

1 in 5 prisoners in the Netherlands is overlooked by professionals, says researcher

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Prisoners deserve better professional support when preparing to return to society. Ph.D. candidate Amanda Pasma says, "You can't imprison everyone for life. Society will have to give prisoners a second chance."

The case manager and Pasma are ready and waiting for the prisoner to arrive. "Why don't you do the intake?" asks the case manager. Pasma is surprised. She is there to shadow the case manager to get a better idea of the support prisoners receive in this prison located in the Dutch city of Leeuwarden.

Nevertheless, a moment later she hears herself ask, "Do you have a place to stay? Do you have your own home or are you staying at a friend's house? Do you have a job? Are you happy with that job? Do you think you'll be able to return to your old job? Are you struggling with debts? Are you behind on your payments?"

Professional support during imprisonment

This intake assessment that Pasma was allowed to carry out, is an important part of the support prisoners receive in the Netherlands. Pasma says, "It's important and it needs to happen as soon as possible so we can have a clear picture of the problems at hand. Many prisoners are only in prison for a short period of time: on average three to four months. If you wait too long with the assessment, the prisoner will have already been released before you've had the chance to talk to them."

In the Netherlands, prisoners are not left to fend for themselves. At least, that is not the case in theory. Every prisoner should have had an assessment within the first two weeks of their imprisonment. And a mentor is supposed to check in with the prisoner every other week to see how they are doing. Pasma's research, however, shows that this is not that manageable in practice. Indeed, 40 percent of the prisoners had no contact with the case managers or mentors.

Case managers sometimes decide which person they do and don't speak to on the basis of a feeling. This happens at the cost of proper support which Pasma says is much needed. "Professional support during

imprisonment is extremely important. It's the moment when you're able to get a clear picture of the people you're dealing with and can start working with them."

An uncomfortable truth

For her research, Pasma visited prisons in the Netherlands and abroad, and distributed 4,000 questionnaires to prisoners and 1000 health care professionals, external agencies, municipalities, rehabilitation centers, and volunteers. Her research reveals an uncomfortable truth: people who already had problems before they entered prison are overlooked.

Pasma says, "One in five prisoners had no contact with even one professional. It's precisely these people who have multiple problems and who need help the most."

Case managers and mentors need to support prisoners during their reintegration into society. In addition, organizations "from outside" also need to support prisoners. For example, rehabilitation centers, municipalities, health care organizations, and volunteer organizations all play a role. Based on Pasma's results, it is mainly these "outside" parties that are still not involved enough in the reintegration process.

Why is it that these prisoners continue to be overlooked? Pasma says that prisoners also need to be able to acknowledge their own problems, take responsibility for them, and be willing to ask for help: "Some people are ashamed and don't say during the intake assessment that they're in debt. Or, they don't know who they can turn to with their problems, which makes it difficult for them to seek help on their own. For this group of prisoners, a much more proactive approach is needed."

Society is not always keen to help prisoners; resistance can come, in particular, from victims or the relatives of victims, says Pasma. She

understands these sentiments, but still encourages people to try to put them aside. "For the safety of our society, it's important to help people rebuild a stable life. You can't lock up everyone for life. Society will have to give prisoners a second chance. Providing help can prevent victims in the future."

Norway: Society has failed

As part of her research, Pasma also spoke to experts in Norway. It seems that resistance towards prisoners is much lower there. "Scandinavian countries are known for their focus on reintegration. Recidivism among former prisoners is also much lower after finishing their sentence. In the Netherlands, 40 to 50% of prisoners reoffend—in Norway that number is only 20%. The sentiment of Norwegians is also different; they show more understanding towards prisoners, believing that if someone commits an offense, [society](#) has failed that person. So, they put all efforts into their reintegration in the community."

There is also no hard line between prison and the outside world in Norway. Support continues to be given regardless. Pasma gives an example, "If a prisoner needs psychiatric help, they'll receive the same [support](#) from the same professionals after their release. In the Netherlands, care stops once a [prisoner](#) is released. If someone receives help from a psychologist in prison, they'll have to look for a new one after their release."

Despite all this, the Norwegians also learnt a thing or two from Pasma. "They found it interesting that I investigated whether prisoners had existing problems before they entered prison. It made sense to me to consider the living conditions of prisoners before their imprisonment; not all problems stem from the prison sentence."

If it were up to Pasma, even more awareness would be created by

involving professionals sooner and more actively in the lives of [prisoners](#)

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Provided by Leiden University

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