QUALITY EMPLOYMENT AND QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES IN PRISONS
Summary

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Research commissioned by EPSU
The production of this report has been financially supported by the European Union. The European Union is not responsible for any use made of the information contained in this publication.

Published by
KU Leuven
HIVA RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR WORK AND SOCIETY
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http://hiva.kuleuven.be

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Introduction

This study was commissioned by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) as part of a European Commission-funded project on quality employment and quality public services. It investigates the employment quality of prison officers in Greece, Italy, England and Wales and Sweden. As public spending in most European countries was cut back in recent years as a result of austerity measures, the prison sector has faced an overall decrease in funding. At the same time, the prison population has been growing and becoming more diverse as a result of tougher crime control policies, migration and other factors. Altogether, these trends increase the complexity of the management of prisons and put pressure on the quality of employment of prison officers.

Country experts drafted four in-depth reports on the current state of and trends in prison officers’ employment quality (see Part 2), based on a questionnaire that is available on the EPSU website.

To measure employment quality, a distinction was made between four dimensions:

1. job content such as workload and autonomy;
2. working environment including pressure and occupational safety and health (OSH) risks;
3. employment conditions, with factors such as contract type, wages, working time arrangements, career opportunities, etc.; and
4. voice and representation covering social support, employee voice and representation.

Together, these generic dimensions allow for the measurement of employment quality in different institutional and industrial contexts and for different occupations and groups. An overview of our conceptualisation of employment quality with a specific focus on prison officers can be found in the report, Framework quality employment – literature overview: Job and employment quality in prisons: threats, low road policies and anchors for a way forward.

Our main findings are presented in this summary. Firstly, conclusions and main recommendations are formulated per country, stressing the differences we found in employment quality. Secondly, some general trends are identified, focusing at the commonalities between those four countries.
1 | Individual country studies: diversity in trends?

Sweden
The Swedish prison system is embedded in a welfare tradition and is known for its efforts to re-socialise prisoners, with prison officers combining surveillance responsibilities with the role of personal coach, counselling one or more inmates. This meant that prison officers tended to be highly educated and trained and enjoyed high levels of autonomy to organise their own work. In addition to this high quality job content, the other dimensions of the employment quality, the working environment, most aspects of employment conditions (pay being an important exception) and voice and representation, were also of high quality. However, Swedish prisons have undergone changes in recent years, triggered particularly by a violent attack on a prison officer. More security rules and administrative procedures have been implemented, the central administration has taken on more decision-making powers, personal coaching has mainly been replaced by group sessions and prison officers have to specialise either in surveillance or rehabilitation-related tasks.

Good job content generally combines easy tasks with more complex ones. As specialisation implies choosing between both task types, it often has a negative impact on job content. These changes, together with the growing diversity among inmates, have put increasing pressure on the employment quality of prison staff. Amidst a more complex context, prison services have also faced budget cuts. Furthermore, trade unions in the sector argue that workers face increased uncertainty as a result of government misuse of temporary employment contracts.

To maintain high quality employment, there needs to be sufficient autonomy both for Swedish prisons to address local issues and for individual prison officers who require the necessary training to cope with the growing and more diverse (e.g. mental health issues, cultural differences) prison population. If job content is to remain attractive, then it needs to continue to be based on a mix of surveillance and counselling tasks. Last but not least, the employment contracts of prison staff should provide sufficient stability and security.

Key concern: autonomy of prison officers

Italy
In 2013, the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in the Torreggiani case over human rights violations in the prison system led to a significant decrease in the prison population and changes to prison management and surveillance practices. Although these measures eased the structural overcrowding in Italian prisons, many other aspects of prison officers’ employment quality have remained problematic. On paper, the Italian prison system resembles the spirit of the Swedish system but the practice is very different. Surveillance is the main task of prison officers and rehabilitation-related tasks are assigned to different professions.

The job content of Italian prison officers is challenging as a result of overcrowding and understaffing due to austerity and a harsher societal climate against crime. Irregular working hours, low wages and a training gap between the learned hard skills and required soft skills also contribute to the generally low level of employment quality (and quality of services) in Italian prisons. There
are indications that it is not uncommon for prison officers to have second jobs making it all the more important to improve the employment conditions of prison officers. Moreover, to support prison officers coping with the growing numbers of mental ill inmates or inmates with different cultural backgrounds, additional training and education are needed as well as greater safeguards on health and safety. With no right to strike prison officers have to seek other means to influence policy.

**Key concern: training of prison officers**

**England and Wales**

Prison services in England and Wales face an unfavourable combination of ambitious goals on rehabilitation, limited training, structural overcrowding, dilapidated infrastructure, low budgets and a harsh societal climate against crime. Such a combination leads to low quality of prison services and low employment quality. With violent attacks and riots on the increase, there is a real risk that the general health and safety of life and work within prisons can no longer be guaranteed. Work-related stress is on the rise as a result of the combination of surveillance and rehabilitation-related tasks imposed on prison officers and their inability to attain those goals due to understaffing, overcrowding and inadequate training (the last especially problematic in some privately run prisons).

The prison system is quite hierarchal, which further diminishes the voice and autonomy of prison officers, a problem which is especially acute in private prisons. Other elements that negatively impact employment quality are low wages, limited career opportunities and the lack of the right to strike. Austerity has played a huge role in this deterioration of employment quality with 7,000 full time prison officers’ jobs cut between 2010 and 2016. Securing a safe and healthy work environment, making the job of prison officer more attractive (in terms of both employment conditions and job content) and recruiting more staff are the main challenges facing the system, clearly necessitating an increase in budget.

**Key concern: employment conditions, especially health and safety.**

**Greece**

The employment quality of prison officers in Greece has suffered greatly from austerity measures. Wages have been cut by as much as 50%, leading to many staff quitting the job or taking early retirement. With no budget to recruit new officers, prison services have faced huge understaffing, creating situations where two prison officers are responsible for 400 prisoners. Although both understaffing and overcrowding have improved in recent years, they still constitute the main reason for the high work pressure experienced by prison officers. This situation has had a significant impact on the health and safety of prison staff and inmates, including in the worst cases, fatal incidents. Both initial and continuous training provision has been cut back from six months to one month (or less) and continuous training is only offered on an ad hoc basis depending on the available budget. This lack of training comes at a time when prison staff need more help to deal with the increasing number of conflicts and the more diverse backgrounds and complex problems of inmates.

Although rehabilitation has recently been taken up in official policy documents, budgets haven’t been adjusted. In 2017, only 120 specialised employees were actively working on rehabilitation, compared to 4,000 custodial staff. To cope with the unfavourable working conditions, prison officers often develop informal solutions, such as privilege systems. Research on Greek prisons has
shown that less hierarchical prisons, with a better relation between management, administration and prison officers lead to higher job satisfaction and less stress even despite issues such as overcrowding or understaffing. This shows the important role that social support and autonomy (two important dimensions of job content) play in the well-being of prison officers. The focus on improving health and safety in prisons is a basic precondition for employment quality while improved training is needed, tailored to the specific needs of all prison staff.

| Key concern: health, safety, and structural training programs |

Summarising our findings, the following figure presents a comparison of the four dimensions of the employment quality in the four countries studied.

![Current situation of the employment quality in the four countries studied](image)
2 | General trends

Although the employment quality of prison officers differs to a great extent among the four countries studied, we did identify some common trends. In each country, the job of prison officer is becoming more and more difficult as a result of trends in each of the four dimensions of employment quality.

- In Sweden, the job has become more difficult as a result of the implementation of new and strict safety rules and the introduction of more administrative duties. In addition, prison officers in Sweden used to combine rehabilitation-related tasks with surveillance, contributing to varied job content. Such a combination is beneficial for job satisfaction as a good balance between repetitive tasks (surveillance) and complex tasks (rehabilitation) can be positive in terms of job content where prison officers have the chance to learn and use their competences. However, this is being undermined because many prison officers now have to specialise in either rehabilitation or surveillance. Specialisation and the narrowing of prison officers’ job content was a trend observed in all four country studies.

- In the UK, acute overcrowding and understaffing have led to a very unsafe working environment. In addition, prison officers are expected to be responsible for both surveillance as well as rehabilitation of prisoners, which increases the complexity of the job content. Employment conditions generally need improvement in terms of wages, training and education, career prospects and security of employment contracts. While the means to achieve this are limited as prison officers are denied the right to strike.

- In Italy, difficulties stem from uncertain employment conditions: wages are low, working hours irregular and overtime frequent, and there is a training gap between theory (hard skills) and practice (requiring soft skills). Overcrowding and understaffing put increasing pressure on the workloads and job content of prison officers who, as in the UK, are denied the right to strike.

- In Greece, as in the UK, overcrowding and understaffing have created an unsafe working environment. The increased diversity of inmates in terms of mental health issues and different cultural backgrounds, adds to the difficulty of working in prisons. Moreover, an acute lack of training prevents prison officers from developing the right skills and competences to deal with these challenges. Wages have been cut in recent years and career prospects are limited. In general, job content, the working environment and employment conditions have deteriorated significantly despite some easing of the problems of understaffing and overcrowding in the past two years.

We identified some common elements that play a role in making prison jobs more difficult in each of the four countries:
- high (and increasing) administrative burdens;
- inmates have become more diverse and suffer an increasing number of (mental) diseases;
- the harsher societal climate against crime and a general increase in violent attacks on prison officers fosters higher levels of perceived risk and insecurity among prison officers;
- as governments add more complex re-inclusion and rehabilitation related goals to the tasks of prison officers, their job content becomes more challenging. Although soft skills are increasingly important, both for the purpose of rehabilitation as well as to deal with the increased diversity of inmates, training is still predominantly focused on hard skills (surveillance). This training gap increases the complexity of prison jobs.

These problems are compounded by the lack of additional resources for the prisons sector. In England and Wales, Greece and Italy, austerity has taken a significant toll.
- Governments are not providing any additional funding to attract more (skilled) prison officers.
- Budget restraints are also undermining training and on-the-job-learning of prison officers in some countries when they are urgently needed to help prison officers cope with the extra complexity of, for example, self-harming among inmates. Other employment conditions, such as pay and the security of employment contracts, have also been negatively affected by budget cuts.
- To better control expenditure, there is some evidence of countries centralising prison administration. However, such policies reduce local autonomy that can be important to address local needs. Decentralisation of decision making (together with the necessary financial resources) could make an important contribution to tailoring prison policies to meet local challenges. Centralisation is historically high in Italy and Greece, and increased in Sweden in the nineties.

This combination of more complexity with fewer or stagnant resources is having detrimental personal and work-related outcomes:
- staff-turnover is high among prison officers (Sweden, Italy, UK and Greece);
- 7,000 full time prison staff jobs were cut in the UK in the period 2010-2016, with the cost of riots since then amounting to £9.4 million;
- 20% staff shortage (Italy);
- 44% of prison officers lack the competences to deal with conflicts and the problems of inmates (Greece).

Two additional risks regarding the employment quality of prison officers were identified.
- The combination of understaffing and overcrowding is the perfect breeding ground for an unsafe working environment. If health and safety of both inmates and prison officers cannot be guaranteed, the quality of services as well as the quality of employment will suffer greatly.
- Experiments with marketisation of prison services in the UK have had a negative effect on both employment quality as well as quality of services. There is evidence of inadequate education and on-the-job training in private prisons, as well as poorer employment conditions and reduced decision making powers of prison officers.

Policy choices clearly impact on the employment quality of prison staff. Although we identified similar policies in each country, the quality of employment differs greatly. This could be attributed to a certain path dependency with past policies continuing to influence employment quality. With the exception of wages, employment quality in Sweden has historically been high but is now under pressure from diverse policies that impact the job content. Employment quality in Italy has not seen particularly high and recent austerity measures have aggravated certain existing tensions and problems (such as the training gap). Employment quality in England and Wales has fallen in recent years as a result of a cocktail of detrimental policies and although trade unions are historically strong in the sector, there is some pessimism about the possibility of future improvements in employment quality. Finally, the Greek situation resembles the Italian case and is characterised by understaffing, overcrowding and a deterioration of employment conditions. Even strong trade unions could not prevent austerity measures from undermining the employment quality of prison officers.