

SOME TRAITS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRISON POPULATION DURING THE LAST FIVE YEARS. THE CASE OF NORWAY.

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Introduction

This paper deals with some aspects of prison development during the last five years. Some apparent traits are focused on, in particular where these do not comply with the general, expected trends. Data presented here are primarily collected from the central record of the prison administration in Norway. I will briefly deal with five themes:

1. Crime rate in general and prison consequences
2. The number of prisoners and the level of punishment
3. The level of custody for remand prisoners
4. Age groups and rates of women and foreigners in prison
5. The threat of new crimes

1. Crime rate in general and prison consequences

Generally the total number of registered crimes have shown a slow decrease in the early nineties, but from 1996 it has been increasing again. In my opinion this increase is mainly due to an important change in registering crimes, initiated in the autumn of 1995. However that may be, the total number of registered crimes seem to have little impact on the prison system. In the nineties the total number of all kinds of incarcerations have been around 11,000 a year. The number of prison sentences for major crimes has been fluctuating around six thousand a year since 1993, and prison sentences for misdemeanours are generally going down. The reduction in prison sentences for misdemeanours is mainly a consequence of changes in the penal code for drunk drivers and the need to decide cases more quickly by imposing fines instead of bringing cases to trials in court.

2. The number of prisoners and the level of punishment

On 1 February 1994 there were 2,467 inmates in prison in Norway. On 1 February 1998 the number was 2,487, which is practically the same. In addition, around 150 registered inmates on an average endured other permanent stay in treatment institutions and in hospitals, as well as long term interruptions of serving (regular leaves of absence not included). Whether these inmates are included in ratio calculations or not, the prison population in Norway is still one of the lowest in Europe compared to general population. 2,487 inmates on 1 February equal 56 per 100,000 of the general population in Norway.

Even though the average number of prisoners have not been increasing since 1993, we have seen some changes in the mixture of categories and crimes represented.

From 1994 the relative number of prisoners mainly charged with or sentenced for drug crimes have increased by 5 %. This category is now occupying *one third* of all beds in the prisons. If

we add the category of thefts committed under the influence of drugs or in order to fund drug abuse, their number well exceeds half the prison population.

The number of prison sentences for drug crimes is about 15 % of all sentences for major crimes, but the sentences are in average about 50 % longer than the general average of all other major crimes. Drug crimes also have high priority in prosecution. As a consequence the number of imprisonments for drug crimes is still going up, while other traditional categories, especially thefts, are going down.

For example, measured on 1 February the relative number of imprisoned sex offenders have been going down from 8 % in 1994 to 5 % in 1998 in spite of the fact that focus on sex crimes is generally on the increase. And perhaps even more surprisingly, the relative number of violence offenders have not increased in spite of the fact that we have seen an increase in reported crimes of violence. About 20 % of the prisoners are serving time for violence.

The average level of prison sentences for all major crimes has been rather stable in the nineties, and the latest figure from 1996 is for the first time in years actually going down. In the early nineties the average length of sentences was around 250 days. In 1996 it was 201 days.

These traits of development, especially the stability of the total number of prisoners, have not been foreseen, neither by the authorities nor by criminologists or researchers. Since 1993 the well known Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie has been arguing that Norway is likely to experience an increase in prison population. Mainly based on the development in the eighties, prognoses by Statistics Norway and the Ministry of Justice and Police estimated a need for a total prison capacity well exceeding 3,000 beds in the year 2000, possibly reaching a total need well above 4,000 beds. The estimated increase in imprisonments for crimes of violence was one factor of these analyses, which so far has not come true.

3. The level of custody for remand prisoners

The total number of remand prisoners, the average time endured and their relative proportion of the prison population have all been increasing over the last five years. This has created problems in finding proper cells for this category in the closed prisons. As a consequence some remand prisoners have been put in police cells not adequate for prisoners, and the justice authorities in Norway have rightfully been criticised for this. Today about 600, nearly one fourth of the total prison population, are remand prisoners. This increase is partly a consequence of the combination of fewer prison sentences in general, thus increasing their relative measure, combined with the fact that the practice of demanding and imposing custody for prosecuted people for major crimes, is not changing correspondingly. It is also believed that a law reform put into effect on August 1995, granting defendants an increased opportunity to try their own case twice in court, influences the period of time remand prisoners are held in custody. If this is the case, the latest increase is, at least to some degree, brought about by voluntary actions of the defendants themselves.

4. Age groups and rates of women and foreigners in prison

For a rather long period the number of young inmates has been going down, both in absolute numbers as well as in relative measures. Today young offenders under the age of 18 are rarely more than 10, and most of them are remand prisoners. Generally the prison population is getting older. More than half of the prison population is now more than 30 years of age. Nearly 20 % is above the age of 40.

The number of women in prison has also increased from somewhat above 100 inmates to around 150 today, which is about 6 % of the total prison population. This change is brought about due to a gradual increase in the number of prison sentences for women.

The total number of prisoners with other citizenships than Norwegian have been somewhere between 300 and 400 the last five years. On 1 February this year they numbered 330, which is 13.3 % of the total prison population. Two thirds of this category are charged or sentenced because of drug crimes. A large group of these, however, are not permanent residents in Norway.

5. The threat of new crimes?

To some degree "modern crimes" have led to new kinds of inmates, but generally speaking the total number of all untraditional crime types have not shown an increase the last five years. The total group of all crimes other than theft/profit gain, drugs, violence and sex, was 336 on 1 February this year. On the same day in 1994 the equivalent number was 364. This observation is also quite contrary to the general public opinion as well as the opinion of many professionals in or outside government. The general expectation is also that small, deviant groups, such as racists and members of rivalling motorcycle gangs will have a noticeable impact on the prison system. This is yet to be seen.

Only a handful of people have been put to prison for crimes like these in Norway.

Table. Prisoners by crime category and citizenship 1 February 1998

Crime categories	<i>Percent by category</i>				
	Foreign	Norwegian	Total	Foreign	Norwegian
Violence	46	450	496	9 %	91 %
Drugs	214	577	791	27 %	73 %
Profit crimes	43	702	745	6 %	94 %
Sex crimes	13	102	115	11 %	89 %
Other	14	326	340	4 %	96 %
sum	330	2 157	2 487	13 %	87 %

Note: Inmates with permanent stay outside prison not included.

Data collected from the Central Record of the Prison Administration in Norway.

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