

Nordic Correctional Exceptionalism in a Non-Nordic Context: Building the Foundations for Actionable Penal Reform

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The opinions expressed in this policy brief are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Nordic Research Council for Criminology.

Findings

- Nordic corrections can serve as a key source of inspiration for concrete and implementable prison reform in the United States. Peer-to-peer mentorship and experiential learning opportunities facilitate the transition from theoretical to practical change.
- Officers and leaders in the Nordic countries see clear advantages to their participation in international collaboration – beyond goals of altruism. Local benefits include unique opportunities for critical self-reflection, improved motivation, group cohesion, heightened professional pride, and identity development.
- American officers describe the levels of stress, (un)safety, (dis)trust, and risk management as key areas of divergence between the Norwegian and Pennsylvanian prison environments.
- Both American and Norwegian correctional professionals see rehabilitation as a central goal of incarceration, but the groups differ in their perception of who is responsible for enabling this change: Norwegian participants see rehabilitation and reentry work as integral to the professional role of a correctional officer, whereas American participants assign responsibility to other prison staff (incl. trained therapists and counselors). Both groups identify differences in both recruitment and training of COs as drivers of this difference.
- American officers and leaders identify cultural differences linked to perceptions of crime and punishment in society, and the professional roles of COs in the prison environment, as key obstacles to actionable change in the U.S. context.

Background

The United States is a global outlier in the field of criminal corrections, and an increasing number of state and local governments have started to look abroad for ways to reform their prison systems. The focus of this project is an ongoing prison reform initiative led by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) in collaboration with correctional services in the Scandinavian countries. The academic research team is led by researchers from the University of Oslo and Drexel University.

During the first phase of the project (2018-2022), which was partially funded by NSfK, correctional officers and leaders from Pennsylvania (PA) took part in international exchanges where they visited and worked in prisons throughout Scandinavia. Starting after the first exchange in 2019, they undertook development efforts that culminated in the establishment of a unique housing unit known as Little Scandinavia (LS) at State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Chester in May 2022. This unit has gone through substantial physical changes, and perhaps more importantly, the staff-to-resident ratio has been increased, and all officers have received additional training that enables them to engage more actively in residents' daily lives and rehabilitation.

The research endeavors in Phase 1 focused on collecting data on international collaboration, knowledge transfer, and reform development.

These data have formed the foundation for academic and policy-oriented publications and presentations on topics including staff well-being, the roles and responsibilities of correctional officers, and opportunities and barriers to prison reform in the US (see more below).

In the second, operational (and ongoing) phase of the project (2022-2025), the PA team is focused on the continued development and adaptations of the unit's policies and protocols, supporting the residents and staff from the LS community, and continue to engage with their Scandinavian peers. Working in parallel, the research team collects data from numerous sources to understand the impact of the housing unit on both staff and residents. This includes both in-prison outcomes such as negative behaviors and measurable changes in the prison climate, and longer-range outcomes related to community reintegration and recidivism.

Nordic relevance

The Nordic countries have gained a reputation as world leaders in corrections and are favored destinations of international practitioners and policymakers interested in first-hand experiences with prison reform. Importantly, neither the one-time visits nor the more long-term international collaborations have been central in Nordic research, and our understanding of what these international collaborations mean to the people and institutions involved remains scarce.

This project seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by taking an interdisciplinary and mixed methods approach to understanding the perspectives and experiences of numerous stakeholders at all phases of the process.

Recommendations

- Both researchers and practitioners should be cautious in assuming that seemingly disparate correctional systems are too different to inspire growth and development in each other – even “penal outliers” like the US and Scandinavia can be environments for actionable reform.
- Nordic correctional services contribute meaningfully to prison reform abroad. In light of current resource demands in the Nordic region, it would be advisable to prioritize collaborations that may lead to actual change abroad and are supported by independent research efforts.

Based on feedback from Nordic participants, future international collaborations should ideally be:

- Bilateral and beneficial to Nordic participants.
- Evaluated, with results being communicated back to staff and incarcerated people at the involved facilities.
- Focused on broad staff engagement and “bottom-up” approaches in the planning phase.

- Based on peer-to-peer interaction and practical, applied learning opportunities for all parties in the practical phase.
- Directly supported by international partners to avoid draining resources from daily operations and creating conflicts of interest between international collaboration and other work.
- Managed equitably, within the Nordic agencies and collaborating nations.

Outputs

Academic output from the project has thus far focused on international collaboration and staff perceptions. Select publications include:

Chanenson, S. L., J. M. Hyatt & S. N. Andersen (in press). Embracing Dignity: Pennsylvania’s Experiment with Scandinavian Correctional Principles. In Eisen, L.-B. & W. J. Brennan (Eds.) *Punitive Excess*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Horowitz, V. L., E. R. Greberman, P. E. Nolan, J. M. Hyatt, C. Uggen, S. N. Andersen & S. L. Chanenson (2021). A Comparative Perspective on Officer Wellness: American Reflections from Norwegian Prisons. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 34(4): 477-497.

Hyatt, J. M., S. N. Andersen, S. L. Chanenson, V. Horowitz & C. Uggen (2021). «We Can Actually Do This”: Adapting Scandinavian Correctional Culture in Pennsylvania. *American Criminal Law Review*, 58(4): 1715-1746.

Hyatt, J. M., S. N. Andersen, V. Horowitz & H. G. N. Lopez (2023). Correctional Officers, the Carceral Environment and Reentry: Perspectives from the U.S. and Scandinavia. *Advancing Corrections Journal*, 15: 101-114.

Outside of academia, the reform effort has been the subject of a three-part documentary series produced by the Swedish national public broadcaster (SVT). The documentary, which is known (in English) as “Prison Project: Little Scandinavia”, has aired (or will air) on all the Nordic public broadcasters beginning in 2023.

A trailer for the documentary is available on [Youtube](#).

The Swedish series is available on [DR](#), [NRK](#), [SVT](#), and [YLE](#).

The project has also attracted substantial media attention both in the US and the Nordic countries. Select newspaper articles featuring the project include:

[As San Quentin prison vows to transform, its residents ask: is change possible?](#) In the Guardian.

[A local experiment in Scandinavian justice.](#) In the Philadelphia Citizen.

[California to transform infamous San Quentin prison with Scandinavian ideas, rehab focus.](#) In Los Angeles Times.

[Prisoners Today, Neighbors Tomorrow.](#) In New York Times.

[«Lille Skandinavia»: Et lite stykke Norge i amerikansk fengsel.](#) In VG.

[How Norway Is Teaching America To Make Its Prisons More Humane.](#) In the Huffington Post.

Knowledge gaps and future research needs

Three main knowledge gaps need to be addressed in future research:

1. The processes that link international visits by policymakers and/or practitioners to actual and actionable change. How many of the hundreds of visits to Nordic prisons and probation services lead to actual change abroad or domestically? What is the nature of this change, and what are the formal and informal barriers to reform?
2. The impact of any Nordic-inspired reform efforts implemented abroad. What is the impact on the first-hand experiences of people living and working in prison, prison culture and climate, budgets and cost/benefit ratios, and post-sentence outcomes such as reoffending, health, and labor market participation?
3. The impacts of international collaboration on Nordic partners. How do these projects impact the experiences of people who work and live in prison here, and what are the costs and benefits – social, cultural, and financial – of engaging in international collaborations?

In sum, addressing these knowledge gaps would both strengthen Nordic criminology and support policy development.

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The project

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