

Why Norway's prison system is so successful

By Christina Sterbenz, Business Insider, 12 December 2014

Editor's note: further recent information from Wikipedia follows this article.

In Norway, fewer than 4,000 of the country's 5 million people were behind bars [as of August 2014](#).

That makes Norway's incarceration rate just 75 per 100,000 people, compared to [707 people for every 100,000](#) people in the US.

On top of that, when criminals in Norway leave prison, they stay out. It has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world [at 20%](#). The US has [one of the highest](#): 76.6% of prisoners are re-arrested within five years.

Norway also has a relatively low level of crime compared to the US, [according to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security](#). The majority of crimes reported to police there are theft-related incidents, and violent crime is mostly confined to areas with drug trafficking and gang problems.

Based on that information, it's safe to assume Norway's criminal justice system is doing *something* right. Few citizens there go to prison, and those who do usually go only once. So how does Norway accomplish this feat? The country relies on a concept called "[restorative justice](#)," which aims to repair the harm caused by crime rather than punish people. This system focuses on rehabilitating prisoners.

Take a look at [Halden Prison](#), and you'll see what we mean. The 75-acre facility maintains as much "normalcy" as possible. That means no bars on the windows, kitchens fully equipped with sharp objects, and friendships between guards and inmates. For Norway, removing people's freedom is enough of a punishment.

Like many prisons, Halden seeks to prepare inmates for life on the outside with vocational programs: wood-working, assembly workshops, and even a recording studio.

Halden isn't an anomaly either. [Bastoy prison is also quite nice](#).

As Bastoy prisoner governor Arne Wilson, also a clinical psychologist, explained to [The Guardian](#):

In closed prisons we keep them locked up for some years and then let them back out, not having had any real responsibility for working or cooking. In the law, being sent to prison is nothing to do with putting you in a terrible prison to make you suffer. The punishment is that you lose

your freedom. If we treat people like animals when they are in prison they are likely to behave like animals. Here we pay attention to you as human beings.

All of these characteristics are starkly different from America's system. When a retired warden from New York visited Halden, [he could barely believe the accommodations](#). "This is prison utopia," he said in a documentary about his trip. "I don't think you can go any more liberal — other than giving the inmates the keys."

In general, prison should have five goals, as described by criminologist [Bob Cameron](#): retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, restoration, and rehabilitation. In his words though, "Americans want their prisoners punished first and rehabilitated second."

Norway adopts a less punitive approach than the US and focuses on making sure prisoners don't come back. A 2007 [report on recidivism](#) released by the US Department of Justice found that strict incarceration actually increases offender recidivism, while facilities that incorporate "cognitive-behavioural programs rooted in social learning theory" are the most effective at keeping ex-cons out of jail.

The maximum life sentence in Norway shows just how serious the country is about its unique approach. With few exceptions (for genocide and war crimes mostly), judges can only sentence criminals to a maximum of 21 years. At the end of the initial term, however, [five-year increments](#) can be added onto to the prisoner's sentence every five years, indefinitely, if the system determines he or she isn't rehabilitated.

That's why Norwegian extremist [Anders Behring Breivik](#), who killed 77 people in a bombing and mass shooting, was only sentenced to 21 years. Most of the outrage and incredulity over that sentence, however, came from the US.

Overall, Norwegians, even some parents who lost children in the attack, seemed satisfied with the sentence, The [New York Times](#) reported. Still, Breivik's sentence, as is, put him behind bars for less than 100 days for every life he took, as [The Atlantic](#) noted. On the other hand, if the system doesn't determine Breivik "rehabilitated," he could stay in prison forever.

To those working within Norway's prison system, the short sentences and somewhat luxurious accommodations make complete sense. As [Are Hoidel](#), Halden Prison's director, puts it: "Every inmates in Norwegian prison are going back to the society. Do you want people who are angry — or people who are rehabilitated?"

Further notes from Wikipedia:

Incarceration in Norway's criminal justice system focuses on the principle of **restorative justice** and rehabilitating prisoners. Correctional facilities focus on the care of the offender and making sure they can become a functioning member of society again. They have one of the lowest **recidivism rates** in the world, currently 20%,^[1] with approximately 3,933 offenders in prison,^[2] and one of the lowest crime rates in the world.^[3] Norway's prisons are renowned for being some of the best and most humane in the world. Norway does not have the **death penalty** or sentence people to **life imprisonment**. The maximum custodial sentence is 21 years,^[1] however the courts do have power to add to sentences as they see fit during sentences if they do not feel the offender has been fully rehabilitated.

Prison population

According to the World Prison Brief website, Norway has 3,933 people within their 54 different institutions as of January 2017. Of those 3,933 people that are inside the prison, 23% are remand prisoners or awaiting their pretrial. There are only 0.1% juveniles within their correctional system. There is also only about 6% of females within the prisons which makes the male percentage a staggering 94%. Another interesting fact about the prison population in Norway is that a little more than 30% of the prison population are foreigners and are not Norwegian natives.

The official capacity that Norway can hold inside of their prisons is 4,092 people which means that their institutions aren't over capacity yet. They still have plenty of space to put people that they find guilty of committing a crime. However, the amount of people that are being locked up has been increasing in the last decade or so. As of the year 2000, there were about 2,500 people locked up inside of the correctional facilities in Norway. In 2008, there were just below 3,400 people locked up and in 2016, there were 3,850 people that were locked up. The prison population rate jumped from 57 per 100,000 people in 2000 to 73 per 100,000 people in 2016. Although this may not be the highest jump, it still shows that there is an increase of incarceration people in Norway.^[7]

Restorative justice in Norway

Norway has one of the lowest incarceration and recidivism rates of the world, their method is so effective other countries use the "Norwegian model". Norway prefers to use alternative penalties, also known as "penalties in society",^[8] but "penalties in prison" are still used.

Penalties in society means, that the offender will serve their time out of jail, they will have to meet with an official a specified number of times as per ordered by the court. In return then can stay out of prison if they follow the order by the court, in most cases they retain their current employment, or the court orders employment, they get to continue being with their families (children, spouses, etc), they can often continue their normal life but without crime. Penalties in Society only are put in place if there is no burden to be put on the victims, their families or society as a result.^[8]

Community service is the most common penalty in society, it is measured in hours not days, months or years. Approximately 2500 people are sentenced this form of punishment a year and the hours can range from a minimum of 30 to maximum of 70, the average number given to an individual is usually around 70 hours and they should be completed in under a year.^[9] The community service is usually spent in social work, the individual spends their time in churches, schools, kindergartens, volunteer organizations and social organizations. Community service may include “change programs”, treatment, special conversations and other programs that may be included with the crime. The correctional system has a right to add other conditions like prohibition of drug or alcohol use, outside of the court orders. The correctional system will draw up a “implementation plan” under the guidelines of the court order, then they can add programs or conditions as they see fit for the crime committed and the individual. This plan should include all aspects of the community service, other sanctions, and other programs with timing, location and people involved.^[9]

Electronic monitoring or electronic control is one of the most popular methods of penalties in society. It is an electronic ankle GPS that must be worn at all times, it monitors the individual, it can only be used the last four months of probation or imprisonment and the individual qualifies to wear one. While wearing one it cannot be removed and if it is an alarm is triggered, the individual can only go home, work, school or permitted areas (education or job training).^[10]

Anti-doping programs are court ordered alternative program that would otherwise be unconditionally imprisoned. The crimes are driving under the influence of alcohol, illegal and legal drugs. The goal is to give awareness of the crime and the dangers of what could have happened. This program is only for the offender not for the general public.^[8]

Drug program with judicial review (ND) is an alternative to unconditional imprisonment for drug and alcohol addicts. The crimes that can get the offender into this program is anything drug related, including crimes to fund the addiction if the crime can be rooted to the drug addiction it can land them into the program.^[11] The judge has to issue the alternative, the criminal has to agree they want to get clean, the correctional institution has to agree, and a personal survey has to be completed by the correctional authority. After the prosecutor files all of the claims and they are accepted there will be a two to five-year program controlled by the court. Once the program is implemented there are four stages: implementation, stabilization, liability and continuum. Throughout the program the program will work with correctional services, municipal services, education services, mental health services and specialist health services. Throughout each stage and preset markers, the individual must meet with the court to check progress, and after the program the Freedom Care Authority can check on them after the implementation. In order for the program to be completed all the stages must be completed and the program must be completed during the allotted time.^[11]