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Quality of employment in prisons

Country report: Sweden

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The following report is based on a number of different sources. As researchers we have been involved in prison research for several years, and have primarily used our own data, publications and knowledge. This has been complemented with official statistics and reports from the Swedish Prison and Probation Services (SPPS) and union representatives and ordinary prison officers giving short answers to the different items in the project questionnaire.

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Prison facilities

Sweden has 48 prisons and 30 remand units which are divided into three categories:

- **Category 1:** seven large, high security prisons with concrete walls and electrified fences. Five of these are in the Stockholm area (less than 300 km from Stockholm), one is in the Gothenburg region and one is in the northern part of Sweden. Three of the prisons have secluded maximum security units for in 72 (3 x 24 places) extremely high-risk prisoners. All are for men.
- **Category 2:** 25 prisons, including two for women, with at least two high, barb-wired fences.
- **Category 3:** the remaining 16 prisons which all have an “open” character with lower fences, and unlocked houses/wings during daytime and three of which are for women. Prisoners have access to most areas inside the fences. A minority of prisoners are permitted to work outside the prison during daytime.

The 48 prisons have a total capacity of almost 5000 prisoners but the number at present is around 4000 (2017). There are about 5000 prison officers, including temporary staff. The largest facility in Sweden is the category 1 Kumla prison with around 450 places. The average prison has about 100 places. The vast majority of facilities are in the southern half of Sweden, where most of the population live. Around 6 percent of prisoners are women. Most prisons have small industries where prisoners work and education facilities where some may study on a basic level. They also offer treatment programmes for drug abuse, violence and criminal behaviour. The average prison would be category 2 for men, with 100 places housing 80 prisoners today, where around 100 staff work of whom about 80 would be prison officers of some kind.

The 30 remand units are often located in city centres with a few placed together with or within prisons. The units together hold on average 1600 suspects waiting for trial, conviction, placement in a prison or deportation. Capacity is around 1900, and roughly 1600 prison officers work in these units. An estimated half of remand prisoners have contact- and information restrictions, in various ways. Many have extensive and often long-term restrictions, a fact that has been criticised by the Human Rights Watch.

All the prisons and remand units are owned and run by the Swedish Prison and Probation Services (SPPS, in Swedish “Kriminalvården”), part of the Ministry of Justice. Sweden has no private prisons. All prison officers are employed by the SPPS which also organises the probation and parole services, as well as a large transportation unit.

Gender segregation

The average distribution among prison officers in prisons and remand units is 60 percent men and 40 percent women. In women’s prisons it is often the opposite with 60-70 percent female staff. In high security wings and prisons for men, the share of male POs might be a little over 60 percent, while in men’s treatment wings and in open prisons the share of male POs might be a little under 60 percent. If we look at the main tasks, almost half of prison officers are “personal officers” and among these the gender distribution is often 50/50. Among the 30 percent gate/security POs, men make up a little more than 60 percent. In addition, research shows (Bruhn 2013) that there is an informal work division where male POs more often perform order-keeping tasks, while female POs more often do counselling tasks.

Main tasks of prison staff

Tasks	Pre-detention (X= yes)	Permanent detention (X= yes)	Occupation performing the task (regular, specialized, external staff, specify if possible)
Surveillance	X	X	Prison officers (PO) all of them, more or less (regular or spec)
Nursing and medical care	X	X	Prison Health Staff (+ PO assisting by medicine distribution, escort to health unit, etc)
Education of inmates	? (often not available)	X	Education staff+ PO escort/surveillance inmates to and from educ.
Integration of inmates	?	X	Introduction? A POs task
Recreation of inmates	X	X	Often one special PO planning with an inmate + other PO assistance/surveillance
Personal assistance of inmates	X	X	Many POs are "Personal Officers" with duty to plan, counselling etc for 3-6 inmates
Preparation and distribution of food	X	X	Inmates eat together in their own wing. 1-2 trusted inmates serve/distribute the food in the own wing. PO surveillance
Daily household related activities (e.g. cleaning, distribution of objects and consumables...)	X	X	PO assist/surveillance (inmates who distribute food, clean the wing, etc.) PO deliver equipment to the wing
Other			
Gate keeping and security work	X	X	POs with security specialisation
Night work	X	X	POs with night scheme duty
Children's rights		X	One specialized PO per prison

Anchors of employment quality: high or low road strategies

In research and debate about prisons and penal systems, Sweden as well as the other Nordic countries has a reputation of having a quite humane policy – often labelled as a Nordic (or Scandinavian) exceptionalism, compared to more repressive systems in other western countries. This means, in accordance with the distinction between a high and a low road strategy that Sweden leans more towards the high road variant – or at least wants to see itself like that. The title worn by Swedish prison officers for instance is "kriminalvårdare" which directly translated means criminals' carer, not officer or guard.

Swedish prisons and remand units are mainly anchored in a welfare tradition, where the prison and probation systems are seen as a part of the welfare system. This makes the "rehabilitation of prisoners" one of the main goals. The prisons and remand units maintain good standards, are rarely overcrowded and most prisoners who have behaved well get parole after serving two-thirds of their sentence. Most prison officers are trained and expected to be "personal officers" (contacting and counselling a small number of prisoners) working in a motivational way. Building closer relations to some prisoners is, or at least has been, an important element in a humane policy.

However, there are some exceptions to the high road-ideal. Remand-prisoners often face restrictions that limit their opportunities to have contact with others and receive information. Some are held in

remand for a long time. In prisons, extended security and control measures have limited escapes, the import of drugs and other contraband, etc. but at the same time limited the daily benefits of prisoners. Shell protection is rigorous and internal security routines are carefully followed in every respect. This has also limited some of the opportunities for prison officers with rehabilitative tasks (eg personal officer tasks) to do a proper job. Due to security and time-consuming control routines, both social training of prisoners and time for counselling are limited. The overall number of employees performing rehabilitative work has decreased substantially in recent years. Close contact or frequent meetings between a prison officer and a prisoner has come to be seen somewhat suspicious and a potential security risk. Instead prisoners are offered manual-based motivational and treatment programmes (most of the in groups) conducted by a couple of specialised prison officers or external therapists.

Prison policy

The traditional welfare basis of prison policy is often challenged by more punitive ideas. In the 1980s it became the normal to offer parole after serving two-thirds of the sentence rather than half. In the 1990s the opportunities to get permission for temporary leave from prison were heavily reduced. Around 2005, external and internal security and control measures were heavily increased. Still, today the two-fold goal to keep inmates in custody AND to rehabilitate prisoners/motivate remand prisoners, are actively pronounced. The meaning of them and the balance between them have changed, however. According to our research, the conflict between the goals is managed by individual prison officers in different ways.

The prison services have been subject to some state budget cuts which have slightly reduced staff numbers, closed some prisons and shortened parts of the training for new prison officers. This, together with a more punitive turn in policy, has also led to specialization among prison officers, mainly in personal officers and security officers, but also other small groups of programme officers, night staff, and other minor groups. As the number of prisoners has decreased the over last 8-10 years, the staff/inmate ratio has remained more or less the same. Following a tragic assault that led to the death of a female prison officer some years ago, the occasions when prison officers work alone in contact with prisoners have been limited to a minimum.

Concerning the quality of prison services, Sweden has to our knowledge no national survey on prisoners' satisfaction, like the one carried out in Scotland, for example. There was an internal survey in 2005 but only to prisoners in the treatment and motivational wings (31 wings in total). The SPPS has its own quality indicators to measure the performance in different prisons and remand units but none involve inmates. Prison officers fill in questionnaires and prison management delivers statistics to the authority.

The funding of the prisons and remand unit comes almost 100% from the Swedish state budget. Prisons produce some goods, a small quantity of which is "sold" to other authorities or to private companies. The management of prisoners in prison is solely a state concern and privatization is really not discussed at all in the political debate in Sweden. None of the political parties have had, or have, prison privatization in their political programmes. This is confirmed by the prison officers' union.

Organisation within prisons

Prisons are fairly flat organizations with prison officers, principal officers (they lead 1-2 wings or special units each) and a prison governor. Leadership styles vary, but most governors have had a career inside the SPPS and few are recruited from outside but the issue is not much discussed within the organization, except perhaps in SPPS headquarters.

The SPPS is divided into six regions each with its own Regional Director and administration. As a whole the prison authority is heavily centralized – a traditional top-down bureaucracy. This follows a general trend among Swedish state authorities from an era of de-centralization with regional authorities coordinated via central advisory and authorities responsible for general policy development and surveillance to a centralization and single authority policy. This transformation in the prison and probation field was carried out in the nineties.

Training and skills

For the last 15-20 years, the minimum requirement for becoming a prison officer is an upper secondary school education (in Sweden this is often up to the age of 19). Many start with a temporary summer job at a prison or remand unit, and if they are found “reliable” they might be offered the training course. This consists of 26 weeks in shorter periods of education and practice at a prison/remand unit. The training covers legislation, rules, self-defence, counselling techniques, etc. In between the training, new recruits work under supervision in the workplace. At the end of the training course, they are offered a specialization as a security officer, personal officer or a few as programme therapists and short courses related to their specialization. It was planned to revise the basic training course during 2018.

For the moment, on-the-job training of new recruits lasts eight weeks under supervision, but will probably be prolonged in the coming years. Currently, there is a shortage of prison officers and there have been public campaigns to recruit young people. The SPPS offers specialised training and education to become programme staff, security specialists and others specialised prison officers. The length of courses varies but is often a couple of weeks. There are no discussions about career promotion for prison officers, except perhaps among top management.

Trade unions and employment conditions

There is one blue-collar union SEKO and one white-collar (civil servant) union ST/OFR-s which organise prison officers. There is also a small academic union. Negotiations between the employer and the unions take place on national, regional and local levels. There are three employment contracts: regular staff on monthly salary; temporary staff on monthly salary (long-term) and finally short-term temporary staff paid on an hourly basis (but once a month). Working hours for daytime work is 40 hours per week, while working on schedule evenings/nights is 38 hours a week.

Welfare approach

Prisons in Sweden are generally seen as a part of the welfare sector, with its underlying ambition to rehabilitate prisoners. Concerning the prisoners’ mental health of prisoners, many employees argue that the share of prisoners suffering from severe mental illnesses is constantly rising. There is always an opportunity for the courts, after an examination and certificate from forensic psychiatry, to sentence someone to mental care (closed and long-term), instead of prison. However, owing to changed legislation, compared to 30 years ago, it is now much rarer that offenders are sentenced to mental health care rather than prison. A few large prisons have special wings for prisoners with mental illness, with specially educated and trained staff, such as psychiatrists. Prisoners who go into a psychosis are often transported to an ordinary psychiatric clinic and guarded there, until they are able to return to prison.

Employment conditions

Wages are regulated collectively in negotiations between the employers (authorities) and the prison officer union representatives. Pay increases of around 2% have been common in recent years. A

small share of this is locally distributed. Prison officers are “low-wage” employees, similar to other care staff such as those in elderly people or in hospitals. They have the same vacation rules, with 30-35 days full paid vacation per annum. Most prison officers are organised in one of the two unions.

Insurance, pensions and other benefits are centrally negotiated and similar to other blue-collar occupations. The working environment is checked regularly by a local union representative and the prison management. Union representatives have the right to immediately stop work in severe cases of a dangerous environment, but this rarely happens. The biggest problems for prison officers tend to relate to threats from prisoners (very common), situations when they have to work alone in a wing (now very limited, after the tragic death of a female prison officer, working alone escorting a dangerous male prisoner in a Swedish remand unit), and perhaps also the strain of intense face-to-face work with prisoners in e.g. treatment wings. Prison officers have a fairly safe employment situation, and only a few are sacked each year for breaking rules such as having an affair with a prisoner or other security rules.

Employment quality

Swedish prison policy stresses both the punitive, security side and the rehabilitative side (a high road strategy). Prison officers’ work tasks and job demands basically emanate from this double-sided mission. This creates a dilemma in daily prison work of how to combine and balance strictness and security tasks with rehabilitative work. To some extent this dilemma is addressed by organizational division and specialization into different types of prisons (from high security to “open” prisons), and wings with different types of prisoners.

In high security prisons and wings, in special treatment wings and in low security prisons and remand units the dilemma is not that manifest as tasks are more one-sided. Nevertheless, even for prison officers in specialized units the potential dilemma remains. The biggest group of prisons though are category 2 and most prison officers work in regular (normal, non-specialized wings). How these tasks, this double-sided mission, can be united into a coherent work strategy very much depends on individual workers and the work group they belong to. Some argue that this is not a problem, but in our research we have seen strong signs that this dilemma can become a problem and a cause of stress especially for the less experienced prison officers. This raises the question of how to build good relations as a basis for rehabilitative and motivational efforts while having to search for drugs, contraband and so forth (see Bruhn et al 2010).

In recent years, we may conclude that some small groups of prison officers have seen a development of job content while the majority of regular staff have seen a decline in the possibilities of developing their competences. Initiatives taken in the nineties (very much because research about the working conditions had shown stress and alienation problems among staff) for developing the occupational role, especially the introduction of the *kontaktmannaskapet* (personal officer) stating that every prison officer shall have special counselling and support function for 3-6 prisoners, but sometimes even more prisoners, has now eroded in most prisons. Management no longer seem to have any will to invest in developing this function.

Overall, we can identify three different trends that have heavily affected prison service organization and changed its structure over roughly the last decade. The first is the security turn from 2004 after some spectacular escapes. The SPPS has invested heavily in a range of security measures – fences, electronic devices and so forth – at the same time there has been a punitive turn at the political and societal level leading to changes in laws and court decisions, leading to longer sentences. An important feature of this in prisons is also the development of how risk assessments are carried out and organized, the use of different standardized methods for this and so forth.

The second trend is the breakthrough of certain standardized so-called evidence-based treatment programmes most often based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). These programmes are

mostly handled by specially trained programme leaders (many of these are prison officers with special training). Earlier, in the 1990s, there was a focus on prison staff working on rehabilitation to a high degree via the institution of “personal officer” (an initiative seen as both an important way to rehabilitate and at the same time develop the occupational role of the prison officer making it more meaningful). This is now down-played (see Bruhn et al 2016) as is the rehabilitative role of the occupation of the ordinary prison officer. Treatment, motivation and rehabilitation are to an increasing degree something that happens in special forums and by specialized staff. The development of a work methodology for those that meet prisoners in the framework of ordinary daily routines seems to be less interesting for management. Because of this we expect that over the last decade, the vast majority of prison officers have experienced a reduction in the competences needed for their work (see Bruhn et al 2016, Bruhn et al 2017).

The third trend that is important in this context is the spread of so-called New Public Management that has led to an extensive increase of administrative work and documentation, accounting, monitoring and surveillance of work performance. This takes time away from ordinary prison officers to carry out their main work tasks and the possibilities to develop relational and motivational work with prisoners (ibid.).

Prison work and staffing

Goals setting staffing levels (at least two staff being present in different operations) has meant an increase in staff in some units (although this can be about increasing the number of special security staff). However, the number of prison officers working directly (and closely) with prisoners has decreased over the last five years in relation to the total number of staff.

The occupational role of prison officers is quite broad but it also contains many differences between different employees because of an increasing division of labour. Work tasks can be everything from visits and transport to investigations and planning permissions. But maybe for most it is about being present and carrying out surveillance. Because of a new plan (formula) for execution some new sub-roles has been developed but this differs between different prisons. Normal daily prison work is predictable with strict regulation and routines, i.e. waking up, breakfast service, cleaning, following prisoners to industrial work units or education centres (inside prison) – fetching them for lunch – serving lunch – following them back again, organising leisure activities and locking up for the night. These types of work tasks are normally rotated among prison officers. Alongside all these routine tasks there is always the potential for the unexpected to happen. If a prison officer is sick or an extra transport to another prison has to be carried out, there are no extra resources, so other tasks have to be cancelled or postponed.

On top of the daily work routine come all the administrative tasks – writing reports and documents, filling in statistics etc. The amount of the latter has increased a lot as a result of both stricter security regulation and demands, and as a result of the dominant system governing public sector work, i.e. New Public Management. At the same time the climate in society has become harder, this also means that a more heterogenic group of prisoners exists today. Prisoners with different types of psychiatric problems (sometimes even mental illness) often, because of too few special wings for these, end up in prison wings for “normal” criminals. Another problem may be hostility between gangs and other types of networks.

Unpredictable behaviour among prisoners creates a more insecure environment for prison officers and at the same time demands on prison staff to collaborate with other societal actors and authority representatives have increased. What is important though is that the role of prison officer is still quite wide and there is no specific, formal job description. This means that, at least in some types of wings, there is room for some group autonomy to develop, for instance, a more rehabilitative culture depending on their willingness to work with motivation and develop relations with and between

prisoners. High staff turnover is currently one factor that limits the extent to which individual prison officers can exercise on-the-job control, as it creates tight working schedules and leads to much work being covered by substitutes. This situation, however, differs significantly between different wings and prisons.

When it comes to information about policy, development and upcoming changes on a general prison and prison authority level the ordinary prison officer's possibilities to have information and maybe exercise influence depends very much on the approach of first-line and middle-management. Formally, there are general written plans, workplace meetings, theme days etc. All in all, as mentioned, there are some negative trends affecting prison officers' possibilities to exercise influence and control. One is the narrowing of the occupational role because of specialization (the first two trends mentioned above) and the down-playing of the personal officer role with its focus on motivational and rehabilitative work, another is the increased demands of documentation, accounting and administration, and a third is the high staff turnover at the present which creates higher pressure on work performance, less group cohesion and in prolongation difficulties for internal group dialogues and collective actions.

As for social support from management there are recurrent performance appraisals and at several units officers also have access to supervision. The most important social support is probably on an informal level between peers although the quality of this may have decreased because of fewer experienced staff and high staff turnover in many wings.

Health and safety

The hardening of societal views on crime has spill-over effects in prisons. The prison population has become more heterogeneous, with a substantial increase in the number of prisoners from foreign cultures over the last decade (2016: 35 percent with foreign citizenship according to SPPS Statistics 2016) and prisoners with psychiatric problems. At the same time the presence of drugs and drug abuse in prisons has actually declined thanks to a very strict control system. Overall, however, threats, violence and mental ill-health are increasing and this is particularly obvious among younger prisoners belonging to certain gang networks. This has also meant an increase in staff reporting threats and violence. According to the prison authority's own report (Kriminalvårdens årsredovisning 2016) the number of reported incidents in prisons (remand prisons excluded) was 188, 35 up on the year before (in relation to average total figure of about 4000 prisoners).

Sweden has seen a decline in the number of prisoners over several years because of several factors such as fewer prisoners with short sentences because of the introduction of tagging as an alternative punishment, fewer young prisoners because of alternative sentences, and also changes in judicial policy at courts, and police having a work overload and less efficiency). However, the trend has changed and the number of prisoners has started to rise again.

Systems for increasing staff health and safety in prison follows the regular Swedish model of labour relations. Every workplace with more than five employees should have an occupational health and safety (OHS) representative appointed jointly by the union and the employer. Bigger workplaces should have a special OHS committee. The mapping of existing OHS problems is done by regular investigations of employees (normally surveys), and workplace inspections carried out by the OHS representatives and committees. Preventive tools include health care (gyms, training etc.) and efforts to start early rehabilitation. Recently the SPPS investigated risks in relation to working alone. This has led to some increase of staff in different wings to avoid such situations. On top of this and special efforts have occasionally been made to raise awareness about different tasks such as conflict management.

Occupational and career development

The occupation of prison officer is not a high status job in Sweden. While an upper secondary level education or similar is enough to join the service, very many prison officers actually have academic degrees. Wages are low in relation to comparable groups, even though additional earnings such as for working unsocial hours, night shifts and so forth increases the wage. Shift work, overtime and irregular working hours are standard for prison officers. According to union representatives there is a misuse of temporary contracts with currently about 20 percent of prison officers working on a temporary basis. New prison officers should attend the basic in-service educational programme as soon as possible although some are put on a waiting list.

The in-service training programme lasts 26 weeks with some central courses and some local arrangements, although there are currently proposals to expand these courses. After attending this course the individual normally continues to work in the prison where he/she was originally employed. Further training is offered via mostly single day-courses e.g. treatment of acute cases, handling medical drugs, heart- and lung rescue etc. According to the union such further training is rendering difficulties because of staff turnover.

The SPPS has a gender distribution target of 40-60 in all units and on a general level women accounted for 46 percent of all prison officers in 2016 (Kriminalvården årsredovisning). The balance between the sexes tends to differ a lot between prisons (male and female) as well as between smaller units and wings, and between the different types of main tasks (see Introduction above). Furthermore, the number of employees (including management) with a background in foreign countries was 18 percent in 2016 (compared with the state sector in total where it was 17 percent).

When it comes to opportunities for further individual and career development these are, in our view, limited. On a horizontal level there are some possibilities to change towards working in security, transport or as programme leaders etc. Some of these jobs may require further education and training courses, others not. To climb the vertical ladder more formal education and qualifications are often needed. First line managers, for example, mostly have academic qualifications.

Industrial relations

The Swedish model of industrial relations is based on employee representativeness via strong unions and a strong tradition of collaboration. There are no work councils as in many other countries. Instead workers' influence on working conditions is taken care of by local union branches in bigger workplaces (as prisons). In addition to the blue-collar union SEKO, which organizes the majority of prison officers, there is also a smaller white-collar union, ST. Both normally have a branch in every prison. Employee rights are regulated by several laws, the most important of which are the Codetermination Act, the Work Environment Act and the Employment Protection Act. On the basis of these laws there are cooperative agreements at local prison level (a formal Cooperative Agreement) regulating forms for exercising of co-determination. Normally a co-determination advisory board – a Safety Committee – is set up containing representatives of the unions, OHS representatives and management at the workplace. At an individual or group level (e.g. in each wing) employees are expected to, and perhaps do, participate directly through the obligatory scheduled workplace meetings that are held on a regular basis with management and other responsible officials.

Prisoners have a national interest organization but it is unclear the extent to which they can have an influence on prison conditions. In many facilities prisoners also have a local trustee whose influence on local conditions probably varies a lot between different prisons.

Other issues

Issues concerning the work environment and working conditions for Swedish prison officers have not been the subject of any major political decisions in recent years, nor have they the focus of public debate. After the “security turn” around a decade ago things have been rather quiet even though the debate about crime, crime prevention and increasing violence in society are debated more or less all the time. In the last year the prison authority has found it increasingly difficult to recruit new staff, especially prison officers. The Swedish labour market is quite tight with low rates of unemployment. Earlier, in times of higher unemployment in society, the SPPS has been able to recruit more highly educated people for prison work. But now the situation has changed and those with academic qualifications or degrees have a tendency to leave the service. The authority has tried to deal with this with some minor public campaigns trying to “sell” the job to make it look more attractive.

It is important to mention that the SPPS’s interest and openness for research about life and conditions in prisons – for prisoners as well as management and staff – has declined sharply over the last decade. As researchers we have a lot of primary data especially about the conditions and work environment of prison officers. However, much of this, particularly on the work environment, is now almost 10 years old. We have applied to the authority for the opportunity to carry out follow-up studies in order to get longitudinal data for analysing the development of working conditions but have been denied. To our knowledge the only type of studies currently carried out by researchers inside the prison service relate to different kinds of evaluations of measures taken towards prisoners, mostly so-called randomised control studies, about the effectiveness of treatment programmes.

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