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The Dutch Prison Crisis: A Shortage of Prisoners

Discussion Director

1. Why do roughly half of the people serving short sentences in England, Whales and the United States re-offend within two years?

Roughly half the people serving short sentences in England, Whales and the US re-offend within two years because many prisons just warehouse their prisoners and do not try to rehabilitate them. In the United States for example, the nation’s policy of “get tough on crime” has led to overcrowded prisons where the majority of the inmates are poor, people of color who have had limited education and over half suffer from mental health problems (American Psychological Association, 2014). With the de-institutionalization of mental health facilities, lack of mental health resources, and lack of social safety nets, there is “7% of prison population growth from 1980 to 2000 — representing 40,000 to 72,000 people in prisons who would likely have been in mental hospitals in the past,” (American Psychological Association, 2014). Once someone is in prison, they often have access to high school completion programs, but many do not have access to college programs. “Eighty-four percent of state prisons offer high school classes, only 27% of state prisons offer college courses. Almost all federal prisons offer vocational training compared to only 44% of private prisons and 7% of jails,” (Reich, 2017), while even fewer inmates have access to anger management classes, life-skills and proper drug and alcohol supports. Without these supports, many prisoners end up leaving prison after their sentences and go right back to the life they had that sent them to prison in the first place.

1. Do the Netherlands have decreasing crime rate (25% over the past 8 years) because they are not prosecuting drug offenses? Is this an appropriate response to drug offenses?

I feel that they do have a decreasing crime rate because they are not prosecuting drug offenses, as readily as they do in other countries such as the United States. The Netherlands openly tolerates the recreational use of most illegal drugs. In the Netherlands, “The Opium Act” is the legal guiding force, and it states that if someone is caught with small amounts of hard drugs for their own use, the drugs will be seized, but there will be no prosecution. Furthermore, many coffee houses sell marijuana which has reduced the number of hard drugs being used by individuals. If a government does not to charge someone with a drug crime, then of course your crime rate is going to drop. Personally, I do not feel this is an appropriate response to many kinds of drugs that people use. I think that a better response would be to help the users of the drugs get over their addiction and provide free access to drug consistent drug treatment programs.

1. Is allowing prisoners freedom such as being able to walk unescorted, playing volleyball, and having access to a canteen really punishment?

I do not feel that allowing prisoners to freely roam, play volleyball and having access to a well stocked canteen is really a punishment. The definition of punishment is the infliction or imposition of a penalty as retribution for an offense. While prison should have a plan for rehabilitation and skill building to prevent the offender from reoffending, it should also act as a form of punishment or deterrent so that the offender does not wish to return. For some people the way the Dutch prisons are set up, life is better as a prisoner then it is outside in the real world.

1. Is alternate punishments such as fines and electronic tagging of offenders really “punishment?” Will this deter a prisoner from reoffending?

Alternative punishments such as fines and electronic tagging may be considered a punishment for certain people and certain crimes, such as “victimless” crime such as fraud or money laundering or for people who have a very low chance to reoffend. However, it should not be used in crimes where there is a victim such as assault, rape, attempted murder, etc. First, I do not think fines and tagging offenders will really deter them from reoffending because they get to live their normal life with some minor infringements on their rights and freedoms such as an imposed curfew. Second, while it may be cheaper to put an offender on an ankle bracelet than in prison, what message does it send to the victim? I know that I would highly offended, if I saw the perpetrator going about their daily life with an ankle bracelet living their life, while I have to deal with the emotional impact of the crime.

1. Is the Dutch prison system really fair to the victims of the crime that was committed, especially in violent crimes such as rape or murder?

I do not feel the Dutch prison system is really fair to the victims or victims’ families. While the Dutch system focuses on rehabilitation, it seems to forget about the victims that are impacted by the crimes committed by the perpetrator. In a newspaper article on Dutch prisons called the “Dutch News,” people stated that one of the reasons crime has dropped in Denmark, is that people no longer report crime because they feel the police won’t do anything. A person who committed first-degree murder usually gets an average sentence of 17 years and is out by 12. With an “outdated law on rape and consent, many rapes go unprosecuted,” (Barnes, 2019). This lack of trust in the police force and criminal justice system leads victims to feel isolated and unheard.

1. Is importing prisoners form Norway really solving the shortage of prisoners in Denmark or is it merely masking it?

I support importing prisoners from Norway to solve the shortage of prisoners in Denmark. This will prevent prisons from shutting down and keep prison guards, social workers and support staff who work for the prisons employed.

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