrated very high positive correlations ($r = .86$ and $r = .85$, respectively, $p < .001$), while both were moderately and positively correlated with safety. All three climate dimensions were also moderately and positively associated with wellbeing, indicating that people in prison who reported higher perceptions of procedural fairness, stronger staff relationships, and a greater sense of safety tended to report better wellbeing.

⁴ Cohen's *d* measures effect size, with .20 indicating a small effect, .50 a moderate effect, and .80 a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3. Correlations between measures of correctional climate, by sentence status

	Remand (n = 913)				Sentenced (n = 1,625)			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Procedural fairness	-				-			
2. Staff relationships	.86***	-			.85***	-		
3. Safety	.28***	.26***	-		.25***	.25***	-	
4. Wellbeing	.40***	.44***	.27***	-	.37***	.41***	.29***	-

Note. ***p < .001, *p < .05

Relationships between time in custody, correctional climate, and wellbeing

Figure 2 demonstrates perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing for individuals on remand and sentenced individuals based on time in custody. To allow for more meaningful comparisons between those on remand and those who were sentenced and limit the impact of outliers, we restricted the sample to individuals who spent between 1 and 72 months in custody. Perceptions of staff relationships and wellbeing were highest for those who had spent less than 3 months or more than 24 months in custody among both groups. Individuals on remand, however, reported higher perceptions of procedural fairness and staff relationships across most time clusters compared to their sentenced counterparts, but were highest among those who had spent more than 24 months in custody. On the other hand, sentenced individuals generally reported higher safety and wellbeing scores than individuals on remand, which was most notable among people who had spent more than 12 months in custody.



Figure 2. Trends in mean scores for correctional climate dimensions and wellbeing across time in custody, by sentence status

A series of one-way ANOVAs were performed to explore whether perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing varied by time in custody during the current episode (see Table 4). The analyses revealed that length of time in custody among sentenced individuals was significantly linked to more positive perceptions of procedural fairness ($F = 2.39, p = .05$), staff relationships ($F = 3.11, p = .02$), and higher levels of wellbeing ($F = 7.40, p < .001$). Post-hoc comparisons showed that sentenced individuals who had spent less than 3 months or more than 12 months in custody reported significantly more favourable perceptions of both procedural fairness and staff relationships than those who had spent 6-12 months in custody. For wellbeing, people who had been in custody for 12-24 months reported significantly higher scores than those who had been in custody for less than 3 months or for 6-12 months, while those who had been in custody for more than 24 months reported significantly higher scores than people who had been in custody for less than 12

months. No significant effects of time were found among individuals on remand, indicating their perceptions remained relatively stable regardless of time spent in custody.

Table 4. Mean scores and results of ANOVAs examining effects of time in custody on correctional climate and wellbeing

Time in custody	Procedural Fairness		Staff Relationships		Safety		Wellbeing	
	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced
< 3 months	2.83	2.80	2.76	2.73	3.64	3.72	40.90	40.80
3-6 months	2.78	2.67	2.70	2.70	3.62	3.60	39.76	43.07
6-12 months	2.87	2.61	2.78	2.53	3.47	3.56	40.70	42.09
12-24 months	2.86	2.79	2.83	2.76	3.45	3.75	41.80	44.27
24-72 months	2.95	2.84	2.92	2.83	3.57	3.78	40.78	45.69
<i>F, p-value</i>	.34, .85	2.39, .05	.52, .72	3.11, .02	1.37, .24	2.24, .06	.60, .66	7.40, <.001

Demographic variations in correctional experiences

A series of 2x2 ANCOVAs were performed to explore variations in perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing based on gender, Aboriginal status and sentence status (see Tables 5–6), while controlling for time in custody. A significant main effect of gender was observed for staff relationships ($F = 7.59, p = .006, \eta^2 p = .003$) and wellbeing ($F = 4.76, p = .03, \eta^2 p = .002$), with females reporting more positive perceptions than males regardless of sentence status. Aboriginal status demonstrated significant main effects for procedural fairness ($F = 12.64, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .005$), staff relationships ($F = 10.96, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .006$), and safety ($F = 3.75, p = .05, \eta^2 p = .001$), although the direction of these variations was not consistent. Specifically, Aboriginal individuals, regardless of sentence status and gender, reported lower perceptions of procedural fairness and staff relationships, and higher perceptions of safety compared to non-Aboriginal individuals.

Sentence status also had a significant main effect on wellbeing ($F = 5.29, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .002$), with sentenced individuals, regardless of gender and Aboriginal status, reporting higher wellbeing compared to those on remand. Time in custody also emerged as a significant covariate for wellbeing ($F = 13.67, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .005$), suggesting that individuals who had spent longer periods in custody tended to report higher levels of wellbeing, independent of sentence status, gender, or Aboriginality. However, when accounting for these factors, time in custody was not significantly related with perceptions of procedural fairness, staff relationships, or safety.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics by gender and Aboriginal background (*M (SD)*)

Variable	Procedural fairness		Staff relationships		Safety		Wellbeing	
	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced	Remand	Sentenced
Gender								
Male	2.84 (1.07)	2.74 (1.012)	2.74 (1.05)	2.71 (1.05)	3.58 (1.05)	3.68 (1.06)	40.46 (12.25)	43.95 (12.02)
Female	2.82 (1.05)	2.84 (1.06)	2.93 (1.01)	2.87 (1.10)	3.53 (1.02)	3.60 (1.06)	42.98 (11.37)	44.50 (11.96)
Aboriginal Status								
Aboriginal	2.73 (1.08)	2.63 (1.08)	2.65 (1.07)	2.63 (1.12)	3.60 (1.04)	3.78 (1.05)	40.75 (11.97)	43.56 (12.37)
Non-Aboriginal	2.88 (1.06)	2.79 (1.00)	2.82 (1.03)	2.76 (1.03)	3.55 (1.05)	3.64 (1.06)	40.82 (12.26)	44.18 (11.87)

Table 6. ANCOVA results for gender, Aboriginal status, and sentence status

Variable	Procedural fairness		Staff		Safety		Wellbeing	
	F	η^2p	F	η^2p	F	η^2p	F	η^2p
Gender	0.67	.000	7.59**	.003	1.28	.001	4.76*	.002
Aboriginal status	12.54***	.005	10.96***	.006	3.75*	.001	0.18	.000
Sentence status	0.21	.000	0.32	.000	3.25	.001	5.29*	.002
Time in custody	1.22	.000	0.03	.000	1.82	.001	13.67***	.005
Gender × Sentence status	0.78	.000	0.05	.000	0.10	.000	1.26	.000
Aboriginal status × Sentence status	0.05	.000	0.18	.000	.73	.000	0.02	.000

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .05$; η^2p = partial eta squared effect size

No significant interaction effects were evidenced between sentence status and gender or Aboriginal status on any of the outcome variables, suggesting that while gender, Aboriginal status and sentence status were independently associated with some dimensions of correctional climate and wellbeing, their effects did not vary significantly in combination.

Associations between correctional climate and wellbeing

Hierarchical regression analyses examined whether the associations between perceptions of correctional climate and wellbeing varied as a function of sentence status (see Table 7). Three separate regression models were estimated to avoid issues with multicollinearity between procedural fairness and staff relationships.⁵ While safety showed weaker correlations with other dimensions, it was also incorporated separately for consistency and comparability across models. Demographic variables (age, gender, Aboriginal status, relationship status, dependent children) and custodial characteristics (time in custody and sentence status) were included in Block 1 to establish a baseline model. In Block 2, each of the correctional climate measures, as well as an interaction term between the relevant climate measure and sentence status, were entered. All control variables from Block 1 were retained in each model in Block 2.

Results from Block 1 demonstrated that older individuals, women, those with dependent children, and those who had spent more time in custody during the current episode were each significantly linked to higher levels of wellbeing. Additionally, sentenced individuals reported significantly better wellbeing than those on remand ($\beta = .10, p < .001$).

In Block 2 for each of the respective models, results indicated that perceptions of procedural fairness ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), staff relationships ($\beta = .45, p < .001$), and safety ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) were each positively associated with wellbeing. However, none of the interactions between correctional climate dimensions and sentence status were statistically significant, suggesting that these associations were consistent across individuals on remand and sentenced individuals.

The addition of each correctional climate factor in their respective models significantly improved model fit. Specifically, in Model 1 procedural fairness accounted for an additional 14% of the variance in wellbeing beyond demographic and custodial characteristics. Staff relationships accounted for 17% of the variance in wellbeing in Model 2. Finally, safety accounted for 8% of the variance in wellbeing in Model 3. These findings indicate that each dimension of correctional climate is a strong predictor of wellbeing when considered within their respective models and after controlling for individual and custodial characteristics.

⁵ Preliminary diagnostics indicated robust correlations between procedural fairness and staff relationships ($r = .86$ for those on remand and $r = .85$ for sentenced individuals), resulting in VIF values > 5.0 .

Table 7. Hierarchical regression models predicting wellbeing

Predictor	Block 1 (β)	Block 2 (β)		
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographic characteristics				
Age (0 = ≤ 25 , 1 = 26-35, 2 = 36-49, 3 = 50-64, 4 = 65+)	.06***	-.02	-.01	.07***
Gender (0 = Male; 1 = Female)	.04*	.03	.02	.05**
Aboriginal status (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	-.01	.01	.01	-.01
Relationship status (0 = Unpartnered; 1 = Partnered)	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01
Dependent children (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	.04*	.05*	.04*	.03
Custodial Characteristics				
Time in custody (current episode)	.07**	.10***	.09***	.07***
Sentence status (0 = Remand, 1 = Sentenced)	.10***	.12***	.11***	.08***
Correctional climate dimensions and interactions				
Procedural fairness	-	.40***	-	-
Procedural fairness \times Sentence status	-	-.01	-	-
Staff relationships	-	-	.45***	-
Staff relationships \times Sentence status	-	-	-.03	-
Safety	-	-	-	.28***
Safety \times Sentence status	-	-	-	.01
R^2	.03	.17	.20	.11
ΔR^2	.03	.14	.17	.08
F	10.16***	58.39***	70.09***	34.08***

Note: β = Standardised beta coefficients; *** p < .001, ** p < .01; * p < .05

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how people in custody perceive their correctional climate, with a focus on differences in the experiences of people on remand and those serving custodial sentences, and how these perceptions are related with wellbeing. It also examined the experiences of specific groups, such as women and Aboriginal individuals, and the potential intersectional effects of gender and cultural background with sentence status on perceptions of correctional climate. The findings give insights into individual and contextual factors that shape individuals' experiences in prison and highlight both commonalities and variations across distinct groups.

People on remand tended to report more favourable perceptions of procedural fairness compared to those who had been sentenced, whereas sentenced individuals were more likely to report a greater sense of safety. While prolonged pretrial detention is generally marked by limited access to meaningful structured activities, programs and personal development opportunities that may be associated with feelings of legal unfairness and uncertainty, the findings suggest there may be other distinct institutional experiences at play for people on remand that lead to enhanced perceptions of procedural fairness. One possible explanation is that people on remand tend to experience more frequent interactions with legal and custodial staff during ongoing court proceedings, which may heighten their awareness of fair treatment and reinforce perceptions of justice through visible procedural safeguards, such as regular court appearances and access to legal representation (Jenness & Calavita, 2018; Ryan & Bergin, 2022). These visible elements of due process could enhance perceived fairness despite the potential stressors of legal uncertainty otherwise associated with being on remand. Conversely, the greater sense of safety among sentenced individuals likely stems from the stability and certainty of having a finalised sentence, including established routines, sustained interpersonal relationships, and fewer stressors related to legal uncertainty. Units predominantly housing sentenced individuals may also offer a more settled and secure atmosphere, supported by established routines, greater access to programs, and the presence of peers who have largely adjusted to prison (Crewe, 2011; Haney 2012). These structural and relational differences shape the correctional climate

and may influence how safety is collectively experienced within units. In contrast, remand units, characterised by frequent court-related movements, high turnover, and a concentration of populations experiencing acute stress and uncertainty may in turn diminish the sense of safety and stability experienced by people living in these units. Sentenced individuals also reported experiencing better wellbeing compared to individuals on remand, suggesting similar factors associated with perceptions of the climate as well as the climate itself may be linked to wellbeing. For example, residing in units with more established routines, access to meaningful and structured activities and programs, and where people feel a greater sense of safety and stability may facilitate more positive psychological adjustment.

Time in custody was also shown to play an important role in influencing people's perceptions and experiences. Sentenced individuals who had spent more time in custody, particularly beyond 12 months, reported more positive perceptions of staff relationships, and experienced better wellbeing. These findings are somewhat consistent with other recent research in the NSW custodial context that demonstrated perceptions of some correctional climate measures tended to be more stable over time among individuals who remained in the same centre (typically sentenced individuals) compared to individuals who recently relocated to another centre (often individuals on remand) (Islam et al., in preparation). This pattern indicates an acclimatisation effect, whereby extended time in a stable custodial environment enables individuals to adjust and benefit from stability and access to rehabilitative opportunities. For people on remand, most correctional climate dimensions and experiences of wellbeing remained relatively stable with more time in custody. However, perceptions of safety declined modestly with more time in custody, indicating that prolonged time on remand may erode a sense of safety. The instability and legal uncertainty of remand status may limit opportunities for institutional adjustment, contributing to relatively static perceptions of the correctional climate even among those held for longer periods in custody (Crewe, 2011). Perceived safety among individuals on remand may also reflect the broader institutional climate, which is often more transient, unpredictable, and characterised by higher levels of tension and turnover. Enhancing the structural and relational stability of remand units could improve both perceptions of safety and overall wellbeing for those awaiting sentencing. These findings are also in line with prior research showing that remand status is related with heightened psychological distress, legal uncertainty, and limited access to rehabilitative programs, all of which negatively impact mental health and wellbeing (Andrade et al., 2024; Baughman, 2017; Hassan et al., 2011; Hawton et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2014).

Analyses further revealed notable differences in correctional climate perceptions and subjective experiences of wellbeing based on gender and Aboriginal background. Women reported significantly more positive staff relationships and higher wellbeing compared to men, a pattern in line with prior research indicating that women in custody often place greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships and benefit more from supportive dynamics with both staff and peers. In-prison friendships serve as a critical buffer against stress among women, indicating that the emotional and relational support women receive—including from staff—plays an important role in promoting their wellbeing and perceptions of the correctional climate (Edison & Haynie, 2023). Aboriginal individuals reported less favourable perceptions of procedural fairness and staff relationships than non-Aboriginal individuals, consistent with evidence that Indigenous people often experience correctional systems as less equitable and culturally less responsive due to long-standing structural barriers and systemic inequalities (Blagg et al., 2005; Cunneen, 2008; McCallum, 2022; Trudgett et al., 2024). However, Aboriginal individuals also reported significantly higher perceptions of safety compared to non-Aboriginal individuals in correctional settings, which may reflect the protective influence of strong cultural resilience, community cohesion, or support networks that promote a greater sense of belonging, mutual support, and security (Gee et al., 2023; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2025; Smallwood et al., 2023; Usher et al., 2021). The non-significant interaction effects indicate that the joint influence of gender or Aboriginal status with sentence status does not create additional variance in perceptions of the climate beyond their independent contributions.

Procedural fairness, staff relationships, and safety were each positively correlated with wellbeing, with similar patterns across both individuals on remand and sentenced individuals. Among those on remand, procedural fairness and staff relationships were more strongly related with wellbeing, while among sentenced individuals, safety showed a slightly stronger link to wellbeing. However, these variations were not substantial, suggesting that all three elements of correctional climate have meaningful associations

with wellbeing for both groups. Hierarchical regression analyses reinforced these findings, demonstrating that each climate dimension was positively associated with wellbeing when examined in separate models and after controlling for individual factors. Staff relationships showed the strongest association with wellbeing, followed by safety and procedural fairness. These findings are consistent with earlier research reporting that fairness, safety, and positive interactions with custodial staff are interrelated elements that collectively influence individual adaptation, and emotional and psychological outcomes of people in custody (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Beijersbergen et al., 2014; Crewe et al., 2011; Islam et al., 2024; Sargeant et al., 2025; Van Ginneken & Nieuwbeerta, 2020). Sentence status itself emerged as a significant predictor of wellbeing, but its interaction with climate dimensions did not, suggesting that the relationships between each climate dimension and wellbeing were consistent across both groups.

While the current study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences, making it unclear whether positive perceptions of correctional climate led to better wellbeing or vice versa. Longitudinal studies can explore how correctional climate perceptions evolve and influence wellbeing over time. Reliance on self-reported data may introduce response biases, particularly in prison environments where individuals may be hesitant to express negative views. Due to multicollinearity among the correctional climate measures, these variables were investigated in separate models rather than simultaneously, limiting our ability to explore their combined influence or relative contributions to wellbeing. Finally, the study's jurisdictional focus on NSW and its omission of variables, such as mental health, prior incarceration, or access to programs may limit generalisability to other contexts and does not account for other factors that may influence perceptions of correctional climate or experiences of wellbeing.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing literature on correctional climate by exploring how sentence status influences individuals' experiences in custody. Sentenced individuals reported slightly higher perceptions of safety, whereas those on remand perceived somewhat greater procedural fairness, with no significant variations in staff relationships between the groups. While these dimensions of the correctional climate differed by sentence status and individual factors such as gender and Aboriginal cultural identity, the overall associations with wellbeing were consistent across groups, with all three dimensions significantly and positively related to wellbeing. These findings highlight the importance of considering sentence-specific, gender-specific, and culture-specific concerns to promote a fair, supportive, and secure correctional climate that can in turn help support more positive outcomes for all individuals in prison.

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