

"We are more like social workers than guards"

In Norway, prison guards are employed not just to open and close doors. As guarantors of security, psychologists and guidance counsellors, they are an integral part of the rehabilitation process.

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Since the 1990s, each Norwegian guard is assigned two or three prisoners, for whom he is the "contact officer".
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There are only 25 prisoners in the small prison at Sarpsborg in the south of Norway. Although the barbed wire and cameras at the entrance signal that this is a high-security establishment, the atmosphere inside seems fairly relaxed. Just before lunch, a few prisoners are heading through the corridors to complete their morning tasks. One is busy cleaning, another is sorting the washing, while another five are working in the workshop. Tom, one of the prison's many guards, has no qualms about walking among the prisoners, and their interactions might surprise a layperson. Smiles, jokes and praise are the order of the day. "He's a really good guy! I can talk to him whenever I want", says one of the residents as the guard passes by.

"When I first entered the prison world, we were not supposed to have contact with the prisoners", says Lena, who has been in the job for 30 years. "But that changed in the 1990s and now we take the time to sit down with them and chat".

The purpose of prison has always been to rehabilitate offenders, but the methods have changed over the years. "In 1850 it was thought that the behaviour of criminals could be changed by isolating them and making them read the Bible", recalls Hedda Giertsen¹, Professor Emeritus at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law at Oslo University. "Conversely, in the 1970s they believed in the virtue of work and production. Finally, in the 1990s, more emphasis was placed on social relationships within prisons. Guards were no longer there just to open and close doors; they had to develop connections with the prisoners and serve as a kind of role model".

A different view of security

However, this new closeness between guards and prisoners has not been possible everywhere. "There are different cultures in different prisons", stresses Hedda Giertsen. "In some of the old large prisons, there is still some distance between guards and prisoners". However, when the new prisons were built, such as Bergen prison in 1990, the architecture was designed to allow for a different type of relationship. "Each block houses 6 to 8 prisoners and there are communal areas where guards can spend time with the prisoners", continues the researcher.

"Our goal is to prepare them for re-joining the community", explains Lena

1. Author of the chapter entitled "Prison and Welfare in Norway: Implications for Prison Policy", published in the book entitled *No Prison*, EG Press Limited, August 2018.

2. Norsk Fengsels- og Friomsorgsforbund. This trade union represents around 60% of prison staff in Norway.

This new way of organising the space has in particular enabled a new security concept to be introduced: dynamic security. Under this concept, guards must mix with prisoners as much as possible. They eat with them, smoke a cigarette together in the yard, etc. According to Asle Aase, head of the Norwegian trade union for prison staff and probation officers², it's the best way to avoid conflict: "If I get to know someone, it reduces the risk of them turning against me. And also, if there is a problem, a prisoner can become an ally".

Since the 1990s, every guard has also been assigned two or three prisoners, for whom they are the "contact officer". "We talk to them about their goals, about what they want to achieve during their time in prison", says Asle. "As a result we can guide them towards training or a job. And when they have a problem, they can come to us".

The accessibility of the guards is also very much appreciated by prisoners such as Klaus, who has been in Sarpsborg for seven months. "They are the only people from outside who I can talk to", stresses this Dane who is awaiting trial for drug trafficking. "If I need anything, such as to send flowers to my wife, I can go and see them".

Ever-improving training

The guards are also responsible for organising programmes for the prisoners. In Sarpsborg, prisoners can follow a programme

designed to help them better manage their stress. "Most of the men in here are being held in custody and therefore awaiting trial", clarifies Tom. "It is a highly stressful situation". Patrik, a 32-year-old guard, alternates between Sarpsborg and the nearby prison at Halden. In that prison, which accommodates 250 prisoners, he runs a programme aimed at dependents. "Our goal is to prepare them for re-joining the community", explains Lena. "We are almost more like social workers than prison guards".

The training for prison staff must therefore be equal to the tasks that they are assigned. To become a guard, you must first complete secondary school and then join the academy for correctional service staff. It takes two years to obtain the diploma, which clearly puts Norway among the leading European countries in this respect. Although Denmark beats it with three years of initial training, the average is mostly between six months and a year.

When Asle got his diploma in the 1980s, the training already took two years, but its content has developed significantly since then. "At the time we learnt in particular about the law and many practical aspects, such as how to write reports or when a prisoner should be placed in isolation. We also had lessons in psychology, but the standard of these lessons has improved considerably since the 1990s. Students are taught about sociology and ethics; they learn how to recognise signs of radicalisation, and so on". However, Asle's trade



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union is calling for a third year of training for all prison officers. Their demand has been partly met given that 35 students have just started a new three-year programme. The list of available specialisations includes, for example, "Structured approaches to supporting the fight against crime – Interventions, history and critical aspects".

Guards can also pursue further studies throughout their career. A broad catalogue of training is available to them. Patrik has in particular taken courses on organising his drugs programmes. As for Lena, she has improved her knowledge so that she can communicate better with prisoners.

A rewarding job

While prison guard training is paid for by the State, salaries are modest. "A guard earns on average 30 000 euros a year, which is – particularly low for Norway", says Asle. However, at Sarpsborg, all the officers say that they enjoy their work. "Helping someone to make it through is deeply rewarding", confirms Tom. Job satisfaction is also due to the size of the

prison. "At Halden, every guard is more specialised. Here I really have to do everything. I welcome prisoners when they arrive, I organise family visits, I supervise the workshop, and so on. I enjoy the diversity of my work" stresses Patrik.

However, the range of activities available to prisoners is fairly limited at Sarpsborg. Between four and six of them can work in a packing workshop. As for the others, they can take courses in English or cooking. As most of the prisoners are being held in custody, no proper training is available. They therefore spend a lot of time in their cells, where they have the majority of their meals. In the evening, however, they can meet up in the little communal room to eat, play games or even listen to music.

Klaus enjoys life here, but he would like to be transferred to the prison at Halden if he is convicted. "They have better training and more job opportunities" he explains. Opened in 2010, Halden prison is emblematic of the new prison policy introduced in the 1990s. As in all prisons in the country, every prisoner has their own cell. In 2017, 92.1% of the approximately 4 000 cells in the country were occupied. By comparison, in the same year, the occupation rate for French prisons was 116.5% and 85.2% in Germany.

However, the quality of the cells varies greatly from one prison to another. Although the prisoners at Sarpsborg have a TV in their cell, they do not have a toilet, whereas those at Halden have their own shower. But there is no question of spending the day in your cell. Every prisoner must choose between training and work. In their free time, they can play sport, take cooking lessons or even record music in the prison's studio.

A prisoner costs 348 euros per day

The concept behind all this is written into Norwegian law. "Life in prison must, as far as possible, resemble life on the outside" is the message on the website of the correctional service authority. "If it is too different, returning to normal life will be difficult", explains Asle. "We therefore have to ease the transition".

Quite clearly this comes at a cost. According to Council of Europe statistics, each prisoner cost the Norwegian State 348 euros per day in 2015, and the cost is increasing. In 2005, the bill was 294 euros. In Croatia,

this figure is just 7.3 euros, compared with 102.7 euros in France. It goes without saying that this expenditure is not always unanimously approved. When Halden prison opened its doors, the local newspapers criticised the "luxury" of the cells. "They underlined in particular that the elderly were less well-treated in retirement homes, because they were forced to share a room", remembers Asle.

"The State replied that these new prisons were cheaper to run", explains Hedda Giertsen. "As the prisoners have their own bathroom, they do not need to be accompanied to the toilet, which results in staff savings".

As for Asle, he says that all this expenditure is worthwhile. "How much are you prepared to pay to have a good neighbour? We have to ensure that the person released from prison will not reoffend, will find work and will pay his taxes". According to a 2010 study, the reoffending rate in Norway was less than 20%. Asle feels that this is definitely due to the changes made in the 1990s.

Hedda Giertsen is not as categorical. "It is very difficult to know what really works in the prison system. There are too many factors at play in terms of reoffending, such as the living conditions of prisoners before and after their time in prison. You have to look at whether they have a job, a family, a home to which they can return when they leave, and so on."

It is time for savings

Whatever the case may be, prison policy is changing again. For the right-wing coalition that has been in power since 2013, the priority is saving money. Since 2015, the budget for prison and correctional services has been cut by 3 to 4 million euros a year. "They say that they want to reduce bureaucracy, but in actual fact this budgetary rationing mainly results in staff cuts in prisons", regrets Asle. "If we don't have enough guards, we have to concentrate on the security aspects of the job and we

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cannot organise educational programmes for example".

In addition, if there aren't enough staff to supervise them, prisoners have to spend more time in their cells. Norway has already been criticised on the subject of isolation by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture. Following an inspection in the spring of 2018, the committee reported that many Norwegian prisoners were still spending 22 hours a day in their cells, often for long periods at a time and without

any proper contact with staff. "It's a real problem", confirms Asle. "Prisoners kept in isolation are ticking time bombs".

His trade union is therefore fighting against the job cuts and for the maintenance of educational programmes in prisons. Last November, it even received some rather unexpected support. Groups of former prisoners organised a concert as a sign of solidarity with prison guards. Yet more proof that, in the country of the fjords, relations between guards and prisoners defy preconceptions. ●

