

# From Hyperrationality to Rehabilitation: The Transformation of Prisoner Decision-Making in Poland, 1985–2025

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## Abstract

This article examines the evolution of prisoners' decision-making in Poland between 1985 and 2025, against the backdrop of political, social, and penitentiary transformations. Drawing on Marek Kamiński's concept of hyperrationality, it demonstrates how, under the realities of the People's Republic of Poland, inmates were forced into strategic calculations within the subculture of grypsmen (*grypsujacy*), a system of punishments and rewards, as well as games based on self-harm and coalition-building. By contrast, the contemporary prison environment (grounded in human rights, rehabilitation programs, and greater security) has significantly limited the role of subculture and reshaped the structure of decision-making situations. As a result, the number of strategic choices has declined, and the traditional hyperrationality of prisoners has largely lost its importance. The analysis highlights the profound transformation of the Polish penitentiary system: from a world dominated by subcultural games and risky survival strategies to an institution where predictable administrative and rehabilitative mechanisms govern inmates' daily lives.

**Keywords:** Polish prison system, prison subculture, hyperrationality, prison games, self-harm; rehabilitation, political transformation, strategic decisions, convict criminology

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## Introduction

In his book *Games Prisoners Play*, Marek Kamiński argued that imprisonment socializes inmates into hyperrational behavior (Kamiński, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). This hyperrationality (careful analysis of every action in terms of potential costs and benefits to the inmate, followed by appropriate strategic responses) is evident in many systematic forms of prison interaction. Prisoners are often forced to decide how to respond to situations that arise either naturally or are deliberately created by other inmates, prosecutors, guards, doctors, or judges. Sometimes such decisions have a relatively simple structure, for example, how to behave during a meeting with a counsellor. In other cases, they form part of more complex games with other strategically acting players, such as a simulated hanging (*wyhuśtanie*). An inmate's reaction can determine not only the comfort of his daily life in prison but also, more importantly, the prospects of sentence reduction. It is precisely the significance of such consequences that drives hyperrationality in prisons (Kamiński, 2003).

Among the most crucial decisions an inmate must make is whether to declare affiliation with one of the prison castes, as well as how to behave during initiation tests of *przecwielanie* (which in this case would be only an attempt of sexual humiliation) and *chrzest* (initiation rite). Membership in a caste requires adherence to specific norms of behavior and language. Strategic foresight and the ability to build coalitions can provide an inmate with safety. Some prisoners resort to feigned illness or self-harm to obtain tangible benefits, such as sentence reduction or temporary transfer to a prison hospital with more lenient conditions and better food. Others cultivate a reputation of being “fully rehabilitated,” which may increase their chances of early release (Kamiński, & Gibbons, 1994). Beyond Kamiński's framework, the evolution of the Polish system can be understood through the lens of Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power and the “birth of the prison,” where the focus shifts from the body to the soul of the convict. Furthermore, the transition mirrors the findings of Liebling (2004), who emphasizes that the “moral performance” of a prison – its fairness and humanity – fundamentally alters how inmates perceive and respond to authority.

*Games Prisoners Play* depicts the reality of Polish prisons in 1985. Soon afterward, the collapse of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) brought profound political changes that reshaped the penitentiary system and fundamentally altered the decision-making structure of typical inmates. These changes occurred both in the sphere of *prison deprivations* (conditions

of confinement) and *importations* (characteristics and behaviors brought in from outside by prisoners). It is worth examining them more closely.

1. The subculture of *grypsowanie*: In Kamiński's account, the prison subculture of grypsmen (*grypsujący*; inmates who followed the code of honor) played a central role. According to his estimates, approximately 80% of all inmates in the Warsaw Remand Centers of Mokotów and Białołęka belonged to this group. They occupied the top of the informal prison hierarchy, used a secret slang known as *bajera*, and created an informal code regulating both intra-group relations and interactions with other castes. Below them were the suckers (*frajerzy*; about 17–18% of the prison population), who were subordinated to the grypsmen. They could be exploited, robbed, and ordered around but were not subjected to sexual exploitation, which was reserved for the lowest caste—the fags (*cwele*; approximately 1–3% of prisoners). By 2025, the main castes remained but the proportions had shifted dramatically. Suckers now constituted about 80–85% of the prison population, the grypsmen had declined to 10–15%, and the number of fags had dropped to roughly 1%. Alongside this demographic shift, the overall significance of the subculture diminished considerably.<sup>2</sup>
2. Organization of prison life: Another deprivation factor lies in the administration of cell and prison life. Following the 1989 amnesty, the number of inmates fell to 40,000, and throughout the 1990s prisons were no longer plagued by the overcrowding that was endemic under the communist regime. Corporal punishment was abolished, prison regulations were reformed on the basis of human rights, and inmates were granted leaves on a large scale. Thousands of guards left the prison service, unable to adapt to the realities of a democratic state governed by the rule of law (Moczydłowski, 1994). Access to consumer goods also improved significantly.
3. The distribution of crimes: The most important importation factor is the set of characteristics and types of offenses brought into prison by inmates. Under communism, the most common crimes were theft, burglary, and robbery. There was some heavily fluctuating in time number of political prisoners. By the 1990s, however, prisons also housed members of organized and economic crime, while political prisoners had disappeared (Kamiński, & Miszewski, 2025).

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<sup>2</sup> This information comes from informal conversations with prison service officers.

These combined deprivation and importation changes fundamentally altered the decision-making structure faced by inmates. This article reviews the most important decision-making situations described by Kamiński and analyses how they have changed by 2025.

In this analysis, hyperrationality is operationalized through five key behavioral dimensions that serve as indicators of inmate strategic adaptation: (1) the declaration of caste affiliation, (2) participation in initiation games, (3) the instrumental use of self-harm, (4) the response to administrative rewards and punishments, and (5) the formation of survival or consumption-based coalitions. These dimensions provide a structured framework for comparing the decision-making landscape of 1985 with that of 2025.

## Method

In this article, I will repeatedly refer to my own observations and conclusions to support the theses I formulate. I owe the reader an explanation of their source. In 1998, I caused a car accident that resulted in a fatality. I was sentenced to three years of imprisonment. I served two and a half years of this sentence, from June 2000 to November 2002. I began serving my sentence in the Remand Prison in Chojnice and was later transferred to the Prison in Gdańsk-Przeróbka. The fact that I was a sociology student at the time gave rise to the idea of using my stay in prison to conduct field research, the subject of which became the prison subculture, but also more broadly the population of inmates. The results of this research were presented in my master's thesis entitled "Grypsera: przemiana, słabnięcie czy upadek subkultury więziennej? Na podstawie obserwacji uczestniczącej w areszcie śledczym i w zakładach karnych" [Grypsera: Transformation, Weakening or the Decline of Prison Subculture? Based on Participant Observation in a Remand Prison and Penal Institutions], defended in 2004 at the Institute of Sociology of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. In addition, based on my prison experiences, I published a number of academic and popular science articles (apart from those cited later in this text, also: Miszewski, 2006, 2007b, forthcoming). Meanwhile, information about the prison subculture in 2025 comes from the cited publications as well as from conversations with prison service officers.

This study adopts a specific epistemological stance that combines autoethnography with the analysis of archival data. The qualitative core of the research is based on the author's own experience as a participant observer in the Polish prison system between 2000 and 2002. This "insider" perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of subcultural shifts that are often invisible to outside observers. To provide a longitudinal perspective, these observations are

integrated with a systematic analysis of archival penitentiary statistics and reports from the Polish Prison Service spanning the years 1985–2024. This triangulation of methods ensures both subjective depth and objective breadth in the analysis of the transformation.

## Results

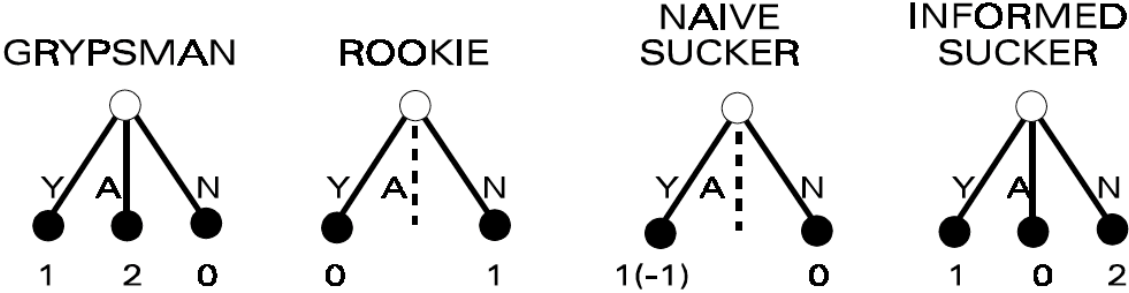
### Declaration

The first major decision faced by an inmate concerns the declaration of belonging to one of the prison castes. In 1985, almost every newcomer aspired to become a grypsman, which was understandable. They were the strongest and most numerous group, bound by solidarity and mutual support (qualities of immense value in the harsh conditions of a communist prison). The informal code they created and upheld made joining them a mark of prestige (Miszewski, 2005a).

Not everyone, however, could become a grypsman. Certain candidates were excluded from the outset: those convicted of pedophilia, members of the ruling Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR), or individuals associated with the justice system. The remaining candidates faced a long and exhausting probationary period, known as *Ameryka*, during which their physical and psychological endurance, intelligence, ability to cope with adversity, and reputation outside prison were thoroughly tested (Kamiński, 2006, Miszewski, 2007a).

The first decision problem an inmate faced in 1985 was quite surprising and apparently of minor importance. He needed to declare on entry to his first cell whether he is a grypsman or not. In fact, this first decision fundamentally affected inmate’s prison path. Because inmates could assume a number of roles, decision-making parameters were different for different types of inmates (see: Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.** Are you a grypsman? Four decision problems



Note: Y = Yes; A = Ask other grypsmen; N = no. The Rookie and the Naive Sucker are unaware of the third strategy, which is represented by dotted line. The Naive Sucker incorrectly believes that the payoff for “yes” is 1, while the true payoff, represented in the parentheses, is -1. Source: (Kamiński, 2004b).

In the 1985 decision problems, all types of newcomers to the cell are incentivized to answer truthfully or, in the case of a true grypsman, to use a secret answer “Ask other grypsmen” that signaled his intimate knowledge of grypsmen subculture.

Moreover, because in 1985 a typical cell consisted mostly of grypsmen, decision makers could assume that their answers would be evaluated by grypsmen. Since in 2025 the composition of cells changed radically, and the vast majority of inmates were not grypsmen, this assumption was no longer valid. Kamiński recalls that out of several dozen entries into various cells that he observed, in every case the question was asked: “Are you a grypsman?”<sup>3</sup> From my experience, the question “Are you a grypsman?”, when asked by a newly entering prisoner, just as often indicated a non-grypsing inmate who wanted to make sure that someone else also did not gryps.<sup>4</sup> Grypsmen entering a new cell would also ask: “Who gryps here?” And if there were other grypsmen in the cell, they would simply answer: “I do.” I have never encountered a situation in which a grypsman answered this question with: “Ask the other grypsmen!” I have also never come across the sophisticated symbolic forms of testing subcultural affiliation described by Kamiński (2006) and Moczydłowski (1991), such as throwing a towel at someone’s feet and checking the reaction (the proper reaction being to wipe one’s feet and kick the towel away while shouting “fags and suckers to the corner!”).

Since the early 2000s, the prison administration has known perfectly well who grypses and who does not, and when selecting cell assignments it took into account both this knowledge and the physical and personality traits of the inmates. In cases of disagreement between cellmates, it was enough to report the issue to a case officer to change cells without major difficulty. This applied both to grypsmen and to all other prisoners. Thus, another decision-making problem disappeared – one that in Kamiński’s time had been of enormous importance: what actions to take in order to leave an unwanted cell, including costly self-harm (Kamiński, 2004a).

The ban on admitting those convicted of pedophilia remained in force, but for many inmates membership no longer carried prestige. Since communism fell in 1989, communists practically disappeared and few inmates would declare such an affiliation. Personally, during my entire stay I did not encounter any prosecutors; however, I did meet three former police officers, and

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with author.

<sup>4</sup> The neologism “to gryps” is modeled on the Polish verb “grypsować” meaning ‘to participate in the grypsmen subculture.’

two of them were grypsmen. This therefore no longer constituted an obstacle to being accepted into the group.

After the fall of communism, the importance of entry slowly diminished. In 2025, it was enough for a newcomer to simply declare a wish to become a grypsman.

### **Initiation games**

The most critical decisions for a newcomer came during two initiation tests: *przecwielanie* (attempt of sexual humiliation) and *chrzest* (initiation rite). *Przecwielanie* was a psychologically devastating ordeal designed to test resilience and possible homosexual tendencies. All grypsmen in the cell participated, dividing roles strategically. For a period, the newcomer was treated with hostility: his movements around the cell were restricted, degrading comments were made about his mother or sister, and during visits to the sanitary corner he might have a burning newspaper or jam thrown on his head. Questions about this treatment were dismissed. Over time, the newcomer became convinced that he would soon be beaten or raped which would lead to extreme stress and sleeplessness. At this point, another grypsman, who had remained in the background, stepped in for the final test. Late at night, leaning from the upper bunk, he offered a deal: "I'll make sure this ends tomorrow morning, but you must do something for me – you have to satisfy me orally." Accepting this proposition automatically condemned the newcomer to the caste of fags. The only correct decision was firm refusal, which allowed the newcomer to continue the *Ameryka* probationary period (Kamiński, 2006).

Failing the *chrzest* test did not carry such dramatic consequences, but it did result in relegation to the caste of suckers. Interestingly, *chrzest* could only be "failed" in one way: by refusing to participate (something the newcomer was never told). The entire test was an elaborate bluff. First, an executioner figure was chosen who would usually be the strongest inmate, who maintained an intimidating presence. Each day, he prepared the "carrot" (*marchewa*), a towel tied into knots and soaked in water which supposedly to be used as a torture device. The newcomer was told exaggerated stories about the devastating damage such blows could cause (broken bones or even death) and was urged to quit before the test began by accepting the safer status of sucker. These persuasions were often effective, and many newcomers never discovered the reality: the test consisted only of a few symbolic strikes with the towel which left the candidate more wet than hurt. Only those who made the right decision (to proceed with the test) ever learned the truth (Kamiński, 2006).

The *Ameryka* probation also included many covert tests. The newcomer was unaware he was being evaluated. It also included *gierki* (games), more or less sophisticated tests of intelligence, wit, or character. Altogether, dozens of correct decisions were required if the newcomer wanted to successfully complete the probation and become a *grypsman*. *Ameryka* culminated in weeks of exhausting training in *bajera*, which also served as a vehicle for transmitting the entire *grypsowanie* code (Kamiński, 2006).

By 2025, the requirements for newcomers had diminished significantly. *Przecwielanie*, *chrzest*, and *gierki* had disappeared. The decision to join *grypsmen* carried no risk of failure. Instruction in *bajera* and the code, provided by “teachers,” was also much weaker than in 1985. Norms of solidarity and mutual assistance (see: Kamiński, 2006, p. 100) had weakened, making the decision to join less obvious. As reflected in the membership proportions discussed in the introduction, by 2025 far fewer inmates chose to join *grypsmen* than in 1985 (Miszewski, 2022). According to my observations, it was precisely the sharply declining number of *grypsmen* that led to a serious weakening of the requirements imposed on new entrants. In practice, a mere declaration that the newcomer simply wished to join the group was sufficient. No attention was paid anymore to physical strength, psychological resilience, or the length of the sentence. I myself witnessed a situation in which a young boy was admitted into the subculture even though he had come to prison for only six days to serve a substitute sentence for failure to pay a fine. He was weak and helpless, repeatedly made serious mistakes, and such a short sentence certainly did not allow him to become thoroughly familiar with the rules of *grypsowanie*. This did not escape the notice of other prisoners and certainly did not encourage the subculture to attract new members (Miszewski 2004). This is consistent with the later research findings of Szczepanik (2019): nowadays, *grypsowanie* is also adopted by those who feel very insecure in prison, who feel weak and threatened. Joining those who practice *grypsowanie* has one main purpose for them – to become part of a group that will protect them.

## **Self-Harm**

Kamiński (2006) identifies a number of techniques developed by inmates in 1985 to engage in self-harm. Self-harm, or self-injury, was among the most spectacular and unusual phenomena in Polish prisons. Inmates developed ingenious techniques for swallowing metal objects – or simulating such acts – often by attaching them to the walls of the esophagus or stomach in ways that required surgical intervention. Other methods included faking suicide by hanging, pouring boiling water on one’s legs, injecting harmful substances into muscles, inserting needles into

eyes or nails into foreheads, cutting veins, and many others. Knowledge of these self-harm techniques was both precious and secret, and those who mastered them enjoyed higher status within the prison hierarchy.

The most significant benefits motivating inmates to engage in self-harm included:

- The possibility of conditional release or temporary suspension of a sentence which was encouraged by the high costs of prison medical treatment;
- Exerting pressure on the prosecutor before sentencing. That could result in the suspension of pre-trial detention, reclassification of charges, or suspension of the verdict;
- Escaping from a hostile environment through self-harm (a persecuted sucker or fag could leave a cell, while a grypsman could prevent being placed in an enemy cell);
- The advantages of staying in a prison hospital cell, which was more comfortable, or transfer to an outside hospital, often with a view to escape; and
- Meetings through coordinated acts of self-harm. While the system separated accomplices before trial, it was not sophisticated enough to prevent their meeting when inmates were transported to prison hospitals for a more serious medical treatment. The option of coordinated self-harm gave accomplices the chance to coordinate testimonies.
- Coordination through simultaneous acts of self-harm also allowed leaders of grypsmen from different prisons to meet and discuss important subcultural matters (Kamiński, 2006, pp. 219–220).

Self-harm proved partially effective because the prison administration at the time did not recognise these strategic aims. It often assumed the only true motive was the desire to “cause trouble,” even at the cost of one’s health or life (Michalski, & Morawski, 1971, p. 59).

Kamiński provides several examples of games involving self-harm that inmates played in 1985. Here are four spectacular examples:

- “The Frenchman” was a thief specialising in robbing actresses, singers, and foreigners visiting communist Warsaw who feigned Parkinson’s disease in hopes of early release. Initially, he refused a medical examination and claimed no changes in his functioning. Eventually, he was examined by prison doctors. For months, he convincingly imitated all symptoms, in front of fellow inmates and, crucially, the staff. He was examined by prison doctors, who referred him to outside specialists. According to Kamiński, these doctors must have cooperated with him, since the illness had been carefully chosen (where there were no laboratory tests to detect it at the time). Supported by medical opinions, his convincing performance allowed him to leave prison after less than five years of a nine-year sentence.

- “Devil” was a mildly intellectually disabled grypsman who had been mocked by fellow members of his group in a previous cell. Fearing demotion to the caste of suckers, he deliberately scalded both legs after being moved to another cell. He justified it as an act of “solidarity with all grypsmen.” Although his action was widely considered pointless, others respected him his toughness and refrained from tormenting him (which was the true goal of his action). By this gesture, he signaled that there were limits to mocking him and that he was a full-fledged grypsman, willing to pay a high price to defend his status.
- Wojtek and Jacek were the leaders of a gang that robbed cars and gas stations. With their crimes easy to prove, they adopted a different “line of defense.” Aware that delaying the trial and increasing costs for the prosecutor might lead to a shorter or suspended sentence, they devised a strategy of rotating self-harm to cancel hearings. Their plan worked. Initially, the prosecutor demanded 12–13 years, but after the third cancelled trial they signaled readiness for a plea deal. They confessed and expressed remorse, which resulted in an eight-year sentence. Their next step was to attend prison school and maintain exemplary behavior, which as juveniles at the time of the crimes would make them eligible for parole after four years. Thus, their well-calculated strategy had the potential to reduce their stay from over a decade to only four years (Kamiński, 2006).
- The riskiest game was *wyhuśtanie* (the simulation of hanging), described to Kamiński by his cellmate Tomek and others. Kamiński notes that only the desperate attempted it. The game involved staging a real suicide attempt, with a trusted accomplice cutting the rope at a predetermined moment before irreversible brain damage occurred. The danger was obvious as timing was not always precise. Survivors were treated with extreme caution by prison staff. Even if their intent was doubted, officials feared further trouble if they should they repeat the attempt. So, the risk-taking inmates were afforded significant concessions (Kamiński, 2006).

By 2025, many parameters of self-harm games had changed dramatically, making the expected outcomes less profitable – or even imposing a net cost on the decision-makers. These changes can be grouped into three broad categories:

1. **More effective administrative tools.** The prison administration developed or received physical, legal, and intellectual tools to deal with self-harm more effectively. They had finally learned to distinguish between emotional self-harm (committed under strong agitation) and instrumental self-harm (carried out with specific goals in mind). The former was not punished, but the latter was. Beyond disciplinary sanctions, inmates were

billed for the medical procedures (such as the removal of swallowed objects). In order to remove a swallowed object, the prisoner was transported for surgery to a civilian hospital outside the prison system. Costs were not optimized by attempting non-surgical removal by the prison health service, since the costs were borne by the prisoner anyway. This introduced substantial additional cost to self-harm. The rewards were reduced as well. Self-harm no longer helped in obtaining parole or sentence suspension; in fact, it often harmed one's chances. Prosecutors were no longer deceived by such tactics. By 2025, an inmate wishing to change cells could simply request it from a supervisor, making certain elaborate acts of self-harm unnecessary (Szymanowska, & Migdał, 2015; Przybyliński, & Krause, 2017).

2. **Improvement in living standards.** The living standards in prisons had improved substantially since the 1980s, so hospital cells no longer offered significant advantages. A modern IT system tracked every inmate's movements, ensuring that accomplices were never placed together. Subcultural leaders had become too comfortable and unwilling to make personal sacrifices; they would certainly not engage in self-harm for the sake of the group, particularly given their awareness of the subculture's decline (Miszewski, 2016, 2022).
3. **Advances in technology.** A modern IT system traced every inmate's movements, ensuring that accomplices were never placed together. As a result, conducting simultaneous acts of self-harm lost its purpose. Moreover, the widespread presence of covert cell phones among inmates allowed for far less costly coordination of testimonies between accomplices or subcultural leaders.

The lower benefits and increased costs of self-harm effectively reduced the frequency of such acts in 2025. In 2025, out of all cases described above, Wojtek and Jacek would have achieved nothing through self-harm. Their trials could certainly also have been delayed, but this would no longer have resulted in a reduction of the sentence and might even have led to its aggravation if the court had deemed their actions particularly burdensome and intended to obstruct the proceedings. In such cases, the hearing may be held via video connection or even without the presence of the defendant. Wojtek and Jacek would most likely have been charged with the costs of treatment, and if they were unable to cover them, an additional period of substitute custodial detention would have been added to their prison sentence, proportional to the cost of the treatment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This information comes from informal conversations with prison service officers.

“Devil” likely would not have taken such a desperate step, as the subculture’s prestige and the severity of punishments for outliers had eroded. In case of cruel harassment by cellmates, he would be also able to ask the administration for a transfer.

The “Frenchman’s” simulation, however, could still succeed although his chances of success would be substantially lower. According to Mayo Clinic, while substantial progress has been made since 1985, there is still no definitive test that could detect Parkinson’s disease.<sup>6</sup> In the 2020s doctors would still be motivated by potential financial gains (bribery). However, given the substantial rise in the physicians' relative income comparing to 1985, the likelihood of finding a physician willing to take the risk of faking documentation would have been lower.

As for *wyhuśtanie*, fewer inmates would attempt it. Most potential suiciders would prefer to serve a few extra years in relatively tolerable conditions rather than risk disability or death. Tomek, interviewed by Kamiński, was cut down too late which resulted in partial paralysis and possible lifelong use of a wheelchair. While he was successful in getting released, the price he paid would have been considered too high in 2025.

By 2025, the higher costs and lower benefits caused self-harm to practically disappear. Inmates had very limited knowledge of self-harm secret techniques, much lower than in 1985. They were more reluctant to endure the pain and sacrifice associated with such acts, such as swallowing objects. They also knew of their low effectiveness and high costs. As a result, they rarely resorted to self-harm (Kamiński, & Miszewski, 2025). Kamiński (2006) reported that practically all inmates considered self-harm or at least fantasized about it. In 2000, I personally encountered threats of self-harm only twice; both cases concerned the transport of prisoners (one prisoner wanted to be transferred out of a given prison but the administration refused; the other refused to leave a transit cell and be placed in the appropriate wing because he did not want to serve his sentence in that prison and wanted to be transported further; in both cases, the prisoners considered committing self-harm as a means of exerting pressure on the administration). According to statistics, the number of self-harm incidents in 1989 amounted to 1,673; in 1992 it increased to 3,585, after which it began to decline steadily over subsequent years – to 958 cases in 1999, 730 in 2004 (Biuro Informacji i Statystyki, 2006: p. 59), 433 in 2011, 215 in 2015, 142 in 2020, and 141 in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

## Rewards, punishment, and rehabilitation

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<sup>6</sup> Mayo Clinic, Available form: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/parkinsons-disease/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20376062>

<sup>7</sup> *Statystyki roczne Służby Więziennej, za lata 1997–2024*, Available form: <https://sw.gov.pl/strona/statystyka>

In 1985, good inmate behavior was enforced by the system but not well-rewarded. It was expected as self-evident. Among the smallish rewards were additional coupons for food packages. Any violation of prison rules, even the tiniest, was punished. Paradoxically, this meant that in the absence of rewards, inmates attached less significance to punishments. In other words, in the “carrot-and-stick” system, the carrot was missing. Good behavior and efficient work did not automatically lead to the most desired privileges, such as temporary leaves or parole. Kamiński cites only a handful of individual examples of successful “games” of “appearing rehabilitated” (Kamiński, 2021, 2022).

Temporary leaves and parole could certainly be obtained if the inmate agreed to act as an informant. However, the severe informal punishments for being exposed, such as *przecwelenie*, which involved sexual humiliation leading to being forcibly degraded into the lowest caste subject to sexual exploitation (Kamiński, 2006). The additional widespread disdain for informing made only a few to choose such cooperation (Miszewski, & Piotrowski, 2022). Moreover, punishment by the administration often raised an inmate’s standing among peers by adding prestige. Thus, in deciding how to behave, inmates were more concerned with not provoking other inmates than with avoiding sanctions from the administration.

By 2025, the situation had fundamentally changed. Good behaviour and progress in rehabilitation contributed directly to earlier release. The prison administration, as previously noted, began to widely use temporary leaves and parole (Moczydłowski, 1994). Alcohol and drug therapies, permission to work outside the prison, vocational courses, training programs, and participation in rehabilitation initiatives became increasingly common. By returning to the carrot-and-stick model, the carrot was made bigger, while the stick was gradually withdrawn. In 1989, the use of informants was discontinued (Nyzio, 2020). As the prison subculture had greatly weakened, inmates based their key decisions more on the reaction of the prison administration rather than on their peers.

The increased importance of rehabilitation and the emergence of substantial rewards created an entirely new category of games and decision-making problems for inmates. An inmate who actively seeks to maximize the benefits of rehabilitation typically focuses on what Renata Szczepanik (forthcoming) calls “collecting points.” The value of such points is often subject to interpretation by the prison staff, since the very notion of “rehabilitation” remains largely subjective. Points may be gained through cooperation with researchers, maintaining good relations with priests or therapists, or completing educational programs. The most dangerous potential source of negative points lies in relationships with other inmates who

display antagonism toward the administration. Szczepanik argues that the fear of losing “points” strongly influences inmates’ decisions regarding participation in prison coalitions.

Inmates employ a range of strategies designed to soften the attitudes of prison personnel or to convince them that they are suitable candidates for rehabilitation. Among these general strategies, Szczepanik identifies:

- portraying oneself as a victim of the system,
- pretending to be an accidental or minor offender who caused minimal social harm,
- invoking family-related motives such as the desire to ensure material stability, care for the elderly, the sick, or children, or to obtain education,
- simulating religious transformation and presenting oneself as a “new person,” and
- attributing criminal behavior to illness or other factors beyond one’s control.

In all these games and broad strategies, inmates engage in careful calculation, attempting to decode the expectations of the prison staff and to fulfill them (Szczepanik, forthcoming).

## **Coalitions**

In 1985, the status of a grypsman was highly valued. It was partly because it provided protection from the group. Grypsmen scrupulously followed at the time the principles of solidarity and assistance. It required them to help a fellow member attacked by other castes or by prison staff, to support those placed in solitary confinement, and to assist members hospitalised in prison. These principles were among the main reasons why newly arrived inmates chose to join the grypsmen.

As in any group, especially one with many members, internal tensions and rivalries existed. To strengthen their position within the group, grypsmen formed coalitions that competed with each other. The aim was not only to achieve leadership but also to avoid degradation. A key task for each inmate, therefore, was to decide which coalition to join.

Similar coalitions, teahouses (herbaciarnie), were formed for the distribution of goods. When an inmate received a food parcel from family (sometimes weighing up to five kilograms) it was impossible to consume it all alone (cells lacked refrigerators, so food could not be stored). Allowing food to spoil was strongly frowned upon, so sharing was the best option. To avoid sharing with random grypsman and to secure reciprocity when the other received a parcel, one had to join such coalitions strategically. This may seem to involve simple decisions, but as Kamiński shows, coalition games were complex. Much could be gained or lost. The stakes were

not only food but also one's reputation. A deceived member could be seen as weak, possibly destined for exclusion from the subculture (Kamiński, 2006).

The prison administration was unable to guarantee inmates' safety. There were too many prisoners (as prisons under the PRL were permanently overcrowded) and understaffed (Nyzio, 2020). Moreover, the administration often had little interest in maintaining order. There are documented cases of deliberately placing hostile groups or castes together in a cell to provoke conflict and degradation (Szaskiewicz, 1997).

By 2025, the rules of *grypsowanie* had eroded significantly. Solidarity and mutual aid had weakened, as had other principles. Degradation to the status of a sucker was no longer feared, as one could always be reinstated (*podniesienie*) to the rank of grypsman by paying the group leaders (Miszewski, 2005a). The institution of *podniesienie* existed already in 1985 but was rarely used and accompanied by high requirements (Kamiński, 2006). In 2025, prisons were no longer overcrowded, and staff numbers had significantly increased. The prison administration was now legally obliged to ensure the safety of each inmate and made every effort to place prisoners in cells with appropriate conditions. The lowering of attack threats from other inmates, lower density, and better protection from the administration diminished the inmates' incentives to form protective coalitions. Another side effect was that far fewer newly arrived inmates chose to join the grypsmen in 2025 (Miszewski, 2022).

Similarly, consumer goods had become widely available and could be purchased in sufficient quantities at the prison commissary, eliminating the need for coalitions to distribute them. Moreover, tea, which in the 1985 prison was illegal and strong tea infusion functioned as a light drug in inmates' evening libations, was legalized. Regular meals often involved tea and various brands of tea were typically available in the prison commissary. Many inmates were permitted to have electric kettles or heaters in their cells. The incentives for creating consumption- and drinking-coalition diminished.

On the other hand, while old-type coalitions mostly vanished, new coalitions appeared that were mostly motivated by exploiting rehabilitation opportunities and "scoring points." As has already been shown earlier, recidivist prisoners, wishing to be perceived by the prison service as rehabilitated, had to know which relationships to emphasize and which to avoid or conceal from the evaluating staff. Relationships with other inmates who adopt an antagonistic stance toward staff and openly declare ties to the criminal milieu are harmful to the image of a rehabilitated person. By contrast, it is beneficial to emphasize relationships with other prisoners who help strengthen the image of a rehabilitated individual (Szczepanik, 2018; Kacprzak, forthcoming).

Coalitions with contacts in the free world have also become increasingly important. As Szczepanik further notes, recidivists locate the credibility of their efforts to gain rehabilitation points in the appropriately acquired or reconstructed environmental support base outside prison. The characteristics of this environment are crucial: it must be entirely free of criminogenic stigmas. Recidivists therefore emphasize the strong rehabilitative and preventive qualities of their new social support base. The social capital from which they will draw after release from prison, and which will allow them to properly organize their lives, has been accumulated through women (partners, mothers, sisters with no connection to the criminal world). Relationships with such women are important assets in gaining rehabilitation points. Thanks to them, recidivists take care of their self-presentation as individuals who have someone and somewhere to return to, who are not and will not be alone in their struggles after release (Szczepanik, forthcoming).

My observations also show that forming a coalition with someone who can secure proof of employment after release from prison is extremely valuable. The most valuable such certificate was issued by an employer for whom the prisoner had worked while serving the sentence, but one obtained “from anywhere” could also prove helpful. If the penitentiary court accepted such a certificate as credible, it sometimes granted the convicted person early conditional release on that basis (Miszewski, 2005b).

## **Conclusions**

The transformation of Polish prisons between 1985 and 2025 represents a shift from a system that compelled hyperrational, survival-oriented decision-making to one in which predictable administrative and rehabilitative mechanisms largely determine inmate behavior. In the late communist era, the prison environment forced inmates to calculate every move within a dense web of informal hierarchies, punishments, and rewards. Under those conditions, hyperrationality was not merely a cognitive trait but a necessity for survival. Decisions about caste affiliation, coalition formation, or engagement in self-harm were governed by strategic logic – games of risk, bluff, and endurance that reflected the scarcity, violence, and arbitrariness of the totalitarian penal order.

By contrast, the contemporary penitentiary system has substantially reduced the role of such subcultural games. The decline of the grypsmen code, the disappearance of initiation rituals, and the collapse of self-harm as an effective strategy all illustrate how institutional reforms, improved living standards, and technological advances have rationalized prison life. Inmates

today face fewer existential threats and more structured incentives. Their decisions increasingly revolve around navigating the formal reward system – collecting rehabilitation “points,” maintaining cooperative relations with staff, and demonstrating progress that may yield parole or privileges. The balance between deprivation and importation factors has been reconfigured: deprivation has lessened through human-rights-based reforms, while importation now includes values of compliance, self-presentation, and adaptation to bureaucratic norms.

However, voices have recently emerged suggesting that the former subculture may have a chance to revive. This would supposedly occur due to the growing number of prisoners from Ukraine and Georgia in Polish prisons, who follow the principles of the old Russian prison subculture, from which the Polish *grypsera* borrowed a great deal (see: Kamiński, forthcoming). For now, however, the number of inmates from these countries is not large enough for them to play any significant role in this regard. In addition, deportation policy has recently tightened, meaning that a considerable portion of these convicts leave Poland immediately after sentencing. In any case, the first studies on this topic are only now being prepared and have not yet been published.

The logic of prisoner rationality has thus evolved. The inmate of 1985 operated under conditions of uncertainty, coercion, and informal dominance, while the inmate of 2025 functions within a bureaucratic, monitored, and incentivized framework. Strategic reasoning has not disappeared – it has been redirected from the realm of survival to the realm of simulation and impression management. This transition aligns with the observations of Crewe (2009), who argues that contemporary “prisoner society” is increasingly shaped by more complex forms of adaptation and a “softer,” but more pervasive, bureaucratic power that demands psychological and moral alignment from the prisoner. In this sense, the hyperrational prisoner has not been replaced by an irrational one but by a bureaucratically rational actor, optimizing outcomes within the constraints of institutional predictability. The Polish prison has moved from a world of “games prisoners play among themselves” to one where the rules are largely set, monitored, and rewarded by the state itself – a transformation that mirrors the broader trajectory of Poland’s shift from authoritarian control to a rule-of-law democracy.

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