

Netherlands doesn't have enough criminals to fill its prisons as crime to drop

Crime will drop by 0.9 per cent per year in the next five years and as a result, prisons will be forced to close



A prisoner in his cell in Scheveningen Prison, The Hague, Netherlands Photo: Alamy

By Senay Boztas, Amsterdam

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The Netherlands is suffering an unusual crime problem: there isn't enough of it to fill prisons.

Figures from the Dutch ministry of justice released on Monday suggest overall crime will drop by 0.9 per cent a year in the next five years.

Since a third of its 13,500 prison cells are unfilled, this means five prisons will definitely close, and the prison workers' union, FNV, fears 1,900 jail workers will lose their jobs, while 700 could become "mobile" employees based in more than one location.

"More than a third of cells are not used, and the predictions are that it is going to get worse," said Jaap Oosterveer, a spokesman for the ministry of justice. "Obviously, from a social perspective, it is better because crime is down, but if you work in jails, it is not good news."

The Netherlands has been innovative in trying to solve its jail problem. It has “leased” spots in jail to Belgium and Norway, so around 300 Belgian criminals have been held at His Dutch Majesty’s pleasure in Tilberg prison.



The Vecht prison near Utrecht Loenen Maarsen Breukelen Nederhorst den Berg Netherlands Photo: Alamy

Meanwhile, the country signed a new three-year deal with Norway last September, with 240 Norwegian convicts taking up residence at Norgerhaven jail in the prison village of Veenhuizen in Drenthe.

Karl Hillesland, Dutch prisons' director, told the country's broadcaster RTV Drenthe last month that there is even a “small waiting list”, partly due to the success of promotional films shown in Norway.

Everything happens in English, and Mr Hillesland added: “I think the basic values and what we mean about how a sentence should be served is about the same.”

- Crime set to soar overnight as 'cyber' offences included in official total for first time

But, Mr Oosterveer said, this does not solve the “structural problem” of falling crime and extensive prison accommodation, leading to the new plans to close prisons and cut jobs.

The drop in prison sentences is attributed to an older population – less likely to commit crime – and steep fall in violent offences that lead to prison sentences. There are shock exceptions such as the decapitation

of Nabil Amzieb two weeks ago in suspected gang violence in Amsterdam, but figures from the Dutch statistics office, the CBS, show a dramatic 10-year drop in crime victim rates.



Interior of the round dome prison koepelgevangenis in Breda, the Netherlands Photo: Alamy

Recently there has also been a focus on not prosecuting victimless crime and on rehabilitation: shorter sentences, more electronic tagging, programmes on job skills and re-entering the community.

- Violent crime jumps 27 per cent in new figures released by ONS

One notorious Dutch prison, Het Arresthuis in Roermond, near the German border, has found a new life as a luxury hotel. Margje Spätjens, a spokeswoman, said if more defunct prisons followed suit, “we have set a good example of what they can do”.

She added. “The reaction from guests is mostly positive, although some people are a bit anxious.”

However one Dutch MP Nine Kooiman, told Telegraaf newspaper: “If the government really worked at catching criminals, we would not have this problem of empty cells.”

Frans Carbo, head of FNV, said there was another story. “The ministry puts everything down to a decrease in crime in the Netherlands, partly related to the ageing population,” he said. “Actually, the ministry of security and justice is already cutting back and reorganising the whole chain. This starts with

police, where reorganisation is failing, so they are not as good at detection and a lower percentage of crime is solved than ever before...

"Prison sits at the end of the chain and shows the effect in increasing cell vacancy. In 2013, they produced an austerity plan for prisons, youth and psychiatric treatments which runs to 2018 and includes the closure of 19 organisations.

"This plan led to great unrest and to come in the middle of this period with new closures is premature."

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