

Abstract

Relapse study in the correctional services of the Nordic countries

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Background and definitions

The Nordic relapse study “Retur. En nordisk undersøgelse af recidiv blandt klienter i kriminalforsorgen” published May 2010 is a product of a yearlong collaboration between a group of researchers and statisticians from the correctional services in the Nordic countries. Reoffending figures are reported based on a common definition of reoffending, equally long observation period and a shared classification of offender groups, i.e. the correctional clientele in the Nordic countries divided into five offender groups: Prisoners, community service, conditional sentence with supervision, conditional sentence with treatment and electronic monitoring. The latter four groups are for simplistic reasons lumped into one category labelled “probation”. The object of the study is to present and discuss reoffending rates among those released from prison sentences and those who started serving a community sanction in the probation services in 2005. Relapse is defined as a new prison sentence or community sanction that became legally binding within two years of release from prison or from commencement of the community sanction in 2005. The survey comprises a total of almost 60 000 offenders in the Nordic countries. The study represents an important pioneering effort as there are no previous relapse studies that report and analyses reoffending in the correctional services in a Nordic comparative perspective.

Main results

Table 1 shows the main results of the survey. The table shows that Norway has the lowest overall reoffending rate among correctional clients in the Nordic countries. Within two years a fifth of all released from prison and among those who began serving a sentence in the community in Norway incurred a new conviction that had to be served in the correctional services. In the other Nordic countries the overall reoffending rate varies from 24 % to 31 %.

Table 1. Percentages of new sentences within 2 years to be served in the correctional services					
	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Released from prison in 2005	29	36	27	20	43
Started serving in probation in 2005	22	25	16	21	20
Total	26	31	24	20	30

National differences

Except for Iceland, there are minor differences within the Nordic countries in the overall reoffending rate among probationers. Nevertheless, the report points out that there is a large variation in risk profile among the subgroups of offenders in the probation services, among which the reoffending rate also varies correspondingly, cf. table 2. The Norwegian offenders sentenced to community service show the second highest reoffending rate compared to those who serve other forms of community service in the other Nordic countries. This is for the most part explained by the fact that in Norway this offender group has a significantly higher proportion of clients with a previous prison sentence than those serving community orders in the other countries. The percentage of offenders with a previous prison sentence among the Norwegian offenders serving a community sentence is practically the same as for released prisoners in Norway; approximately a fourth, measured five years back in time prior to the commencement of the sanction in 2005. This indicates that previous prison sentence is not an essential obstacle when the courts decide whether the offender in Norway should be given a community sentence. In contrast, only four per cent of the Swedish clients serving community service have previously served a prison sentence. Not surprisingly this offender group also shows the lowest reoffending rate of all clients in the Nordic countries, i.e. nine per cent.

Table 2. Percentages of new correctional sentences within 2 years after started serving a sentence in the probation service in 2005					
	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Community service	19	26	16	23	9
Conditional sentence with supervision	27	22	-	21	33
Conditional sentence with treatment	22	39	.	12	29
Electronic monitoring ¹	20	.	.	.	12
Total	22	25	16	21	20

By way of introduction, the authors argue that national differences in reoffending rates among correctional clients are influenced by national differences in the use of suspended sentences. The

¹ Electronic monitoring was not an option in Finland, Iceland and Norway in 2005. In Denmark only 55 persons started serving electronic monitoring. In Sweden 2828 started serving electronic monitoring.

distribution of principal crime types and the size of the offender groups receiving suspended sentences vary between the countries, indirectly affecting the composition of offender groups in the correctional services and their reoffending rates. Differences in the distribution of principal crime types among correctional clients are one of the major factors contributing to national differences in reoffending rates. Clients sentenced for thefts show the highest reoffending rates in all the countries, but the proportion of them differs. For example in Sweden 61 % of released prisoners sentenced for thefts reoffended. Apart from Iceland, Sweden also had the second highest share of released prisoners for thefts.

The largest national differences in reoffending in the corrections are found among those released from prison. The report's main explanation for these differences is national dissimilarities in the composition of the groups of offenders serving their sentences in prison in relation to those that serve their sentences in the community. While the majority of correctional clients in Sweden serve their punishment in probation, only one fourth of the Norwegian clients do so. When large groups of sentenced persons with a low reoffending risk are transferred to probation, such as in Sweden, prisons will increasingly be left with a more troubled clientele with a higher reoffending risk, as demonstrated by the fact that almost half of the released prisoners in Sweden are formerly sentenced to prison. Conversely, there is a large group of low risk traffic offenders among released prisoners in Norway, strongly contributing to the low reoffending rate among released prisoners in Norway. Only approximately one fourth of released prisoners in Norway are formerly sentenced to prison. In the other countries the proportion varies between 34 % and 59 %. The proportion of clients formerly sentenced to prison is the most significant contributor to national differences in reoffending rates. Formerly being sentenced to prison commonly at least double or even triple the risk of reoffending.

The study also reveals that Norway chooses imprisonment more often than the other countries, both in relation to general population and when it comes to choosing between prison or probation. When comparing this evidence with the low reoffending rate among released prisoners in Norway, the political and empirical conditions for increased use of alternatives to imprisonment seem advantageous in Norway.

Words of caution

The authors emphasize that the results cannot be used to predict the effects of various measures delivered to the offenders while serving their sentences, but on the other hand it cannot be ruled out that such national differences may have contributed to the overall reoffending rates, though the effect is probably marginal compared to the effect on recidivism caused by national differences in the distribution of offender groups with dissimilar risk profiles. The authors also point out that other external factors undoubtedly may have contributed to the differences in reoffending rates between the Nordic countries, such as clear up rates for criminal cases and the capacity to deal with them in the police and the courts, as well as changes in the lives of the offenders.

Applicability and future perspectives

The most important finding in this study is probably the way it demonstrates that reoffending rates among different offender groups inside the correctional services is a reflection of national differences in the criminal sanction system and the division of offender groups serving in prison compared to those serving in the probation. If you repeat measuring reoffending the same way over the years, you should be able to recognize how general changes in client characteristics within one sanction affect reoffending rates. Thus, when national policies changes by introducing new sanctions, it is possible to predict what will happen with recidivism in one group when clients move from one sanction to another, e.g. from prison to probation.