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Presentation title: Prison officers, social support and order in prison

Previous literature on the role of prison officers has demonstrated that many officers go beyond their custodial tasks and help inmates with their institutional or personal problems, thus improving inmates' wellbeing and enriching prison officers' job. This approach to the prison officer's role has been labelled as 'human service' in the US (e.g. Lombardo, 1989) and as 'care' in the UK (e.g. Tait, 2011). In this presentation I will argue that these human service or caring relationships - and the impact they have on inmates, prison officers and the prison environment - are better understood under the framework of social support (Cullen, 1994). Drawing on a research on the role of prison officers in two Spanish prisons, it is confirmed that prison officers do provide practical and emotional support to inmates even when it is not their duty. However, we observe that prison officers provide social support not only to enrich their role by helping inmates, but also because it is functional to achieve social order in prison. Specifically, we find three mechanisms through which social support brings compliance: coping assistance (prevention), reciprocity (instrumental control), and personal authority (normative control). Policy implications of these findings are discussed.