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# Must the Shit Hit the Fan Before Anyone Responds? Response-Activating Texts as Catalysts for Organisational Responsiveness

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**Received:** 6 April 2026 | **Revised:** 22 May 2026 | **Accepted:** 25 May 2026

**Funding:** University College of Norwegian Correctional Service; The Norwegian Police University College

**Keywords:** information flow | organisational response | prison | soft information

## ABSTRACT

The article examines how 'soft' information functions in rational organisations that emphasise hard information, and how this affects safety. Drawing on fieldwork in a high-security prison, we analyse how frontline personnel interpret soft information about potential disturbances. We identify three coexisting institutional logics shaping these interpretations: precaution, laissez-faire and legality. Based on these logics, we find a tension between anticipation and verification in organisational responses, where verification tends to dominate. Verified information drives formal response and information must typically conform to the format of an incident report to be considered valid by decision-makers. As a result, incidents often need to materialise before formal action is taken. We introduce the concept of 'response-activating text' to describe documents that trigger organisational action. The study highlights how historically rooted legal norms shape the handling of soft information, raising the question of whether the dominance of legal logic may come at the expense of safety.

## 1 | Introduction

> *How much shit actually has to hit the fan before you do something? Is it really impossible to do a bit of preventative work here?'*
>
> (Prison officer)

Soft information comprises informal and ambiguous knowledge that is context-dependent and not easily codified or measured (Bertomeu and Marinovic 2016; Mintzberg 1994; Stinchcombe 1990). The ability to accurately interpret these subtle, ambiguous and tacit indicators of danger is essential to prevent organisational incidents (Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Vaughan 1996; Westrum 1993, 2014). However, the subtle features of such information render it challenging to measure and difficult to integrate into rational systems, meaning soft information is easily overshadowed by more visible, clear and concrete information (Almklov et al. 2014; Dekker 2014; Mintzberg 1994; Perin 2005). Hence, this article seeks to examine how soft information is handled during normal operations to learn about the processes informing organisational responses to upcoming disturbances. This is important because many incidents are grounded in normal work processes (Bourrier 2002; Hollnagel et al. 2015).

The research discussed here is based on 5 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a high-security prison in Norway, which presents an interesting combination of machine bureaucracy, clear legislative logic and complex human behaviour, making it a compelling setting for investigating how soft information operates within rational organisations. Across frontline settings, soft information concerning emerging disturbances often takes the form of 'hunches'. In prisons, these

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hunches typically stem from subtle shifts in prisoners' body language or social interactions, and noticing such cues is essential for proactive safety across occupations (Midtlyng 2024; Sørensen 2023; Sørensen et al. 2024).

This article addresses the following question: How is soft information concerning possible disturbances interpreted and acted upon by frontline personnel in a prison organisation? The way such information is interpreted in organisations is important because failure to capture it may mean that the indicators of when action is required are inaccurate (Meadows 1998). This can cause serious problems, as identified following accidents in several organisations (Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Vaughan 1996). While production is central to many private organisations and can involve trade-offs with safety, this article focuses how legislation performs a similar structuring function in public organisations, shaping frontline work, interpretation of information and organisational responsiveness. By analysing soft information through different logics, this article examines in depth how meaning and response are produced in practice.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we describe the context of Norwegian high-security prisons. Next, we present the information perspective on safety, which represents the theoretical framework for this article, including our analytical framework of institutional logics. We then explain the data and methods used in the research. Finally, we present and analyse the results, discuss those results in light of the introduced theory and provide a short conclusion.

## 2 | Context: Norwegian High-Security Prisons

A Northern European country with 5.4 million residents, Norway has a total prison capacity of around 3600 inmates, approximately 70% of whom are in high-security facilities (Norwegian Correctional Service 2026). While Norway's prison system emphasises rehabilitation and humane treatment (Pratt 2007), these ideals exist alongside strong security, control and procedural consistency imperatives, particularly in high-security prisons, where prisoners serve their sentences under relatively strict regimes. Norwegian prison staff exhibit a clear 'the governors govern' approach (Skarbek 2020), resulting in them being hands-on and working strictly 'by the book' (Liebling et al. 2021).

Safety and security are formal values and form a strategic area within the NCS. Most Norwegian high-security prisons are structured as machine bureaucracies, meaning they are characterised by formal reporting systems, rules, procedures and a clear chain of command (Mintzberg 1983; Sørensen 2017; Sørensen and Kruke 2022), which are intended to maintain safety and security during both normal operations and crises. Thus, while soft information is mostly related to humans—rendering the cues ambiguous and difficult to interpret—the interpretation of it occurs within clearly rational organisational frameworks.

In accordance with Douglas et al. (1980) and Boin and Rattray (2004), we define a prison disturbance as a single or collective episode of prisoner behaviour that disrupts the normal functioning of the prison via different modes of resistance, interrupting institutional routine and control, which can involve threats and violence to prisoners, staff or society. The significance of detecting and avoiding prison disturbances is strongly related to the social role of the NCS that supports dynamic security, enabling prison officers to assess such situations and adapt their responses via close interactions with inmates (Sørensen et al. 2024).

However, serious disturbances, including violence and murder, do occur in Norway's high-security prisons. The strong social bonds and physical proximity in prisons, combined with the relatively high officer-to-inmate ratio (Aebi et al. 2023, 21), expose prison officers to significant risks, and a small action is sufficient to inflict considerable harm (Midtlyng 2025). Indeed, seven murders have occurred within the NCS since 1980, involving officers, inmates and civilians, in addition to hostage situations, escapes, cell fires and suicides (Sørensen 2023). Exposure to violence and harassment is widespread within the prison system. Rambøll Management Consulting (2023) reports that 55% of prison staff experienced physical violence, 36% received unwanted sexual attention, 66% suffered harassment and 55% were subject to attempted exploitation. Verbal abuse is particularly prevalent, with 70% of prison staff reporting receiving threats. Moreover, despite declining prisoner numbers, threats and assaults against prison officers have increased, with 1237 incidents reported in 2023 among a prisoner population of only around 3000 (Sygit-Kowalkowska et al. forthcoming). Officers seek to avoid these disturbances by noticing soft information while on duty.

There are myriad perspectives among Norwegian prison staff, which is unsurprising given the range of professions that work in prisons. The uniformed staff comprise prison officers, operational senior officers, administrative senior officers, inspectors and prison governors. Among these groups, prison officers work on the 'shop floor' in direct contact with prisoners, meaning they are embedded in the everyday life of the prison, often performing experience-based assessments of prisoners' states, behaviours and relational dynamics. By contrast, senior managers are typically more removed from daily interactions, working at a greater distance from prisoners but still supervising daily work in the prison. In Norwegian prisons, senior officers have authority to make formal decisions concerning ongoing work. Inspectors and prison governors are administrative staff who usually work at a distance from the prison wings. In addition, several other occupational groups work in prisons, ranging from legal advisors to health professionals.

Furthermore, while safety and security are formal core values in prisons, these concepts can be understood in different ways. For instance, safety work, as a set of activities, is distinct and often performed for purposes other than operational safety as an outcome (Rae and Provan 2019). This diversity in terms of concepts, professional backgrounds and organisational roles within prisons creates useful conditions for exploring competing institutional logics and how such logics influence safety.

## 3 | Soft Signals, Hard Systems: Marginalisation of Soft Information in Rational Organisations

An organisation is a social system constructed to perform particular tasks and realise particular goals (Etzioni 1964). In



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bureaucratic organisations, the principle of rationality is inherent. Weber (1997) lists the strengths of bureaucracy as precision, speed, clarity, regularity, reliability and efficiency, which are realised by distributing tasks in a hierarchy that includes monitoring and detailed rules. Yet, despite offering these advantages, the rationality of bureaucracies is associated with a number of notable challenges. For instance, the bureaucratic mode of operation seen in prisons is poorly suited to translating vague and conflicting goals into concrete actions (Boin 1998), particularly when addressing what is considered an acceptable risk in different situations (Bryans 2012). Hence, Mintzberg (1983) criticises machine bureaucracies for being unsuitable to address complex or fast-changing situations and for poorly handling informal information (Dekker 2014).

Information processing lies at the core of any organisational structure, and problems with the flow of information often contribute to unwanted events, including accidents, disasters and incidents. The existence of 'incubation periods' prior to accidents has been identified, making it possible to notice problems and, consequently, to stop or prevent accidents (Turner and Pidgeon 1997). Thus, the development of disasters should be viewed as involving organisational processes rather than events (Roux-Dufort 2007; Turner and Pidgeon 1997). In fact, studies highlight the importance of information flow for safety within organisations and show how barriers to this flow can result in accidents and other unwanted events (Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Vaughan 1996). This indicates that different forms of structural and cultural barriers render it difficult to make accurate sense of certain information.

Information within organisations can be broadly categorised as hard or soft based on its nature and how it is processed (Mintzberg 1994). The key difference between these two kinds of information concerns formality and measurability. Hard information refers to formal, structured and quantifiable data, including official reports, documented records and measurable facts that are easily verifiable. Thus, hard information is typically codified within organisational systems and forms the primary basis for formal decision-making and accountability. Soft information is informal, tacit and often qualitative. It exists implicitly and is often embedded in interpersonal interactions and experience. Thus, it encompasses ambiguous observations, intuitive judgments and relational knowledge that may not be systematically recorded. Moreover, soft information is usually context-dependent and requires interpretation, making it difficult to capture and communicate within rigid bureaucratic systems.

These differences imply that the value of hard information has already been verified, whereas soft information facilitates forecasting (Bertomeu and Marinovic 2016). Indeed, soft information is core information that provides early indications of what will happen in the future (Stinchcombe 1990, 2). Despite being less tangible than hard information, soft information is critical for detecting weak signals, especially in environments where not all relevant factors can be quantified. Westrum (1993) argues that effective information flow depends on recognising and acting on relevant information wherever it arises within the system, regardless of its hierarchical position or formal role.

Yet soft information is often marginalised and ignored within organisations. Technologically complex organisations tend to cling to calculated logics, relying on quantitative data, measurements and formalised models as the primary basis for decision-making (Perin 2005; Vaughan 1996). Among the common barriers facing soft information are rigid hierarchies (Perin 2005; Turner and Pidgeon 1997), 'communication silos' (Turner and Pidgeon 1997) and lack of openness to warnings (Perin 2005; Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Vaughan 1996). Moreover, signals of impending disaster are often misinterpreted or underestimated. Over-reliance on hard information can form barriers that prevent essential information from reaching decision-makers or cause decision-makers to inaccurately judge important information. This can lead to inadequate response strategies. These problems can be perceived as tensions among logics within organisations. To capture the wider frameworks of meaning regarding these logics, we will now discuss the concept of institutional logics.

### 3.1 | How Institutional Logics Shape Interpretations of Information

Institutional logics are socially constructed belief systems that direct actors' attention, shape what is considered appropriate action and provide meaning to organisational practices (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012). They offer both symbolic and material frames for reasoning and decision-making within institutional fields. Multiple logics coexist within organisations and, as each has its own set of values and expectations, this coexistence often leads to tensions. This is especially true when logics suggest conflicting interpretations of situations or divergent actions.

By applying the concept of institutional logics, it is possible to shift attention away from individual preferences or organisational 'failures' and situate conflict within broader systems of meaning. Rather than assuming unitary rationality, this framework highlights how actors may be embedded within different institutional orders, drawing on distinct assumptions regarding what constitutes a 'problem', what kinds of information are credible and what responses are appropriate. Thus, the concept of institutional logics provides a framework for understanding why joint sensemaking concerning risk is often challenging within organisations.

This has been central to prior safety-related research, even if the concept of institutional logics is not typically applied. Among the findings of safety research relevant to institutional logics are the tension between competing priorities, such as production versus safety (Perin 2005; Rasmussen 1997; Reason 1997; Vaughan 1996), and the parallel existence of management and real-time logics in operational work (Almklov and Antonsen 2014; Perin 2005; Vaughan 1996). Prior research has examined such tensions between competing priorities and has generally demonstrated the importance of soft information for organisational safety, often based on hindsight studies. However, there is limited empirical insight into how frontline personnel in highly regulated public organisations make sense of ambiguous early signals as part of their everyday work. We lack knowledge of how different logics shape what counts as credible



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information and legitimate action in everyday work in different organisational contexts.

Building on institutional logics theory, we analyse how organisational actors differently interpret and act upon soft information as well as the consequences this may have for safety and security. Analysing organisational life through the lens of competing institutional logics allows us to see how actors navigate ambiguity, negotiate meaning and justify actions in ways that are shaped by their institutional environments (Thornton et al. 2012). This perspective also allows for exploration of the dynamics of dominance and adaptation between logics over time.

## 4 | Data and Methods

This research uses ethnographic methods to determine how soft information is handled during normal operations through studying frontline personnel's interpretations of such information in a prison organisation. Thus, the data are not observations of disturbances and incidents; rather, based on the idea of incubation (Turner and Pidgeon 1997), this article examines how soft information about *possible* disturbances is interpreted during normal operations. The data are drawn from routine, everyday situations rather than rare or high-severity events. It is in everyday situations that interpretations of soft information—which is tacit, implicit and ambiguous—can be studied.

Soft information was not initially the focus of this study, which originally had the broader aim of investigating how safety and security are maintained in frontline work. During the initial data analysis, however, the interrelations among potential cues, their interpretations and the subsequent organisational responses were identified as a central analytical theme. Labelling something 'soft information' is easiest in hindsight. Before an incident occurs, related information may simply be assumptions. Managing safety necessarily relies on indirect measures aimed at factors that might influence safety (Almklov 2018). Hence, soft information was operationalised as any indication or information that could alert the prison to possible disturbances, including knowledge about prisoners' behaviours, statements or interactions that could signal emerging risks.

### 4.1 | Research Context

The focal prison comprises multiple wings, each supervised by officers responsible for daily operations. It is considered large by Norwegian standards and typically accommodates 100–300 prisoners (Johnsen et al. 2011, 515). To maintain confidentiality, the precise number of prisoners will not be disclosed. This study focuses on prison officers and senior officers, both men and women, aged 21–65 years. The participants have a range of work experience durations, roles and perspectives, providing insight into how different staff members interpret and act on soft information regarding disturbances.

### 4.2 | Fieldwork

The empirical data were collected via ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author between August and December 2018. Due to the qualitative design emphasising in-depth understanding of how soft information is handled during normal operations, the gathered data remain relevant today. Ethnography is a suitable method for studying what participants take for granted (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019), including their interpretations of soft information. The data sources utilised during the fieldwork included participant observations and informal conversations with staff, primarily prison and senior officers. Participant observations, including informal conversations, provide insights into the explicit and tacit assumptions underlying participants' daily work (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). The first author had broad access within the facility, enabling independent observation of activities across prison wings, including standard units and isolation areas. Her participation in training and education sessions for new officers enriched the understanding of institutional practices.

All researchers inevitably influence the processes of data collection and analysis through their prior experiences. In this study, both authors' prior experience as prison officers shaped the research in specific ways, particularly in terms of our sensitivity to contextual nuances and our interpretations of participants' accounts. During data collection, this background also facilitated trust and access in the field. At the same time, this positioned perspective required ongoing reflexive attention.

The first author's prior experience offered several advantages, but also necessitated the use of reflexive strategies to mitigate potential biases, including the use of descriptive questioning and the writing of naïve field notes (Spradley 1980). Approaching the field from a naïve rather than an experienced standpoint was a deliberate strategy to avoid taking familiar practices and assumptions for granted. By describing the prison environment from an outsider's perspective during the initial phase of fieldwork—for example, by detailing the physical setting of a prison unit rather than simply noting that observations took place there—she was able to create greater analytical distance from the setting under study. Adopting a naïve researcher position also encouraged participants, who were aware of her prior experience, to avoid assuming shared understanding and instead provide more detailed explanations of their perspectives and practices. In addition, writing down taken-for-granted assumptions and reflecting on experiences in field notes reflections proved valuable for operationalizing reflexivity in practice.

Reflexivity involves recognising and critically engaging with one's assumptions and potential biases throughout the research process, and this remained an ongoing consideration for both authors, including the second author, who also has experience as a prison officer. Both authors engaged in continuous analytical dialogue to challenge and refine our interpretations. This approach aimed to ensure that our prior experience functioned as a resource while minimising the risk of unexamined bias.

Ethical approval for the fieldwork was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and the research adhered to the requirements of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. Written information on the study was provided to staff and prisoners, and oral consent was obtained from them prior to participation.



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### 4.3 | Analysis

The fieldnotes were written contemporaneously in Norwegian and then translated into English, with minimal adjustments made to ensure clarity. The initial coding involved broad categories used to identify emerging patterns, where soft information was identified as a central analytical theme. This was followed by reflexive thematic analysis of data relevant to this theme (Braun and Clarke 2019). The iterative analytical process included repeated review of the fieldnotes, generation of codes and examination of themes. The coding was semantic and closely aligned with participants' language to reduce the influence of researcher expectations, which was particularly relevant given the authors' background as prison officers (Braun and Clarke 2022; Tjora 2021). The analysis focused on identifying themes related to how soft information regarding disturbances is interpreted and responded to in a prison organisation.

Three key themes were constructed, representing three institutional logics identified in the way frontline personnel interpret soft information. The first theme reflects a *precautionary logic* in which organisational responses are shaped by a low threshold for interpreting even minor cues as potential indicators of risk, prompting early and proactive intervention.

The second theme captures a laissez-faire logic, characterised by limited concern for early warning signs and restraint is considered sensible. Responsibility is framed as avoiding unnecessary intervention in everyday operations and potential disturbances are deliberately allowed to unfold. Maintaining safety is understood as closely tied to observable events and action is deferred until intervention is unavoidable.

The third theme highlights a *legal logic* in which everyday appropriateness and safety are subordinated to legally grounded imperatives, privileging retrospective written records as the primary basis for organisational action and accountability.

Together, these themes demonstrate how different institutional logics shape interpretations of soft information during normal operations in the prison.

## 5 | Results

### 5.1 | Precautionary Logic

> *A red alarm turns on in my head*
>
> (Prison officer)

This theme captures a common logic among prison officers—one that is clearly precautionary in addressing potential risk situations by quickly interpreting occurrences as possible indications of risk. This was expressed by officers, for example, interpreting stones in the prison yard as possible risks (with potential use as weapons) or perceiving suspected drug or alcohol intoxication as a warning sign of aggression and the escalation of conflict, which has been observed to develop into prison disturbances (Sørensen et al. 2026). As one prison officer explained, 'When a prisoner refuses to provide a urine sample, a red alarm turns on in my head. He could be intoxicated, he could be hiding drugs … To me, it's unthinkable to just lock the door and leave without doing something more with the situation'. This idea of a 'red alarm' reflects how possible intoxication can be interpreted as an early signal of a heightened risk of disturbance, where the officer anticipated a loss of control. This signal prompted him to seek more information about what was happening (if the prisoner was intoxicated or keeping drugs in his cell). The officer emphasised that he wanted to *do something* about the situation—that is, to take control over the possibly intoxicated prisoner and the drugs.

Searching tired prisoners who refuse to provide urine samples in the morning and insisting on prisoners repeatedly going through the metal detector are examples of practices that create friction between officers and prisoners. Yet the degree of friction was not relevant. While some prison officers (and managers) interpreted these kinds of responses by prisoners as expressions of tiredness and did not relate them to safety, many officers perceived such responses as indicative of a possible risk that they wanted to avoid. This way of thinking is closely intertwined with the notion of managing risk as the possibility of human activities altering the future (Zinn 2008 4). However, following this logic, a possible negative consequence for safety is treated as an unacceptable risk. Independent of the possibility of the consequence actually occurring, the risk should be managed in line with a 'better safe than sorry' approach. Due to the precautionary focus, many officers were concerned about 'having oversight' of events in the prison. They needed oversight because, according to this logic, all information is interesting and should be taken seriously in active attempts to prevent incidents from happening. This drive for total control—and the experience of lacking it—was common among prison officers. For instance, a prison officer explained how he experienced the prison when first employed there: 'The first thing I saw when I came here was the big yard. I thought, "How am I supposed to have oversight over this?" It didn't get any better when I heard there were only two officers guarding the yard. You are not in full control here'. Such criticism of how the prison is organised and designed was widespread among prison officers, who were largely influenced by a precautionary logic. Due to the structures and organisation of the prison, it was not possible to have the level of oversight they desired.

Criticism was also directed towards what many officers perceived as a reactive approach to safety-related information. One officer put it like this: 'How much shit actually has to hit the fan before you do something? Is it really impossible to do a bit of preventative work here?' This experience—that the prison reacted too late despite having information about upcoming disturbances—was observed repeatedly in the data. Sometimes, officers' information was based on 'hunches'. We know that hunches in operational work are often (albeit not always) based on concrete observations and knowledge of the work environment, allowing officers to detect early warning signals (Midtlyng 2024). Other times, the information is more concrete, based on observations or statements about upcoming incidents. Yet such information often did not trigger a response from those with decision-making authority. An officer who had worked at the prison for several years explained that this was 'somewhat ingrained' there, that something had to happen before anyone reacted. Several officers experienced this as



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posing a threat to staff and prisoner safety. This contrasted with their own logic of precaution, where they quickly responded to anything that could be perceived as a potential risk, regardless of how limited the information was.

For many prison officers, precautionary logic appeared to be a necessary professional logic in a prison environment where their job involves maintaining safety. Norwegian prison officers are trained to develop risk awareness and to preventatively maintain safety with minimal intervention. Prison researchers have determined that 'professional distrust' is institutionalised in the prison setting, where prison officers are 'exclusively looking for faults, lacks and dangers—a kind of risk-sensitive gaze' (Ugelvik 2022, 627). Hence, precautionary logic can be understood as a socially constructed belief system among prison officers, which directs their attention and shapes what they consider to be appropriate action. Research indicates that precaution, as an institutional logic, may be common among frontline personnel responsible for safety (Johansen et al. 2016; Vaughan 1996).

However, not all prison officers followed this line of thinking, and individual officers sometimes shifted between different logics in different situations. Institutional logics are available for individuals as bases for action (Friedland and Alford 1991) and do not equal personal working approaches. There are cultural differences between prisons and prison units, which inevitably shape institutional logics over time. We will return to the influence of local culture when discussing the next theme, which may explain why not all prison officers work based on precautionary logic.

### 5.2 | Laissez Faire Logic

> *The prisoners run a tight internal code in here, and we count on it.*
>
> (Prison officer)

This theme reflects a contrasting interpretation of soft information about possible disturbances among officers and managers, which we conceptualise as a logic of laissez faire ('let do' or 'leave alone'). Officers who work based on this logic exhibit very different views on the need for knowledge about forecasts contained in soft information than those who follow precautionary logic (Bertomeu and Marinovic 2016). Some officers considered what happens between prisoners—and out of officers' sight—to be none of their business. Others, perhaps more moderately, did not perceive it as among their greatest concerns. This understanding seemed to be based on acceptance of not being in total control and not striving to enter the 'black box' of the prisoner community. As an officer explained, 'After all, we have to react if we hear about threats and stuff, but... A lot happens behind the scenes, which we are not aware of [shrug]'.

The quoted officer recognised his responsibility to react to concrete information about what happened in front of him, but in contrast to the precautionary logic, he did not see the need to actively uncover such information. Here, concern seemed to centre on the surface order, meaning that the prison appeared calm and orderly from a governance perspective. Thus, this logic represents a rather indifferent way of thinking about information regarding what is 'simmering' in the prison. When trying to learn more about this implicit logic, we discovered that prior prison managers had introduced explicit policies permitting prisoners some undisturbed time, based on the notion that doing so would promote calmness and order. This indicates a top-down influence of this logic in the prison. In the management literature, laissez faire management refers to a 'hands-off' approach whereby managers allow employees autonomy to make decisions and solve problems with minimal interference (Zheng and Li 2024).

Officers' use of 'strong prisoners' as orderlies further elucidates the laissez faire logic. Orderlies are trusted prisoners selected by staff to perform duties in the unit, meaning they are allowed out of their cells during the day and are responsible for cleaning, food distribution and other tasks. Several officers mentioned being dependent on good relations with strong prisoners to maintain order and get help if conflicts escalate. The aim of maintaining order and accessing help via relationships with orderlies illustrates governance that is strategic but entails *giving away* control to prevent incidents, at least visible ones. While smaller in scale and solely informal, this reflects the approach of prison systems elsewhere. For instance, Skarbek (2020) describes how orderlies are assigned formal tasks related to security work in South American prisons, contrasting with Norway's emphasis on staff governance. Our results show that, despite the formal policy of staff being 'in total control' (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2001), Norway's prison system is influenced by belief patterns similar to those seen in very different prison systems, which influence how prison officers perceive soft information. Officers' statements about being dependent on help from strong prisoners to maintain order indicate this approach to be more systematic and widespread in very large prisons, suggesting how logics are shaped by the physical and structural environment in which actors work and the practical realities they face.

While the laissez faire logic is rarely explicitly advocated, it seems to value satisfied and calm prisoners over 'total control' via staff interventions. The same understanding appears to be common higher up the prison hierarchy, among staff with decision-making authority. Based on observations and statements from several prison officers, anticipating and preventing disturbances are not major focuses among prison management, and this view was grounded in norms about how everyday prison life should ordinarily unfold. Within this logic, surface stability, calmness, and uninterrupted daily routines are treated as indicators of good order, while intervention is understood as something that may unnecessarily disturb an otherwise acceptable state of affairs. These normative expectations form an institutional logic in their own right, shaping perceptions of responsibility and order by privileging restraint and non-intervention unless disruption becomes overt and clearly unavoidable.

Several officers discussed how prisoners 'had to get a beating' before anyone above the prison officer level was interested in hearing about matters. For example, a prison officer explained



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how he once 'knew' that something was brewing, before violence occurred several times and was finally recognised due to staff noticing the prisoner's bruises. This situation echoes the above quote from a prison officer, stating that officers only reacted after they saw concrete evidence. Thus, according to the laissez fair logic, soft information is not of particular interest before it transforms into harder information after disturbances become visible incidents.

This reactive approach appears 'ingrained' in the focal prison. However, as several officers emphasised, this logic offers certain order-related benefits. For instance, while the precautionary logic results in frequent interventions in prisoners' affairs, which may provoke them, avoiding provocations can also be precautionary, despite lacking the element of regaining control. Similar logics of laissez faire in maintaining safety are seen in studies involving police officers, where officers rationalise reluctance to act based on the risk of provoking a breakdown of public order, which would provoke an even more serious risk situation (Bittner 1967; Horlick-Jones 2005). A problem with this safety-related logic is the assumption that nothing will happen if people are not provoked, which is only true in some situations. This reveals a conflict between the precautionary and laissez faire logics, which is more than a conflict between 'doers' and 'bystanders'. It is also a consequence of a complex environment wherein precautionary interventions and 'letting the prisoners do' can lead to safety concerns and a heightened risk of disturbances. It can be difficult to determine which action will lead to which result. However, from the incubation perspective, where small warning signs and anomalies accumulate unnoticed over time (Turner and Pidgeon 1997), a laissez faire logic can challenge the organisation's ability to prevent incidents.

Many officers who followed a precautionary logic had lengthy work experience in other prisons. They often compared what they perceived as 'the local way' of doing things in the focal prison with what they experienced elsewhere. Some officers explained that they tried to prevent incidents by taking small indications of risk seriously, even if they perceived doing so to violate local norms. Yet many officers talked about the need to adjust. As one officer stated, 'You have to try to slide into the local culture. I have had to downscale a lot when it comes to security after starting work here'. Thus, it seems the precautionary logic has a rather fragile position in the prison, where the more surface-oriented laissez faire logic influences organisational responses. With the next theme, we elaborate on a logic with similar reactive consequences but based on different foundations.

### 5.3 | Legal Logic

> *Concerns must be documented and legally sound*
>
> (Senior officer)

This theme captures what we conceptualise as a legal logic, which became visible particularly through the central role of documentation in interpretations of soft information. The legal logic seemed to contribute to changing the status of soft information, depending on whether it had been formally recorded and thereby shaping what was recognised as 'real' within the organisation.

A frequent topic among frontline personnel was whether a prisoner could be moved from his current wing due to him undermining the prisoner community and/or concern about disturbances. 'Undermining the prisoner community' is a term in the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (2001) that qualifies when a prisoner can be moved from a general population unit to an isolation cell. It is a preventive measure to avoid serious incidents. However, despite the possibility of transferring prisoners, there is widespread agreement that prisoners are not moved until 'the shit hit the fan'. The consequences of this for prisoners were captured in the fieldnotes:

> *The officer said he 'knew something was about to happen' based on information from and familiarity with prisoners on his wing. In his opinion, one of the prisoners should have been moved from the wing, because he was concerned that the prisoner would get a beating from other prisoners. Despite him verbally reporting the situation, nothing was done to avoid this. The officer concluded that 'He [the prisoner] had to get a beating first'. In fact, the prisoner was beaten twice, because after a short time away, the other prisoner returned to the same wing without anything being done to prevent it happening again.*

This excerpt does not represent an exception in our data. Repeated experiences like this seem to influence officers' attitudes towards the prison and, probably, their reporting behaviour. After repeatedly trying to report disturbances in advance to prevent incidents—without being heard upward in the prison organisation—many stated that there is no point speaking up. While individuals voicing concerns is a vital organisational feature, it only occurs if individuals believe they will be heard (Westrum 1993). Many officers seemed convinced that disruptions would erupt very soon, based on what they saw and heard in their units, but often they experienced that many managers were not interested in this information. As one officer explained, 'After all, the prisoners must be beaten up before anyone reacts, anyway'. Westrum (1993) emphasises that what people *believe* is the main issue, even if they are not always correct and the situation is sometimes more nuanced. Prisoners being beaten up before the prison responded were similar consequences of both the laissez faire and the legal logic. However, when this happened as a result of the legal logic it seemed clearly grounded in the lack of written records. It was not based on norms about how everyday prison life should be conducted, or on the understanding that restraint and non-intervention constitute sensible safety practice, as in the laissez-faire logic. Rather, the delayed response reflected a legal logic in which action and responsibility were contingent upon formally documented information. As such, we see these as distinct belief systems about information yet resulting in the same need for verifying the information.

According to officers, unwanted behaviour was often well documented in the prison's case record system, although even



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documented behaviour was often insufficient to prompt a reaction. Several officers stated that it was easier to move prisoners from a wing due to concrete incidents than based on observed behaviour over time. Some senior officers agreed that a minimum requirement for making a formal decision about moving prisoners was the existence of an incident report. This reflects the classic machine bureaucracy that favours formalisation through documentation (Mintzberg 1983). Thus, to a certain extent, legal advisors and duty officers were seen by officers as obstacles due to their unwillingness to authorise transfers. Sometimes, legal advisors were referenced as those who 'do not want' to transfer prisoners. Other times, it was senior officers, who have authority to make such decisions on the spot. Senior officers were generally concerned that their decisions were legally justified, and several emphasised documentation to be crucial when making decisions. Based on this focus on legality, we understand this as a legal institutional logic deeply embedded in the formal prison system.

The duty instruction for prison officers states that they should proactively submit written reports on all matters concerning the service, institution and prisoners 'that they understand to be important for the warden or other superior to be informed about' [our translation] (Norwegian Directorate of the Correctional Services 2020). Information can be documented in different forms, including the case record system and incident reports. There are several benefits of formally documenting information. For instance, it allows information to circulate between actors and across organisational levels and temporal contexts, and it serves as an accountability mechanism. This was illustrated by an acting senior officer feeling more responsible if a prisoner escaped after he had signed a safe job analysis, and prison officers who requested written risk assessments by managers concerning what they perceived as bad decisions. Additionally, officers sometimes used the system's dependence on documents to make their case. For example, after officers repeatedly reported concerns about a particular prisoner without being heard, they filed a concern notification about him, because 'When a written notification exists, they *must* respond'. After the concern notification was filed, the prison authorities immediately responded by moving the prisoner from the regular unit.

As an incident report makes the case clear, a decision about intervention can be made and easily justified afterwards. Senior officers were concerned that incident reports 'hold legal weight'. As such, an incident report seems the most valued way of receiving safety-related information. Such reports represent a 'gold standard' for hard information (Bertomeu and Marinovic 2016), although writing an incident report assumes that an incident has already occurred—incident reports are, by definition, retrospective texts. Such reports should contain concrete information and proof of what happened. Yet many managers acknowledged the tacit and informal knowledge prison officers have about what is simmering among prisoners as soft information. For instance, when a prisoner was due to be transferred to another prison, the importance of 'signals' of escape plans was a topic during a meeting. The senior officers—the managers working closest to the prisoners—were told to be alert and proactive.

Many senior officers also spoke about 'the sixth sense' of prison officers (Midtlyng 2024). One senior officer advised the first author to attend interdisciplinary meetings on the units to learn information that senior officers otherwise do not have access to—information about nuances that is difficult to document but that officers know. Thus, information about disturbances among prisoners often only exists verbally among officers and is not a part of the formal system of written documentation. Hence, despite soft information being informally valued by managers, its value is significantly reduced when it is transformed into written documentation. As a senior officer stated, 'Prison officers can walk onto a wing and immediately sense something isn't right. However, what is wrong must be documented. I cannot move prisoners from the wing based on speculation. Unfortunately, incidents often occur in those situations.' This illustrates the senior officer's trust in soft information—contrasting the laissez faire logic—and the problem of translating it into acceptable legal terminology.

Soft information shifts from being interpreted as important and valuable while existing informally and being shared verbally to losing legitimacy and being reduced to 'speculation' after being formalised in writing. The ambiguous nature of this information makes it nearly impossible to maintain the standards of a legal report. This is illustrated in the shared experience between several senior officers that prison officers often said that certain prisoners must be moved, but agreed it could not be done when they were asked to formulate a written request. This can of course be because the requirement for transfer is not met, and in those cases the documentation requirements function as a necessary barrier against erroneous decisions. In other cases, vital soft information can be lost. On several occasions, officers had clear views about the risks associated with certain prisoners, but the information was lost because it could not be formally documented. There seems to be no system for capturing this kind of information.

This means that when soft information did not fit into the reporting system included the legal requirements, the information easily disappeared. While a prison should not be able to implement intrusive measures against prisoners without good cause, the sharp division between 'speculation' and 'evidence' as a result of the legal logic potentially hinders the maintenance of safety. If information within the formal system is mainly found in retrospective texts, it could limit the organisation's ability to capture vital soft information and work proactively. As avoiding undesirable events and fostering a safe environment are key objectives of any prison organisation, this is an example of what Brunsson (1985) terms the 'irrationality' of an organisation. The legal logic seems to be influenced by institutional legal values, norms and practices, resulting in the incident report being the chosen document for reporting important information. This directs the prison's focus to considering what has already happened rather than forecasting what may occur.

## 6 | Discussion

Our aim was to learn about the processes that drive organisational responses to upcoming disturbances by examining how soft information is handled during normal operations. We identified three different and coexisting institutional logics that inform prison officers' interpretations of soft information:



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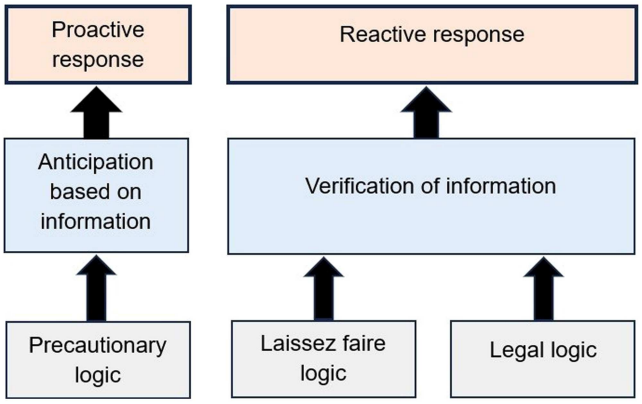


**FIGURE 1** | Three coexisting institutional logics inform prison officers' interpretations of soft information: precautionary logic results in a proactive response due to anticipation of incidents based on soft information, whereas laissez faire and legal logics result in a reactive response due to the requirement for verified information.

precautionary logic, laissez fair logic and legal logic. Based on these results, we perceive a conflict between anticipation and verification within the prison, producing proactive and reactive patterns of organisational response, with written texts playing a central role (see Figure 1).

### 6.1 | Verification as the Dominant Strategy for Information Recognition

The institutional logics of precaution, laissez faire and legality influence interpretations of soft information in different ways (see Figure 1).

Based on a precautionary logic, frontline personnel anticipate possible incidents based on soft information, which triggers a proactive organisational response. The precautionary principle is well known in the field of safety research (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001); however, while it is typically conceptualised as a regulatory or decision-making principle, our findings reveal how it can operate as an institutional logic that shapes actors' attention, interpretation and practice. This differs from previous findings due to the bottom-up advocating of risk management, whereas risk usually exists in organisations as a top-down logic imposed on frontline staff (Brown and Gale 2018; Power 2016). This may be explained by the precautionary logic having deep roots in the prison officer occupation, where preventative work is central (Sørensen et al. 2024; Ugelvik 2022).

In contrast to a proactive approach based on precaution and widespread anticipatory work (Johansen et al. 2016), the laissez faire and legal logics both require concrete and visible information (laissez faire) or solid, written evidence (legal) if information is to be considered valid. In both cases this means that information needs to be verified prior to responding, which is the key characteristic of hard information (Bertomeu and Marinovic 2016). As institutional logics, these differences should not be understood as merely individual opinions or discretionary approaches; rather, they reflect patterns embedded in the organisation and shape how actors perceive, interpret and respond to disturbances. These logics that both prefer verified information provide stable and socially shared frames of meaning, influencing what is considered relevant information, appropriate action and legitimate decision-making.

Our analysis also reveals that, while these logics coexist, they are not equally influential. Anticipation on the basis of a precautionary logic was highlighted by many officers and managers as contrasting with the established organisational culture. Thus, many officers felt that an anticipating approach was losing ground to more reactive approaches of verification, based on logics of laissez fair and legality. These officers were concerned with the early detection of weak signals in order to be able to respond in advance. Over time, experiences of not being heard shape people's socially constructed belief systems, which direct their understanding of appropriate action (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012). Dismissive attitudes to frontline personnel voicing concerns based on soft information have been demonstrated in other contexts. For instance, Perin (2005) notes that calculated and policy logics override operators' real-time logics, while Vaughan (1996, 355) explains how engineers' hunches about Space Shuttle Challenger's rubber seals were dismissed as emotional. This emphasises the importance of studying the processes whereby soft information is handled during normal operations to learn how organisational responses to upcoming disturbances are informed and shaped. Our analysis indicates that the dominance of logics valuing verification in the prison structures how soft information is prioritised, legitimised or disregarded, influencing organisational responses to disturbances. Next, we will elaborate on the role of written documents in these processes, which was particularly evident in the legal logic.

### 6.2 | Response-Activating Texts

Our analysis reveals that soft information—as indicators of danger—can be marginalised until the anticipated danger is documented in written form. In such situations, a disturbance needs to develop into an 'incident'—that is, it must be judged to be sufficiently serious to write an incident report if it is to prompt a managerial response (see Figure 2). Hence, incident reports represent important tools for information sharing in Norwegian prisons. When managers and internal legal advisors make decisions about disciplinary actions and the documentation to be used within the prison system and in court, such decisions are based on written incident reports by frontline staff.

However, as shown in Figure 2, decision-makers often respond with 'low-level actions'. This could involve 'laissez faire' officers reacting on a fight between prisoners which unfolded in front of their eyes, or it could be precautionary senior officers asking staff to pay extra attention or reinforcing a part of the prison by relocating officers from another area. This is because limited resources constrain the scope of action, meaning decision-makers have limited options for more informal preventative approaches before having to rely on the letter of the law (Midtlyng 2025). This could explain why a reactive approach seems to spread, given that decision-makers often have few options for action.



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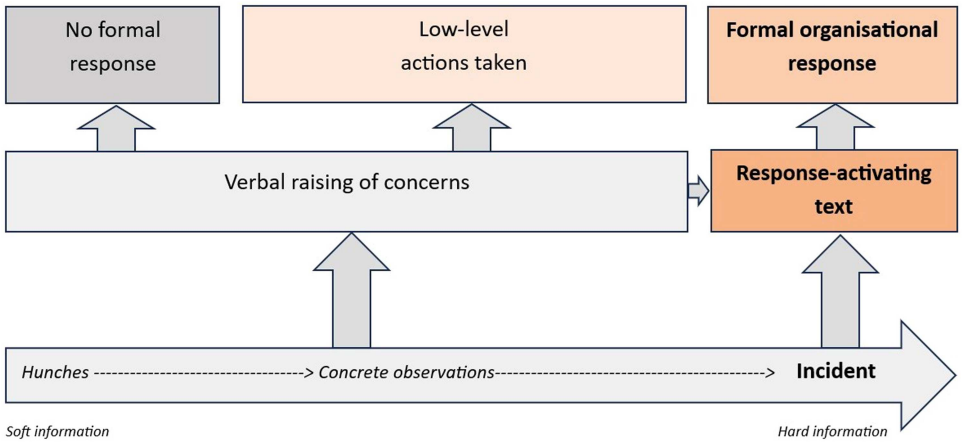


**FIGURE 2** | Response-activating texts: possible disturbances need to develop into situations defined as incidents, which require the writing of a report, to activate a formal organisational response.

Moreover, in many cases, decision-makers' consideration of the legal basis for a decision is necessary and intended. For instance, there are clear legal requirements for transferring a prisoner to an isolation unit, and for good reason. Our analysis indicates that the legal logic influences how actors interpret soft information more broadly, in ways that are challenging from a safety perspective. Based on these findings, we introduce the concept of response-activating texts—that is, written documents that activate an organisational response. In our data, these texts took the form of incident reports and other written texts that rendered officers' concerns explicit and documented. This relates to the concept of 'enabling devices', symbolic written artefacts that facilitate the commencement of work, such as risk assessments that suggest risks are managed even when they are not (Hutchinson et al. 2022). Similarly, an incident report carries symbolic weight by triggering action; however, while an incident report reflects the issues it addresses, its symbolism illustrates a disconnect from broader organisational sensemaking regarding information that does not fit the format. An incident report is concrete, and it describes a situation framed in a way that concurs with the prison's understanding of what constitutes a problem. An incident report thus becomes an indicator of a problem that the prison system recognises. Yet most hard information is fundamentally historical and, therefore, arrives too late (Mintzberg 1994, 263). Indeed, waiting for soft information to transform into hard information will result in inaccurate indicators of danger (Meadows 1998).

An interesting issue concerns whether soft information can be turned into formal documents and, consequently, into hard information. Some tacit knowledge that is difficult to describe verbally (Polanyi 1966) is even more difficult to describe in writing, making this kind of soft information even more tricky to turn into hard information. Rumours and hunches are not sufficient to trigger action in the focal prison, despite managers encouraging frontline personnel to report such things. Soft information that can be portrayed as smaller episodes of conflict between prisoners is easier to describe and form into a 'letter of concern', thereby being incorporated into the hard information that the organisation can utilise. Such hard information does not have the same value as formal reports but can still serve as a foundation for written arguments used as documentation and justification to act and prevent unwanted incidents. Still, further research is needed to learn more about how rational organisations can integrate soft information in practice.

## 6.3 | Implications for Safety

Proactive work is strongly relied upon to maintain safety (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001), and action will often be required long before an incident report can be written to prevent an incident from happening in the first place (Turner and Pidgeon 1997; Westrum 1993). Dependence on texts to document incidents that have already happened can have serious consequences for an organisation and its ability to maintain safety and security. A system wherein soft information only exists 'under the table' can therefore constrain the likelihood of a timely organisational response. This can be seen as a clash between the prison's bureaucratic management model and an ideal safety management system that captures weak signals to prevent incidents from happening. This can prove problematic in relation to the prison's responsibility for keeping both prisoners and staff safe. While a focus on ensuring prisoners' legal protection is desirable, the need to verify information before responding frequently results in prisoners being exposed to violence before any action is taken. Hence, we perceive conflicts between intentions and realities concerning how the law is applied in real time. Related to the distinction between safety work and safe work as an outcome (Rae and Provan 2019), this is an example of two conflicting fundamental concerns—namely, legal and physical protection.

Much previous research on the marginalisation of soft information in organisational information processes has been conducted in high-risk sectors, such as nuclear power and aerospace (Perin 2005; Vaughan 1996). These contexts differ significantly from the prison context, where soft information, incubation periods and incidents are generally much smaller in scale. Yet the organisational processes at play seem to be similar, with different institutional logics involved in negotiations regarding interpretive authority. The coexistence of multiple institutional logics within an organisation requires frontline personnel to navigate competing frames of meaning. The logic that prevails in a given situation affects how information is understood and which courses of action are deemed legitimate and necessary.



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Production has previously been identified as a logic competing with safety in many organisations (Perin 2005; Rasmussen 1997; Vaughan 1996). The present article contributes to the literature by demonstrating how a legal logic seems to prevail over other logics when it comes to formal decision-making. This can be explained by the legal logic's embeddedness in the legal framework providing the foundation for the prison system, whereas production functions as a core institutional logic within companies. In prisons, the embeddedness of legality is combined with deep integration with bureaucratic structures and formal documentation practices. Yet relatively little has been written about the role of law in information flow processes. Research has examined the influence of legal logic in relation to the work of regulatory bodies (Jeschke 2022; Wiig et al. 2023) and standardisation (Engen et al. 2023), while law and regulations have also been widely covered by studies on the increase in regulation and 'bureaucratic overload' (Dekker 2014; Størkersen 2018). Moreover, tensions between safety and law have been illustrated in the literature on safety culture and how organisations react to accidents (Dekker 2011). We extend this research by demonstrating how legality—as a central institutional logic—seems to guide organisational sensemaking in a way that obscures awareness of other perspectives.

Hence, laws and regulations can direct and frame the logic influencing how organisational actors make sense of upcoming disturbances: if nothing is illegal, little is expected to be done. The absence of information that breaks or meets the requirements of the law seems to frame actors' sensemaking regarding a situation in which little can be done. Thus, while the law focuses on procedures, responsibilities and determining who can be held responsible, the safety perspective is concerned with learning so that organisations can interfere and avoid undesirable incidents. This article highlights the necessity of being aware of how a well-intended focus on legal logics within organisations can spread too broadly, obscuring or even blocking important information and ways of understanding disturbances that do not fit the requirements of hard, legally relevant information.

## 7 | Concluding Remarks

This article has demonstrated how different institutional logics influence and shape organisational interpretations of information and, consequently, organisations' responses to disturbances. Our findings emphasise the role of response-activating texts within organisations where legality is foundational for the system, such as prisons. While a prison organisation based on and ingrained with the rule of law is both desirable and intended, when combined with the machine bureaucratic structure of a typical prison, this characteristic will probably influence the organisation to adopt a rationalistic understanding of what is valued and assumed about what happens and how it should be responded to. We have identified how the logics of legality clash with the logics of safety and security in situations in which the 'hard' characteristics of law win over the 'soft' characteristics of impending danger. Our findings indicate that if a legal logic—which is, by definition, reactive—forms and dominates how an organisation responds to safety-related information, it can negatively impact safety within the organisation.

These findings are based on observed practices within one highly regulated organisational context at a particular point in time and from the perspective of frontline personnel. While this enables in-depth insight into how soft information is handled in everyday work, it may not capture variation across organisational levels, institutional contexts or phases of operation. Future research could examine how similar dynamics unfold in other settings, as well as how interpretations of soft information evolve across organisational levels and over time.

### Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this study cannot be shared due to confidentiality constraints.

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