

A more Nordic Norway? Examining prisons in 21st century Iceland

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Nordic Penal Exceptionalism: Finding Iceland

John Pratt put Nordic penal exceptionalism firmly on the criminological agenda (Pratt, 2008a, b). His two papers from 2008 in the *British Journal of Criminology* described penal practice in Norway, Sweden and Finland. This was then placed in sharp contrast to what they called Anglophone penal excess in Pratt and Eriksson's subsequent book (2011). Pratt travelled to the Nordic countries to establish why penal practice was restrained, positive and generally form an exception to penal trends worldwide. Ironically, the key ingredient of exceptionalism is in fact its semantic opposite, *normalisation*. It refers to efforts to maintain in prison life as state of normality, for prison life to be as 'normal' as possible in order to facilitate Nordic prisons' main objective of preparing prisoners for a return to society. The common phrase used is that Nordic prisons are places *of* punishment but not places *for* punishment: the deprivation of liberty is in the fact the punishment whilst the stay in prison should facilitate a prisoner's betterment or personal growth.

Pratt and Eriksson (2011) substantiate their thesis twofold. Their first point is that rates of imprisonment are low in the Nordic countries. Prison is seen as a last resort. The second is that material prison conditions are simply better in the Nordic countries than in places like the UK, Australia, the US or New Zealand. Prisons are smaller in the Nordic countries. Prison officer/prisoner relations are more cordial and less hostile possibly partly due to a more beneficial staff/prisoner ratio. They also refer to the quality of prison life overall, with Nordic prisons being cleaner, quieter with offering more personal space and better visiting arrangements (p. 12). In addition, prison officer training is longer and more thorough and prison officer occupational culture more geared towards rehabilitation. Finally, Pratt and Eriksson emphasise the wide availability of work and education programmes. In summary, Pratt and Eriksson were struck that Nordic prisons were a world away from Anglophone prisons, both in size and in climate.

It probably is some of Norway's prisons that exemplify Nordic penal exceptionalism best. Norway's prison estate is famously small. It consists of about 40 small prisons hosting a relatively small prison population of under 4,000 prisoners. While Norwegian prisons vary in shape and size, its exceptional status is mainly illustrated through two prisons, *Halden* Prison in Southern Norway, near the Swedish border and Island Prison *Bastøy*, which idyllic location in the Oslo fjord matches idyllic descriptions by criminologists and journalists (e.g., Adams, 2010, James, 2013). In fact, both prisons have enjoyed so many visits by policy makers and penal experts, that one might actually regard them as sites of penal pilgrimage. To be sure, both are impressive. Halden is newly built, swanky and opened by the King in 2010. It features artwork by a well-known Norwegian graffiti artist with the pseudonym Dolk, a professional sound studio and a weekend retreat where a prisoner can enjoy a weekend with partner and children. Although high security and with an intimidating high wall and plenty of '*prisony*' aspects, through its design and equipment it is clear that Halden prison is serious about giving prisoners chances.

Bastøy prison, dubbed the 'jewel in the crown of the Norwegian penal estate (Pratt, 2008a) is a sight to behold. Boone, Althoff and Koenraad (2016) add to a sense of pilgrimage by emphasising the exhausting nature of the journey to *Bastøy*, requiring two ferries (a regular crossing that connects the towns of Moss and Horten across the Oslo fjord and the dedicated ferry from the town of Horten to the island). The latter ferry is operated by prisoners and brings the visitor to *Bastøy*

where a collection of buildings, trees, meadows and rocky shores await them. *Bastøy* is effectively a prison farm where prisoners care for the environment and a variety of livestock. Whereas *Halden* is distinctly prison-like, *Bastøy's un-prisonness* catches out prisoners and academics alike.

Whilst *Bastøy* and *Halden* prisons highlight the attractiveness of the thesis that the Norwegian prison system is 'special', Pratt's thesis is not without its detractors. Ugelvik (2012) explicitly warned about a too rosy description of Nordic exceptionalism, in particular in relation to 'othering' within and outside the Norwegian criminal justice system, a point very much echoed by Scharff Smith who highlights the rise of penal populism in Denmark, and elsewhere (Scharff Smith, 2012). At the same time, however, Scharff Smith mentions Danish open prisons and the possibility for conjugal visits as examples of the traditionally humane Nordic penal orientation. Barker (2013) speaks of a Janus-faced mode of governance in the Nordic countries where the strong and trusted state can be quite intrusive. Mathiesen (2012) suggested that we should not overplay the extent to which penal policy making in the Nordic countries is harmonious and consensus driven and also notes that prison conditions rather vary between prisons. Lappi-Seppälä (2013) document relatively low punitive public attitudes but also notes the role of pre-trial detention, as does Scharff Smith (2012). In addition, Lappi-Seppälä and Tonry (2013) open their chapter from 2013 by rehearsing the view that Nordic penal policy is moderate, levels of trust high and level of inequality relatively low. Finally, Pakes and Holt (2015, 2017) considered the high levels of foreign national prisoners in Norway and corresponding high rates of deportations to suggest that the benign aspects of the Norwegian prison system may be particularly reserved for prisoners deemed worthy of them, and these may in particular be exclusive of foreign national prisoners. The existence of a prison exclusively for foreign nationals, *Kongsvinger*, may also be telling, as is the existence of immigration detention facility Trandum (see Ugelvik and Ugelvik, 2013). It also must be mentioned that prison rates in Norway have been on the rise, although they remain low for European standards, these are not exceptionally low within the Nordic countries.

Thus, whereas the reputation of the Norwegian prison system has travelled far and wide pertinent issues exist. We can, however, say, that the prisons of *Halden* and *Bastøy* serve as symbols (perhaps rather than as representatives) of the system overall. It remains the case that in atmosphere, material conditions and ethos, the Norwegian system, by and large, and notwithstanding the notable issues that challenge it, remains a beacon of which the rest of the world would do well to take note of (Pratt and Eriksson, 2012).

Pratt was also criticised for this method. He relied heavily on visits, or prison tourism, as the method tends to be referred to (Pratt and Eriksson, 2012). The charge was made that fleeting visits limit the degree of insight that can be gained, as well as the fact that Pratt was no native speaker. Having taken note of this, the two authors of this paper rely in part on a similar method, which was recently defended by Pakes (2015). He advocated the utility of prison visits from a comparative perspective. In addition, one of the authors of this article is Icelandic, a native speaker and a visitor of Icelandic penal establishments for decades. The other has visited prisons over many years, in several countries spanning three continents. We are confident in saying that the combined skills and experiences of both authors have provided a firm footing, both empirically and culturally, for this article.

So, what about Iceland? Is Iceland like Norway, or are its prisons perhaps even better? Interestingly, John Pratt did not include Iceland in his initial travels assuming that the estate would be too small to offer genuine lessons. But there seems to be a distinct possibility that Iceland may have even more to offer to the criminological imagination. Its prison rate is even lower than those in Norway (47.4 per 100,000 in 2014 versus 72.8 in Norway) and has been for quite some time (see Table 1). Its prisons (only six in total) are even smaller than in Norway and house less than 200 prisoners, all told. Judging by the fact that the small prison estate includes open prisons and halfway houses, it would seem as if in Iceland the breeding ground for positive prisons could be even more fertile than in Norway. These bare facts suggest that Iceland is at least worth our scrutiny. With Iceland also famous for equal gender relations and other forms of inclusivity (Hertz, 2016, Duvander, Lappegård, Andersen, Garðarsdóttir, Neyer, and Viklund (2016) would that inclusivity extend to prisoners?

Iceland and Norway: Cultures of *likhet* and ‘punishment as an afterthought’

Let us make the initial case for Iceland as a candidate to rival Norway’s albeit contested, beacon status. Gunnlaugsson and Galliher (2000) document the relative low rates of crime in Iceland. Iceland’s murder rate is 0.6 per 100.000 which is quite but perhaps not exceptionally low. However, in Iceland this translates to one or two murders per year. Even in the New Millennium there have been whole years without any homicide at all. Sadly, in 2017 there was the murder of Birna Brjánsdóttir. This 20-year-old woman went missing in downtown Reykjavík in January 2017. Eight days later her body was found after a search operation that involved much of the county’s population. Briefly, this most extraordinary event briefly made world headlines due to its extraordinary character: an (initially) unsolved murder case is something that hardly exists in Icelandic living memory (Pakes and Gunnlaugsson, 2017). Gunnlaugsson and Galliher also note a history of poor record keeping of crimes. Whilst other aspects of public life were keenly documented, it seems that crime was simply not important enough to receive the same treatment in the 19th century and for most of the 20th century. And where documentation does exist, Court records seem to evidence very few serious crimes from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Thirdly, there is the fact that prisons have not been purposely designed and built. Instead, existing buildings have been adapted in throughout the 20th century, as is firmly within the Nordic tradition. In many other jurisdictions, it seems that prisons were specifically built to reinforce the belief that prisons by necessity are unique establishments housing uniquely dangerous populations. In Iceland, instead, the fact that prisons did not require dedicated architecture reinforces the notion of normalisation that characterises Nordic penal exceptionalism. Fourth, there is the aforementioned low imprisonment rate (see also Ólafsdóttir and Bragadóttir, 2006). Whilst it could be argued that this statistic is distorted due to the fact that there is a waiting list, the very existence of this waiting list is in fact the fifth argument for our thesis: where there is little or no discomfort with prisoners simply going back home after their conviction to serve their sentence several months later (on occasion even a few years later) when a cell has become available is another indicator that shows that crimes and criminals are not usually greeted with a toxic mix of fury and fear. Finally, the very open nature of several penal establishments adds to the overall picture that crime is not something that society has seen the need to ‘tackle’ in any major or dramatic fashion.

In addition, let us briefly consider whether the cultural conditions associated with Nordic penal policy are in evidence in Iceland. Focusing our comparison with Norway, there is much that Iceland and Norway have in common. Both have suffered the yoke of foreign rule. Norway gained

independence proper in 1905 after centuries of domination by Sweden and Denmark. Iceland only achieved full independence from Denmark in 1944. National identity in both countries is defined on the one hand in conjunction with their regional neighbours, as there is something akin to a regional Nordic identity. There is collaboration too, not least in penal and criminological matters. On the other hand, national identity both in Iceland and in Norway is to a degree constructed in defiance to former Nordic oppressors, with nationalism rooted in the sentiments of relatively recent independence and nation making.

In addition, similar climatic and demographic conditions in Iceland and Norway can be said to have created societies with similar values. Small communities needing to survive in harsh conditions allow for little space for social stratification and have a need for a communal spirit. Centuries of austerity and harsh economic conditions and adverse climates have created an outlook on life that eschews ostentatiousness and honours a simple life with a keen eye for the needs of a neighbour. The concept of 'likhet' in Norway is often used to describe this, a notion that refers to equality as well as to similarity: we are all alike, and we are all on a level. Iceland has been described similarly (Baumer, Wright, Kristinsdottir, and Gunnlaugsson (2002). There seems little in Icelandic history that suggests a need for expressive or emotional punishment of certain segments of society. This is also akin to Norway and other Nordic countries. Both Norway and Iceland are thinly populated. With survival in its harsh climates a matter of collective endeavour, the notion of 'surplus' populations, is historically unknown. Prisons therefore never had to take on a purpose of 'removing' unwanted populations from society. Imprisonment, historically, came at a cost as a small community would lose a pair of hands.

But Iceland and Norway are not the same. Whereas in Norway there is a dominant social democratic tradition, this is less the case in Iceland, where the political left is more fragmented. The welfare state was slower in developing in Iceland. The public sector is relatively small and income taxation is lower. Taxation tends to be less progressive as well. Overall, historically the State has spent less on welfare and does not seem to have been quite as dominant in shaping society as it has been in other Nordic countries (Ólafsson, c1992).

It seems that in Iceland, whereas egalitarian attitudes are strong, income inequalities have been long in existence and much exacerbated in the years leading up to the Financial Crash of 2008. It has also been held that whereas there seems much store put into the notion that Iceland is 'classless', recently research shows a moderate degree of class awareness (Oddsson, 2010) in which income inequality plays a major part (Oddsson, 2016). Whilst social distances are small, a sense of difference seems present nevertheless. In order to understand this apparent tension between egalitarianism and inequality it is important to understand the fiercely held Icelandic values of independence and individualism (Grenstad, 2003). Whereas community is very important, notions of freedom and independence are too. Such sentiments may have limited both the size of the state, as well as its redistributive power.

There have been no shortages of social conflict, in particular strikes and labour disputes. The consensus model, highly valued in the Nordic countries seems to have characterised public life in Iceland to a lesser degree. In fact, the great Icelandic novel *Independent People*, by Nobel Prize winning author Laxness actually portrays quite a divided society. Laxness novel makes much of the (waning) influence of high status individuals, such as merchants and the clergy, against which the

protagonist Bjartur of Summerhouses (Laxness, 1944) spends a life time of effort asserting his independence. Independence seems as much an independence through self-sufficiency (i.e., from the elements) as from hegemonic segments of society through debt bondage. It therefore seems that Iceland's self-narrative does involve fighting social stratification rather than denying its existence, which possibly is less the case in Norway.

Geopolitically, it is important to note that Norway in fact borders Russia in the North, whereas Iceland is much closer to the United States. Reykjavík is in fact billed as an attractive stopover destination for transatlantic flights, furthering tourism to Iceland. Tomasson (1980) argues that Iceland has some characteristics of settler societies, such as in Canada and the US: a strong work ethic, individualism, and a premium on self-sufficiency. This may also help to explain the limited nature of the state, the welfare state and the role of the state in furthering equality. Thus, it seems that Iceland's kinship to North America extends beyond its geographic position (Ólafsson, 2003). This may also help explain the enthusiasm for embracing neo-liberalism in the 1990s, which was much more against the grain in the other Nordic countries (Þórhallsson, 2010; Þórhallsson and Kattel, 2013). It therefore seems that whereas there are many similarities in the family of Nordic nations, subtle differences in values exist and are important (Ólafsson,1992).

From small to tiny: Prisons in Iceland

Let us consider prisons in Iceland in more detail. Data from Iceland as submitted to the Council of Europe show a remarkable state of affairs. The prison rate in Iceland is still substantially lower than that of Norway but that said the total prison population has risen from no more than 89 in 2000 to 154 in 2014, which is a 73% rise, although it perhaps deserves mention that 2000 is regarded in Iceland as a 'slow' year in relation to sentencing. Prisoner numbers were slightly higher in the late 1990s (108 in 1997, 101 in 1998 and 91 in 1999) (Gunnlaugsson, 2011). Prison ratios increased from 29 to 47.3 which represents a change of 'only' 63%, affected as it is by changes in the general population. With such a small population, fluctuations in certain groups such as women and foreign nationals are to be expected but over time we can discern a rise of foreign national prisoners. That said, their actual number in 2000 was only 2 (on the census date). It was 22 in 2014. The data from 2009 look distinctly anomalous. Inquiries at the relevant agency in Iceland indeed revealed these to be in error. It is perhaps significant that the size of the prison estate has not risen quite as much (138 to 163, a rise of only 18%). It is just that prisons have been filled more.

Year	Total number of prisoners (incl. detainees)	Prison population per 100,000	Capacity of penal institutions	Prison density per 100 spaces	% female	% foreign	Escapes per 10,000
2000	82	29.0	138	59	3.7	3.7	480 (5)
2001	110	38.8	138	80			90.9(1)
2002	107	37.3	138	77.5	4.7	9.3	80.6(1)
2003	112	38.8	137	81.8			0
2004	115	39.6	137	83.9	6.1	7.0	0
2005	119	40.5	137	86.9	5.9	11.8	87.0(1)
2006	119	39.9	137	86.9	5.0	13.4	84.0(1)
2007	115	38.1	128	89.8	7.0	13.9	0

2008	140	46.0	142	98.6	6.4	20.7	434.8 (5)
2009	118	36.9	91	129.7	5.1	58.5	142.9(2)
2010	165	51.9	163	101.2	4.8	16.4	169.5 (2)
2011	149	46.8	161	92.5	5.4	18.8	0
2012	152	47.6	165	92.1	8.6	24.3	0
2013	152	47.2	165	92.1	3.3	15.1	131.6(2)
2014	154	47.3	163	94.5	1.9	14.1	0

National statistics shed some light on sentencing practices. A 20% increase in numbers of incarcerations occurred during 2007-2015. A peak had been reached in 2013 with a total of 563 persons receiving a prison sentence, going down to 490 in 2015. We also see an increase in total length of sentencing from 2007 to 2013 with a notable drop taking place in both 2014 and 2015. The total length of prison sentences meted out by the courts in 2007 was 300 years in prison but in 2013 this total had jumped up to around 423 years, or an increase of about one-third. In 2014 and 2015 we see a marked drop or down to a total of 286 years in prison, a similar length as in 2007. Thus, sentences gradually became longer in the new Millennium in addition to a growing number of imprisonment sentences until reaching a peak in 2013 with a notable drop since then.

The diminutive size of the Icelandic prison estate cannot be overstated. Iceland's population is 340,000 and it counted no more than 154 prisoners in 2014. Whereas on a global scale Norway's prison estate is small, Iceland's barely registers. One of us visited the (now closed) urban prison *Hegningarhúsið*, in downtown Reykjavík. Its capacity was around 20 with no more than 6 prisoners held at the time (May 2016). The building at one time doubled up as a court house. In the Icelandic prison system, small means very small indeed.

Iceland's main high security prison, *Litla-Hraun* is in the South and holds 87 prisoners. It is Iceland's biggest establishment and looks and feels like a regular prison. There is no doubt that prisoner-staff relations are characterised by informality and cordiality. Iceland's prisons tend to be calm, with major disturbances virtually unknown and a culture of decency generally in place (Kjartansdóttir, 2017).

The prison in north-west of Iceland, *Kvíabryggja*, which looks like a seaside farmhouse, is virtually an open prison facility. This prison has a capacity for 22 inmates and has recently been renovated. Most of the bankers and bank directors who currently have served time in prison have been placed there. It is easy to be seduced by panoramic photographs of this prison with its mountainous backdrop. It visually reinforces the notion that in Iceland nature is big and prisons are small, dwarfed as the prison is by its surroundings. Prisoners have in room internet access as well.

In the South, there is *Sogn* open prison. It fits the Icelandic prison estate perfectly. It is a former sanatorium. It holds approximately 20 prisoners many of whom go out to work each day. It holds family events and prisoners are free to explore the immediate surroundings as long as they remain in sight, which in fact affords quite some space to prisoners. There are no fences or walls. *Sogn* prison is visible from a distance as it stands at the foot of a hill at the edge of southern Icelandic flatlands, which, although to a far lesser degree than Norwegian island prison *Bastøy*, adds to a

sense of arrival. A little stream adds to its idyllic location set against a hilly back drop. There are sizeable communal spaces and kitchens on each floor of which there are two. Prisoners and staff seem to mix easily. Prisoners pooled together money to buy certain communal luxury items such as a large flat screen TV and a table tennis table. Prisoners do much of the housekeeping and gardening. *Sogn* open prison is small, calm, and indeed, feels like a hospital transformed into a very low secure penal establishment.

Akureyri prison in the North has a capacity of 10 prisoners. It sits within the Northern city of *Akureyri* where it shares a building with the police station. It provides a music studio and internet access (but not in room), but unlike some other prisons in the country, outside space is scarce. As in many other Nordic prisons, the communal kitchen is well equipped and heavily in use.

We must also discuss the big novelty in the Icelandic prison system: newly built *Hólmsheiði* prison is reminiscent of *Halden* in Southern Norway in more than respect. It is 'unprisony' colourful with bright colours designed in so that areas can be referred to by colour rather than number or letter. It opened in 2016. It has cells for 56 prisoners including a custody facility. It is cleverly designed with features such as communal kitchens (which also exist in other Icelandic prisons), relatively spacious cells with views to the outside. Like *Halden* prison in Norway it has the facility for children and partners to stay overnight in a dedicated on-site apartment. The new prison holds women in a separate wing. There is no longer a separate women's prison in Iceland. It will mainly be used as a reception unit for in-coming prisoners, shorter prison sentences and for those who fail to pay fines. The cells are relatively spacious with high ceilings. Outside spaces are cleverly designed and there is plenty of room for meaningful activity. It must also be emphasised that this is the first purpose built prison since Iceland gained full independence in 1944. Second, as much as a trend break this is, it will not be Iceland highest capacity prison. The high specification to which this prison is built, which honours the Nordic prison tradition, in particular as the commissioning had occurred after the Financial Crash of 2008. At the same time, the newly built prison signals a departure. It is, for Iceland standards, very much high security, probably in a setting that does not really require it. Its setting and its newly built status lends it, despite its mod cons, a certain degree of sterility that is unknown in other more organically developed prisons in Iceland. The resolute priority that security has been afforded must be regarded as an import from other penal cultures.

With the new prison in *Hólmsheiði* Iceland's prison capacity will markedly increase, or up to a total of 196. Yet it remains to be seen whether *Hólmsheiði* will be used to its maximum with this new facility. If so, the prison rate is bound to increase. The new prison is aimed in part at solving this waiting-list problem. The long waiting list (which after a steady increase reached 500 in early 2017) was a key factor triggering prison leniency in the new law passed by *Alþingi* (Iceland's Parliament in 2016 (Law no 15, 2016). The new law was actually drafted as early as 2012 but only made it into law four years later, another instance of evidence that prison policy is not exactly urgent business in Iceland. The law makes some modest changes such as early release for young prisoners and an increased reliance on electronic monitoring, both aimed at reducing the prison waiting list. However, enough in its response to the draft bill the prisoner interest group *Afstaða* argued that the changes go nowhere far enough (Afstaða, 2015). *Afstaða* argued for a stronger focus on rehabilitation and the betterment of prisoners. Through *Afstaða* prisoner interests are actively represented both socially and politically. Interestingly, it also tends to look to the Norwegian penal system for inspiration.

Also important is the proliferation of initiatives to keep people out of prison or, should they serve time in prison, to keep that time to a minimum. In 2012 those sentenced to 9 months or less could apply for community service. In 2016 this was extended to those sentenced to up to 12 months. Those under 21 years of age normally serve no more than one third of their sentence in prison. Electronic monitoring may also shorten a prison sentence with a tag the price for early release. Another noteworthy prison alternative came into effect in 1995. Those inmates who are nearing completion of a longer sentence or those who have received a short sentence and secured steady employment or education, are eligible to be released from prison to serve their sentence at a half-way house run by a private, non-profit association named *Vernd* in Reykjavík. There, inmates pay a rent and can hold an outside job or attending school and have more interaction with their families, but under strict rules of conduct (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000). In 2014 a total of 82 individuals served part of their prison sentence at *Vernd* (Prison and Probation Administration, 2016). Thus, we can say that keeping people out of prison remains a mainstay of Icelandic prison policy.

This brief survey of the prison system reinforces the idea of punishment as an afterthought. Prisons were never purpose built and waiting lists further exemplify a lack of urgency when it comes to locking criminals away. Add to the lack of safety as a priority in much of the estate a picture emerges of a country in which faith has never been placed in the prison system (perhaps the criminal justice system more generally) to keep it safe. Even in high secure *Litla Hraun* prison, one of us was told an anecdote that may exemplify Icelandic penal culture. The story was that in the past the perimeter fence was of rather dubious quality. When prisoners played football in the prison yard it would regularly happen that the ball would fly over the fence. Whenever this occurred a prisoner would simply take a run-up, scale the fence, get the ball and return to the prison in the same way after which play continued. The fact that the story is told serves to enhance that vision of prisons: it serves to downplay (perhaps even ridicule) the notion of security, even in the country's then single high secure prison. However, a new fence was erected in 1995 and a watch tower (quite anomalous, both culturally and architecturally) was added as well.

Prisons in Iceland: is small always beautiful?

Whilst the prison estate in Iceland has definite appeal, sadly there are other aspects worth noting. The fact that punishment rarely if ever mattered greatly in the Icelandic public consciousness has led to a degree of benign neglect. Funding is perennially under threat. Whereas newly built *Hólmsheiði* is certainly high spec, other prisons in Iceland do seem to suffer from a lack of investment. This is causing particular strains.

To be sure, small prisons offer advantages. Quality of prison life tends to correlate with prison size (e.g. Johnsen, Grahnheim and Helgesen (2011)). Problems tend to be more visible and more quickly resolved, a 'personal touch' is more likely to be in place and very small prisons are far less likely to face major disorder. This is certainly the case in Iceland's prisons (Baldursson, 2000). However, small prisons have their downsides too as the size of the estate may hinder the development of specialist services. In Iceland, this is particularly noticeable in the areas of social care, mental health and forensic psychology. It was argued recently that at least a dozen psychologists would be required but there are no more than one psychologist and two social workers available (RÚV, 2017). That means that any prisoner who requires this specialist input is likely to struggle to see their needs met. Other

facilities that are common in many prisons elsewhere such as group work for specific types of offenders are difficult to organise, due to a lack of critical mass. Inevitably this includes specific services for women. Women are held at the new prison as there is no longer a specific prison for women in Iceland. It means that one prison will have to do regardless of their individual circumstances, as there is no possibility of progressing through the system by, say, moving from a high secure to a low secure prison over the course of a sentence. On the one hand, therefore the Iceland prison system is well set for an informal and individualised approach to prisoners but there is a lack of institutional capacity to deal with specific, let alone complex needs.

In terms of educational opportunities for prisoners we see a similar picture: one of good will and good intentions but lack of specific strategy or funding. Education is deemed important and many prisoners engage in it. At the same time, the director of prisons calls for a prisoner education policy and for funds to be made available (Þorkelsson, 2017).

There are other factors that refer more to the size of prison estate and its (lack of) social importance. The training of prison guards is nowhere near the standard of its Norwegian counterpart. Basic training for prison officers in Iceland is now 12 weeks, with a further 10 weeks after having worked in a prison for some months. A typical training cohort may consist of six aspiring officers. Over time, the focus has shifted from 'being on guard' to an emphasis on care and communication. The Nordic code of ethics, which was compiled jointly and approved by the Nordic prison officers' associations, includes this statement: "The job consists first and foremost in the custody and care of the prisoners, and members shall in the course of their work make a priority of humaneness in inter-personal relations. Thus, members must maintain their skills, seek to increase them and at all times have the goal of adding to their knowledge" (Gíslason, p. 8). To be fair, the training does include criminology, psychology as well as human rights and ethics.

It can therefore be argued that prisons in Iceland have developed the way they have through culture and habit. Where prisons are small it is easier for inclusivity and positive microcultures to develop, simply due to visibility, lack of stratification and division and the fact that communication lines are short and power is neither remote nor intractable, unlike what is said about prisons and power in the UK (Crewe, 2012). There does seem to be a culture of decency in Icelandic prisons. This is perhaps exemplified by 'jerk-gate', the upheaval caused by a prisoner complaining that he was called a 'jerk' by an officer (Fountaine, 2016). The fact that this in fact was deemed to be newsworthy is telling.

But this excessive focus on an incivility is rather in contrast to the issue of prison suicides. The small nature of the Icelandic prison estate has not prevented 5 suicides from occurring in the last 15 years (Eiðsson, 2017). This is highly significant and as disturbing as it is puzzling. How does a prison estate with the informal advantages that small prisons offer fail to prevent this large number of suicides in its tiny prison population? The answer must at least in part lie in the fact that psychological services are scant and the fact that training for operational prison staff is relatively rudimentary. In fact, Iceland's sole prison psychiatrist resigned in 2017 lamenting the lack of capacity for forensic psychiatric care (Sigurþórsdóttir, 2017). The paucity of specialist services is frequently lamented in particular psychological services. The number of suicides (the most recent instance occurring in remote Akureyri in 2017, with its capacity of only 10) seems to demonstrate that size is simply not enough. Professional and specialist social and mental health care is also required to produce a prison

system that is safe and that can be rehabilitative. Hence, we cannot assume that small sized prisons that evolved in a positive prison culture will be sufficient. What is also required is both a vision and specific investment.

Conclusion

At first sight, Iceland's prisons have charm. They are small, staff prisoner relationships seem informal and benign and prison governors seem of a similar ilk to their counterparts in Norway. However, the estate is simply too small, the funding too precarious and its societal priority too low, to ensure the sustainability of a truly positive prison system. The new prison in *Hólmsheiði* might symbolize Iceland moving into the western world of punishment with a closed institution, high security and modern facilities, but it also represents moving into conditions more like others. Arguably the new prison both enhances Iceland's status as a place where we are relaxed about crime and criminals, but at the same time there is the hint that punishment is taken now more seriously.

The difference between Norwegian and Icelandic prisons may be a reflection of two countries' difference in the role and mission of the state that were discussed earlier. Whereas in Norway the state funds its ambition to have a rehabilitative prison system to sustain its historic commitment to rehabilitation (Aas, 2014), in Iceland the system is simply left much more to its own devices. This may be well a reflection of the role the state plays in Icelandic life, its higher reluctance to taxation and the assumptions that underlie the role of the state and the premium on self-sufficiency and independence. So, whilst culturally in keeping with other Nordic countries its lack of vision and investment sets it apart as the state simply has not made its mark on the prison system to the same extent.

It could be argued that on the one hand, it would be good if prison systems worldwide were more 'Icelandic': small, calm and corresponding, by and large to traditional Nordic humanitarian values. But at the same time, what is perhaps more transferable is Norway's statutory and financial commitment to its prison system which, sadly is by and large lacking in Iceland. Iceland, therefore may offer a degree of inspiration, rather than practical solutions to the penal chaos that continuous to exist in far too many parts of the world. Meanwhile Iceland does offer further evidence for a specific Nordic flavour of penal practice that extends from Scandinavia to Iceland as a North Atlantic outpost that the rest of the world may well do well to at least sample.

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