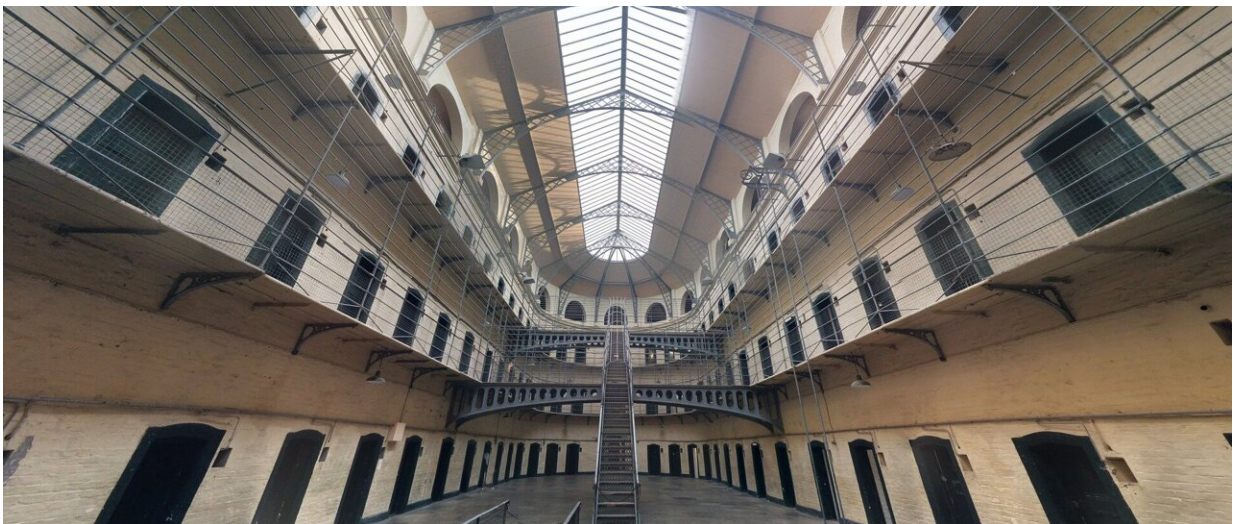


Reimagining rehabilitation: Iceland's open prisons offer a blueprint for UK's foreign national prisoners

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A new [study](#) suggests the UK prison system should learn lessons from Icelandic prisons to transform the lives of foreign national prisoners. The work was published in the *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*.

The [research](#) was carried out by Professor Francis Pakes from the University of Portsmouth, and helps to challenge the prevailing norms

surrounding the incarceration of foreign prisoners. Unlike traditional prison studies, this research specifically analyzed the impact of open prison environments, which afford a unique degree of freedom.

The challenges faced by foreign nationals in prison are well documented. Prisoners are often isolated as they may struggle with language and find it hard to express their culture and religion. They also face added insecurity due to a possible threat of deportation after their [prison sentence](#) has ended. Many prisoners never have any visitors. In Iceland, Professor Pakes discovered a different side to this.

He employed an immersive methodology by adopting a quasi-prisoner role—in the first study of its kind—to explore the dynamics of foreign national imprisonment in Iceland. By staying in the prison for a week, Professor Pakes was able to build trust with the prisoners, which provided him with unique insights and confidences.

Professor Pakes said, "Upon entry I was given a room, settled in, and I was shown round like other prisoners would have done too. I undertook the daily routines of prisoners. This lent a structure to the day dominated by meals, including a communally taken breakfast; a hot meal for both lunch and dinner, and where available, I took classes or took part in other activities. I interviewed anyone, staff or prisoner, who was prepared to speak with me. I also had a multitude of informal conversations both with staff and prisoners."

The research showed that foreign nationals were treated more humanely than in the UK. Through Skype, prisoners could keep in touch with relatives abroad. Foreign prisoners are peer mentors for other prisoners who speak the same language and some pick up important prison jobs, such as looking after cattle or working as chefs. In these ways, the prisoners give something back. In addition, they are less likely to be isolated and less likely to reoffend. Iceland prisons, in particular its open

prisons, allow for a prison experience that is less traumatic and more rehabilitative, and both Iceland and foreign prisoners benefit from that in equal measure.

Professor Pakes said, "Foreigners in prison in Iceland do not face harsher conditions or specific regimes, like they do in the UK. Rather than focusing on their risks or their problems, there was more room to consider the [prisoner](#) as a whole person. The emphasis is on holistic rehabilitation, [community engagement](#) and maintaining family connections is a stark departure from the conventional prison model. The UK has much to gain by adopting elements of Iceland's approach, moving towards a more humane and effective [prison](#) system."

More information: Francis Pakes, Out in the cold? The experiences of foreign national prisoners in Iceland's open prisons, *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2023.100626](#)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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