

Report on the discussion of subgroup 3

Research, statistics and reoffending

After the morning session's discussion of the interventions that have been used with foreign national prisoners, small groups broke off to discuss different methods of improving the business case. It had been mentioned that political decision makers tend to want hard evidence, if possible with a clear link to reduced recidivism rates; making a compelling humanitarian case for interventions is often (sadly) not enough. Our small group was asked to consider the question of research: what kinds of statistical research could be undertaken that would lead policymakers to make sufficient means available for such interventions?

We discussed the issues around this kind of research in some depth. We noted that there is not much information out there about interventions that specifically target foreign prisoners, not least because there are only a few countries investing in their nationals in foreign prisons. Taking as an example the interventions run by the International Office of the Dutch probation service, it would be ideal if we were able to compare the recidivism rates of two groups: those who had received visits and counselling while in foreign prisons; and those who had not. It might also be possible to compare similar data for prisoners who had received support from Prisoners Abroad and Irish Council of Prisoners Overseas.¹ However, prisoners have a choice in whether they receive advice and support from any of these organisations. If they choose to do so, they display an existing interest in reforming their lives, whose influence would be hard to isolate from that of the intervention. This means such research could not unequivocally establish the effectiveness of a specific intervention, because of selection bias. Only a randomly selected control group would eliminate this bias. Creating one would involve the unjust refusal of support to some prisoners who had asked for it.

¹ We presume this would be possible but did not have representatives of these organisations present to tell us if they have access to such information.

We noted that this problem is not unique in researching the impact of criminal justice interventions, and felt it was important not to create unrealistic expectations or to apologetically fail to prove effectiveness where others would not be able to do so either. In the end we felt the best approach would be threefold:

- Focus statistical research on the costs of reoffending – a crude figure, but one which is already measured in many countries – and the extent/number of foreign prisoners who are returning to the ‘home’ country;
- Focus qualitative research on collecting illustrative examples of the difficulties foreign prisoners face in accessing rehabilitative services (where these even exist!) when imprisoned abroad, and contrast the quality of these with the (usually better) assistance available in ‘home’ prisons;
- Draw policymakers’ attention to the implication, that **not** making sufficient means available for interventions on foreign prisoners leaves too much to chance, and that chance is not an acceptable method where public protection and security are involved.

The method might make it possible to estimate minimum and maximum cost savings, which would lend extra force to the argument.

We also noted that it would be desirable to conduct interviews with ex-prisoners who have received support while imprisoned abroad, and have then successfully reintegrated. We mentioned two years without reconviction as a possible selection criterion for this purpose. Such research could gauge the relative importance of different factors that had helped them to avoid reoffending. The aim here would be to explore ex-offenders’ feelings about what the support they received made possible for them.