

Pre-release expectations in Finnish open prisons: a story of mobile phones

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Introduction

Open prisons are a substantial part of the Nordic penal system. In Finland, more than 40% of the sentenced prisoners serve the whole or some of their sentence in an open prison. An aspect of the open prison often recognized, is their benefits related to rehabilitation and preparation for release. Knowledge on whether and how open prisons actually facilitate release from prison and desistance from crime is however limited. This paper presents a prisoner perspective on open prisons, focusing on how prisoners view serving time in open prisons, and how it prepares them to release.

Background and prior research

Finnish prisons are divided in open and closed prisons, labelled according to their security level. As stated in the strategy of the Criminal Sanctions Agency of Finland, prisoners shall not be placed in a prison or prison ward more closed than what is required by prison order and security (Rikosseuraamuslaitos, 2017). Hence, transfer to more open enforcement and gradual release is an important objective. The average daily number of prisoners in the Finnish open prisons in 2018 was 816, which is 21 % of the total average number of prisoners. However, as sentences in open prisons are shorter, if you look at the share of sentences served in open prison, this was 42 %, when not including conversion sentences (Rikosseuraamuslaitos, 2019).

Pre-release expectations, and their connection to post-release behavior, is a topic that has gained increasing interest in recent years. Research by several scholars indicate that a positive outlook on the future among prisoners seems to have a connection to desistance (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Doekhie, Dirkzwager, & Nieuwebeerta, 2017; Nilsson, 2002; Souza, Lösel, Markson, & Lanskey, 2015). At a psychological level, a optimistic outlook gives a sense of agency, which is needed for succeeding in desistance and resettlement in general (Ginneken, 2015). More specifically, there is a connection between criminal and non-criminal behavior expectations and post-release behavior (Doekhie et al., 2017).

Materials and methods

The empirical material for this paper consists of interviews with 45 prisoners prior to their release (< 3 months to release). The interviews took place in five open prisons across Finland, the informants were between 22 and 51 years old, and four of them were women. They served sentences for a broad range of crimes, with sentence lengths varying from 2 months to 13 years. All

informants had a history of repeated offending, although not necessary with any previous prison experience. The content analysis for this paper has focused on open prison and pre-release expectations, how 'the open prison' is present in the informants' pre-release expectations.

Results

The informants were predominantly positive about the open prison where they stayed, and had a bright outlook on their future upon release. "Anxiety about release" as described by Uggen et al (2004), was only affirmed by prisoners with long or lifetime sentences. When prisoners talked about preparation to release, four aspects of the open prison that promote rehabilitation and prepare for release emerged. These were the 1) gradual adjustment to freedom, 2) support for education and work, 3) readiness among prison staff and, 4) contact with the surrounding society.

A gradual adjustment to freedom

The open prison offers more space for the prisoner both indoors and outdoors. The time is, as in a closed prison, strictly scheduled. The time schedule in the open prison however requires a somewhat more active participation from the individual; the prisoner needs to be in time for work and registration, make his own dinner, and so on. Much of the openness and freedom of the open prison is, however, merely a chimera. The control is many areas of life just as strict in an open prison as in a closed. Still, prisoners valued all the facets of the *symbolic freedom*, like the absence of fencing and bars, or the privilege to dispose leisure time as one chooses and to lock one's door instead of being locked up by someone else. They know it is only symbolic, but still they like it.

Supporting education and work

The rationale behind work activities and education in open prisons is both to normalize everyday-life in prison and to improve prisoners' possibilities for participating in the labour market after release. Activity is a duty, and prisoners are assigned either to work, education or rehabilitative activity. Many of the open prison work tasks are routine work, plainly "something to do" for the prisoners, rather than a meaningful occupation. However, in open prisons, some prisoners get to do work outside prison (civilian work). Prisoners generally appreciate the civilian work, mostly because of a higher salary than the activity allowance inside the prison, but also because it might be work that you can put on your CV.

...and you get to do civilian work, like work outside the prison. Here they like have trust in that way, it's nice when you get that kind of trust. And then, when you get to go outside for work, then no one there knows that you're a prisoner. Or, if someone knows, then they don't talk about it. It's nice to see that one's capable of being among normal people and go well with the crew and get along and just feel like normal. (Male, 34 years old)

Readiness of the prison staff

In Finland, prisoners shall have a sentence plan made for them. A plan for the release is also a part of the sentence plan, and of prisoners released in 2018, 78% had a plan for release made (Rikosseuraamuslaitos, 2019). Almost none of the prisoners I interviewed mentioned neither their sentence plan nor the release plan. What they however talked about, was their co-operation with the prison staff – both when they found it working and not working. Many prisoners mentioned the difference between the staff in open and closed prisons:

“Here the liaison guards are, I mean they are not like... In the closed prison they’re constantly at you, have something to say about everything. But if you ask them something, then they only say ”let’s see tomorrow”, “let’s see tomorrow”, ”let’s see tomorrow”. Nothing advances there, not in any direction. But here, here they do something with your case, here they either gives you a positive or a negative decision.” (Woman, 40 years old)

Even if there are differences in prison culture between open and closed prisons, there is no matter of course that staff culture has to differ so much; the training is the same and Criminal Sanctions Agency have the same goals and values no matter the security level.

Contact with the surrounding society

The possibilities for being in contact with family and friends are much better in an open prison than in a closed, and this was a topic often raised by the informants: both concerning visits, leaves, mobile phones and Skype. Especially the access to a prison mobile was praised. The mobile phone made contact with outside world much easier and calling not as expensive as in closed prison.

Conclusion

A majority of the prisoners at the open prison were highly optimistic prior to release, concerning both their reintegration and desistance from crime. It is, however, important to remember that prisoners in an open prison statistically have more reason to be optimistic about their chances upon release. Despite this fact, it seems like serving at an open prison can mitigate some of the pains of release. I have here shown how being gradually adjusted to freedom, having closer contacts with family and friends, getting support from prison staff, and the possibilities of improving skills needed for the labour market, all were important in preparation for release.

Especially the possibilities for closer contact with family and friends was an important pre-release factor. When prisoners talked about the access to mobile phone, it almost sounded like a revolutionary discovery, although the phones were no smartphones and had no internet access. The possibility of daily contact with children or partners, and at the point of time suitable for *them* (and not the prison), was considered very helpful. When having mobile phone, prisoners could

themselves arrange practicalities concerning their release, which undoubtedly is important from a perspective of self-efficacy and agency. This shows that although there are many questions and worries concerning security when discussing implementation of new ICT in prison, the gains must be calculated not only in enhanced prison-life-quality, but also regarding the impact it can have on release and thereby desistance.

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