

Employment quality of prison staff in Europe: trapped in a vicious circle?

What is the employment quality of prison staff in Europe after a decade of austerity measures for public services? That was the highly relevant research topic of a study carried out by HIVA-KULeuven, commissioned by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU).

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The United Kingdom has the greatest proportion of prisoners (85 000 men) in Europe, housed in 120 (mega) prisons, of which 65% are overcrowded.

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To answer this question, four countries were examined: Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), Italy and Greece. The study focused on prison officers and their work experiences, the tasks they perform, their working environment, their working conditions and their concerns, referred to as the employment quality of prison staff. Wages, contracts, working hours, training opportunities, representation, collective bargaining, rights to strike, occupational health and safety but also work organisation and autonomy are key factors of employment quality. We observed a general deterioration in the employment quality of prison staff in each of the participating countries, although not to the same extent.

Different stories?

When we analyse employment quality and recent changes in the countries covered by our study, we see significant differences. The *Swedish* prison system is historically embedded in a welfare tradition and focuses more on the rehabilitation of inmates. This vision is first of all reflected in staffing numbers: in 2018, 5 000 prison officers were employed in 48 prison facilities that accommodated 4 000 inmates (with a total capacity of 5 000). This gives a prisoner/staff ratio of one-to-one. Prison officers combine surveillance duties with their role as personal coach, counselling one or more inmates. To this end, prison officers undergo extensive training. This combination of training and challenging (rehabilitative) tasks result in a rewarding job. Moreover, the prison officers have decent employment

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conditions. However, after a violent attack on a prison officer, Swedish prison policies have undergone several changes. Additional security rules and administrative procedures have been implemented, there has been a general trend towards shifting decision-making to the central administration, individual coaching has been increasingly replaced by group sessions, and prison staff now have to specialise and choose between surveillance or rehabilitation roles. In addition, the trade unions feel that the government is making unfair use of temporary employment contracts, thereby increasing the job insecurity of prison staff. Although not as severe as in other EU countries, prison services have also experienced some budget cuts due to austerity policies. These changes, together with the growing diversity of inmates, are putting increasing pressure on what has hitherto been a very successful combination of high-quality prison services and decent employment quality of Swedish prison staff.

On paper the Italian prison system echoes the rehabilitation goals of the Swedish system, but this is far from the case in practice.

Surveillance is the main task of prison officers and rehabilitation tasks are assigned to different specialised professions. Nevertheless, the work of Italian prison officers is challenging, although for reasons different to those in Sweden: overcrowding and understaffing as a result of austerity combined with a harsher societal environment against crime makes the job of prison officers much more complex. Although the prisoner/staff ratio is relatively low (1.67 in 2018), living conditions for prisoners and working conditions for prison officers in Italian prisons are generally poor. Irregular working hours, low wages and the discrepancy in the training provided in hard skills (surveillance and detention) and the necessary soft skills (communication and conflict resolution techniques) explain the general low level of employment quality (and service quality) in Italian prisons. Significantly, prison officers have no right to strike in Italy so trade unions are obliged to find other strategies to influence policy.

Prison services in the UK are characterised by an unfavourable combination of complex objectives, low budgets and a harsh

societal environment against crime. The UK has proportionally the largest number of prisoners in Europe (85 000 men) spread over 120 (mostly mega-) prisons, of which 65 % are overcrowded. In addition, the number of prison officers has decreased by more than a quarter since 2010, mainly due to mass layoffs. These factors have led to poor-quality prison services and corresponding low employment quality. Most alarming are the health and safety conditions for those living and working in prisons, as illustrated by the annual increase in the number of violent attacks and even riots within British prisons. Moreover, prison officers are expected to combine surveillance and rehabilitation yet the structural understaffing, overcrowding and lack of training – the latter being particularly evident in privately run prisons – make this impossible, resulting in a major source of work-related stress. British prisons are organised hierarchically, which limits both participation opportunities and the autonomy of prison officers, and again this is particularly noticeable in private prisons. Other elements that have a negative impact on employment quality are the low wages, limited career opportunities and the ban on strike action. Austerity seems to have played a major role in the deterioration in the quality of both employment and services in British prisons.

Finally, the employment quality of Greek prison officers has suffered significantly as a result of austerity measures. Wages have decreased by up to 50 % of the annual net income. As a result, many prison staff have quit or taken early retirement. As there has been no budget to recruit new officers, prison services are suffering structural understaffing, resulting in situations where two prison officers are responsible for 400 prisoners. In addition, overcrowding in prison facilities has further exacerbated the difficulties of the work. Although the understaffing and overcrowding have improved slightly in recent years, the situation has had a serious impact on the health and safety conditions of prison staff and inmates, with a number of lethal accidents the unfortunate outcome. Moreover, prison officers are being given less training: initial training has been cut from six months to one month (or less) and continuous training is only given on an ad hoc basis if the funds are available. This lack of training for prison staff contrasts sharply with

their increased training needs. Many prison officers now do not know how to deal with the rising number of conflicts and the multi-dimensional problems that are characteristic of increasingly diverse prisons. Although rehabilitation has recently been included in official policy documents, the funds have not been forthcoming. In 2017 only 120 specialised staff worked actively in the area of reintegration, compared to 4 000 custodial staff.

Common trends?

Although the national settings and different policies make it difficult to provide a full comparison, several common trends can be identified in the four countries included in the study. Essentially, work in prisons has become more complex. On the one hand, governments have added rehabilitation tasks to prison officers' roles, and these are much more demanding in terms of staffing, time and competences; at the same time the administrative burden is increasing. On the other hand, prison populations have become much more complex and demanding, with greater cultural and national diversity, ageing and often very high levels of recidivism. The increasing number of prisoners suffer from (mental) illnesses is another urgent problem. In Greece, two out of three inmates have a foreign background; this figure is 30 % in Italy. Swedish prisons have experienced a significant rise in mental health issues, while suicides, cultural differences and drug abuse have become extremely problematic in UK prisons. In addition, there seems to be a growing discrepancy between training demand and training supply. Although soft skills are more and more important in dealing with the increasing diversity of inmates, prison staff training is still predominantly focused on so-called hard skills (surveillance and detention). In Greece, 44 % of prison staff do not know how to deal with inmate conflicts and problems.

In a context of widespread austerity policies, there are no (additional) resources to enable prison officers to deal with this increased complexity. Most urgent is the understaffing in Greece, Italy and the UK. However, the increased centralising of decision-making and administration results in prisons having less autonomy to use the available resources

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for their local needs. Finally, this lack of resources also leads to a general lack of staff training, most notably in Greece. Training is crucial in helping prison officers cope with the extra complexity of, for example, self-harm by inmates. Employment conditions, such as wages and secure employment contracts, are negatively influenced by this budgetary situation, too. The combination of the high demands of the job and limited resources (I) explains the high turnover among prison officers in each country and (II) is likely a key factor in the deterioration in the employment quality of prison staff.

Two additional common risks to this employment quality have been identified. Firstly, the combination of *understaffing and overcrowding* seems to be the perfect breeding ground for *unsafe working environments*. If the health and safety conditions of both inmates and prison officers cannot be secured, the quality of services and employment quality will suffer considerably. Secondly, experiments with the privatisation of prison services, e.g. in the UK, also have a negative effect on employment and service quality. The education and on-the-job training of prison officers in private prisons has been revealed to be largely insufficient, accompanied by inadequate staff replacement. Indeed, staff in private prisons suffer worse employment

conditions and have less decision-making power than staff in public prisons.

Towards an understanding

The employment quality of prison staff and the quality of prison services are closely related. A deterioration in employment quality, such as that observed in the UK, goes hand in hand with a decline in the quality of prison services. This relationship can be explained by looking at the societal and policy orientations regarding imprisonment and its role in broader welfare policies. In general, there appear to be two contrasting policy orientations leading to virtuous or vicious circles that affect both the employment quality of prison staff and the quality of the service offered to prisoners.

A virtuous circle can arise when imprisonment is embedded in broader welfare policies focusing on the *reintegration* of inmates. Rehabilitation is a highly complex goal, so it is important to have officers who are skilled and well trained, have sufficient job autonomy and social support from their colleagues and superiors, and have stable contracts and decent wages. As the work of prison officers adds a great deal of value, it is crucial to attract and keep competent staff, which will in turn have a positive impact on employment quality. In this context, trade unions can use collective bargaining to negotiate high standards for the overall wellbeing of prison officers, including job security, decent wages, and safe and healthy working environments. Moreover, high quality standards and the related job requirements restrict the ability to outsource or privatise (parts of) prison services, which otherwise might have a negative impact on employment and service quality. Finally, trained prison officers and high-quality prison services will help to reduce recidivism and, thus, will deliver a high return on investment, which governments could then invest in even stronger welfare policies.

A vicious circle, in contrast, is likely to arise when imprisonment is part of a criminal justice policy that stresses the *punitive* function of imprisonment. It would seem that if the focus is on punishment and detention rather than rehabilitation and reintegration, prison work is deemed to be low-skilled, there

is no need for autonomy among prison staff or decentralised decision-making, and the emphasis is on flexible contracts and working times. This leads to cost-cutting strategies that are likely to focus on labour costs and, in turn, result in downward pressure on employment quality. Privatisation of prison services based on price competition is quite likely. Privatisation or outsourcing also means fragmentation of collective bargaining and a structural weakening of trade unions. This could lead to a higher incidence of labour conflicts such as strikes. In turn, the demand for more flexible and cheap labour weakens employment protection. Consequently, a vicious circle and race to the bottom is set in motion, with a gradual deterioration in the employment quality of prison officers.

The common trends identified in our study seems to suggest that crime and justice policy in Europe is shifting towards a more punitive rather than a rehabilitation orientation in the area of imprisonment. Nevertheless, there are considerable differences in employment quality in the countries examined in our study because previous policies are still influencing employment quality and will continue to do so in the future. Employment quality in Sweden is historically high but there is increasing pressure from policies that affect job content and employment conditions. Employment quality in Italy is historically average and recent austerity measures there have aggravated existing tensions and problems (such as the training gap). Employment quality in the UK has plummeted in recent years due to a cocktail of detrimental policies of privatisation, centralisation

and upscaling of prisons, and austerity, and although the trade unions are historically strong in the sector, they feel quite pessimistic about the likelihood of any future improvements in employment quality. Finally, the Greek situation resembles the Italian case and is characterised by understaffing, overcrowding and a deterioration in employment conditions. Strong trade unions could not prevent austerity measures from having a severe impact on the employment quality of prison officers.

General decline in well-being at work

European prison services seem to be standing at a crossroads. During the last decade, imprisonment policies and the growing diversity of prison populations have made prison work increasingly complex, yet the resources to handle this complexity have not risen accordingly. The consequences of these policies are clear: overpopulation, understaffing, a general decline in prison officers' well-being and a steady fall in both the quality of prison services and the employment quality of prison staff. Policy makers should consider this question: what is the role of imprisonment in our societies, an instrument for reintegration or a tool for punishment? Recent policies in a number of very different EU countries seem to converge on the second option and risk causing a vicious circle. The basis of high employment quality among prison officers is a humane vision of imprisonment, in which prisoners and prison officers have equal interests. ●

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