

English summary of Brå report 2015:20



# Work, education and treatment in Swedish prisons

A study on occupational activities for inmates



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The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) –  
centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures  
The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå)  
works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety in society  
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# Summary

The law requires inmates in Swedish prisons to participate in occupational activities during their sentence. The occupational activities may take the form of work, education, treatment programmes, or another structured activity. An inmate's repeated refusal to participate in assigned occupational activities may lead to a misconduct report. However, most inmates want to go to their occupational activities since they feel that it makes life in prison more manageable and makes time pass more quickly. Inmate participation in occupational activities can also be positive from a safety perspective; it can lead to fewer conflicts in the wings and closer contact between personnel and inmates. Last, but not least, occupational activities can contribute to the inmate's rehabilitation and thus reduce the risk of recidivism.

Although occupational activities are a central element of the sentence, there are no comprehensive studies regarding its content and quality. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has therefore been instructed by the Government to survey occupational activities in Swedish prisons. The situation in Sweden and other relevant countries is also to be compared. Finally, Brå will evaluate the positive effects of occupational activities on the inmates and shed light on how they can be developed.

The study is based on Brå's visits to twelve prisons in which a total of almost 200 people, both personnel and inmates, were interviewed. Two surveys were also sent out, one to conditionally released persons and one to heads of each prison. In addition, statistics from the Prison and Probation Service and the Swedish Public Employment Service were compiled for the report. The following is a summary of the result of the study.<sup>1</sup>

## Five different types of occupational activities

In order for an activity to be included as an occupational activity and confer the right to compensation<sup>2</sup>, it must be scheduled and, as a general rule, supervised by personnel. The Prison and Probation Service divides the offered occupational activities into five categories:

- Work activities
- Service
- Education
- Treatment programmes

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<sup>1</sup> Proposed areas for development are addressed in the section entitled "Brå's assessment".

<sup>2</sup> Inmates receive compensation in the amount of SEK 13 per hour for participation in designated occupational activities.

- ASV.<sup>3</sup>

One occupational activity, often work activities, ordinarily form the basis for an inmate's weekly schedule. The work activities consist primarily of simple tasks such as assembly and packaging, but can also comprise different forms of production such as in the agricultural, textile, and timber industries. The basic task can also be service work; in such case the inmate cleans the wing or works in the prison kitchen. Half of the inmates had occupational activities in the form of work during the period studied (October 2013) and one-third performed service tasks. These activities were usually then combined with a treatment programme or education, based on need and availability. Although education and treatment programmes seldom occupy entire days, a great number of the inmates avail themselves of them. During the period studied, slightly more than one-quarter of the inmates participated in treatment programmes, and two in five studied.

ASV is a growing and quite variable type of occupational activity. It includes both activities which can take up a great deal of the day, such as self-management<sup>4</sup> and practical vocational training, as well as activities which occupy random hours and "fill up" the inmate's weekly schedule, such as yoga and group exercise. Half of the inmates have ASV as part of their weekly schedule.

Women comprise approximately 6 per cent of all inmates. The overall picture painted by the statistics is that the women generally participate in more of the five different occupational activities than do men. However, detailed study of the statistics reveals another picture, namely one of more limited offerings for the women, since the variation within each category is not as great as for the men.

### **Not enough occupational activities**

Inmates have both the right to work and the obligation to participate in the assigned occupational activities. Currently, the lack of occupational activities for all inmates is a greater problem than the inmates' unwillingness to participate in the assigned occupational activities. The lack of work reveals itself in several ways. Firstly, "full occupation" in most prisons is defined as 30 hours per week, not 40 hours as in the Swedish society at large. Secondly, the prisons generally do not succeed in achieving the goal of 30 hours of occupational activities per week. Half of the inmates have a registered shortage of work and, on average, did not work more than 23–24 hours per week. Typically, this is because the time for their assigned occupational activities cannot be filled. Thirdly, both personnel and

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<sup>3</sup> ASV stands for *Other Structured Activity* and is a catch-all category for those activities which do not fall within the other four categories. ASV and examples of such categories follow in the text.

<sup>4</sup> "Self-management" means that the inmates personally take care of food preparation in their wing as well as budget for, and purchase, goods.

inmates say that there is also a significant "hidden" shortage of work, in other words an unregistered shortage of work. One reason why personnel do not always register a shortage of work is so that the inmates do not face the consequence of only receiving half wages for such hours.

The length of an average working week in women's prisons is the same length as in men's prisons. On the other hand, more of the women have a reported shortage of work. However, in terms of reported hours, the scope is less for the women than for the men.

### *Some of the occupational activities are not experienced as meaningful*

An additional problem is that the inmates do not experience some of the occupational activities which are available as particularly meaningful. This applies primarily to the simpler work activity tasks, such as assembly and packaging – tasks which, as mentioned previously, represent a significant percentage of the work activities.

## **The number of labour market training programmes has increased somewhat**

A number of prisons offer vocational training programmes as a form of occupational activity in order to increase the inmates' preparedness for the labour market. Most of the training programmes (90 per cent) are procured and paid for by the Swedish Public Employment Service.

In 2014, 38 labour market training programmes were offered in prisons with a total of over 500 participants. This is a slight increase when compared with 2009, when Brå also evaluated labour market training programmes in prison (Brå 2010:21). The most common type of training is offered in the *Construction and manufacturing industry*, which represents almost 75 per cent of all training programmes during the period studied (2010–2014), and comprises, above all, training in welding, tiling, and construction. The second most common occupational category, *Restaurant and foodstuffs*, is significantly smaller. It represents 13 per cent of the training programmes and relates exclusively to food preparation and food handling training. One-tenth of all training programmes had an *Agricultural and garden* focus. These include training programmes in both greenhouse work and animal care. Half again of that amount were shorter training programmes in *Cleaning*. Finally, a small number of *Mechanical manufacture* training programmes were offered.<sup>5</sup>

Slightly less than six per cent of those who participated in Public Employment Service training programmes during 2010–2014 were women. This corresponds to their percentage representation in the

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to the labour market training programmes stated above, a new training programme was offered under the auspices of the Public Employment Service in 2014. The training programme is called *My way to work* and is an introductory course in working life for those who are not ready to start a full-scale labour market training programme.

prison population as a whole. Looking at the period from 2010–2014, a greater percentage of male inmates participated in construction training programmes while a greater percentage of female inmates participated in restaurant and garden training programmes.

*Demand is great but it is difficult to fill the groups*

The picture which comes to light from Brå's interviews with both inmates and personnel at prisons is that the demand for labour market training programmes is greater than the supply. At the same time, it was learned that it can be difficult to fill the seats in the training programmes which are offered. All of the inmates who might like to attend do not have sufficiently long sentences to afford them the time to complete a training programme, nor might they have the personal prerequisites necessary to succeed in the training programme. This is also reflected in the fact that almost half of those who start the training programmes do not complete them. In addition, most prisons are rather small, which further limits the base of interested and suitable inmates at each prison.

**A number of factors govern the occupational activities to which the inmates are assigned**

The occupational activities are supposed to be adapted to the needs which are identified in the inmate's sentence plan<sup>6</sup>. However, there are series of different factors which affect the scope to which this is possible in individual cases. A number of these obstacles are unavoidable, while some are associated with factors over which the Prison and Probation Service should have influence. In Brå's opinion, difficulties which the Prison and Probation Service should, at least in part, be able to reduce include primarily the following:

- the documentation which the placement section uses as a basis for selecting prisons is not updated;
- certain prisons or wings lack a certain occupational activity entirely;
- safety requirements prevent the inmates from participating in certain occupational activities;
- there are limited opportunities for individuals with a short sentence to be able to participate in education or a treatment programme;
- there is a lack of tasks which are suitable in light of the inmates' psychological and physical prerequisites;
- there is a lack of education and treatment programmes available to inmates who do not speak Swedish;
- motivation among the inmates is too low.

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<sup>6</sup> The sentence plan (*Verkställighetsplaneringen* or *VSP*) is a document in which, among other things, the inmate's family situation, needs, and risk assessment are documented.



To a great extent, the obstacles facing female inmates resemble those facing the men. The difference between the sexes relates primarily to the fact that women, in a national perspective, have a narrower range of occupational activities to choose from. This relates to the fact that there are fewer women's prisons and a smaller client base.

### **The occupational activities are experienced as primarily having positive effects during the time in prison**

In general, one can say that the greatest number of international evaluations of the recidivism prevention effects of occupational activities in prison relates to treatment programmes, but studies have also been conducted on the effects of education. In meta-analyses, one can see in both cases positive effects in terms of recidivism but the effects are rather small. On the other hand, there are no major evaluations of the significance of ordinary work activities in respect of recidivism.<sup>7</sup> The Swedish studies which have been conducted also pertain primarily to treatment and education. The studies have not been able to show any unequivocal effects on recidivism.

The picture which emerges from Brå's study, which has a broader definition of "effect", is that the occupational activities are seen as important primarily during the time in prison. The inmates whom Brå interviewed believe that the daily work plays an important role in creating "normality" behind the walls. The occupational activities help them create routines and make time pass more quickly. The occupational activities also facilitate meetings between personnel and inmates. Better relationships between them enable motivational work. They also find that the occupational activities prevent conflicts in the wings. Finally, compensation for their work has some significance for the inmates, since it gives them some financial latitude.

#### *Over 50 per cent perceive that the occupational activities also have a long-term effect*

A significant number of both the individuals on conditional release and the inmates also believe that the occupational activities can have long-term positive effects. This relates primarily to treatment programmes and education. Brå's survey of individuals on conditional release shows that over half of them who participated in education experienced that it increased their chance to obtain work. An equally large percentage who participated in a treatment programme experienced that the treatment reduced their risk of relapse. In addition, a significant number of all respondents thought that the occupational activities increased their self-confidence and gave them the knowledge to manage everyday life after release – regardless of which occupational activities they had.

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<sup>7</sup> This also applies to the different types of occupational activities which are included in service and ASV.

## **Prison and probation services in other countries face largely the same challenges as in Sweden**

In order to compare Sweden's situation with the one in other countries, Brå has studied three European countries, each with a justice system essentially similar to Sweden's, specifically Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Like Sweden, the inmates in the countries studied have an occupational activities obligation.<sup>8</sup> There is also some form of obligation for prison and probation services to offer wage-based occupational activities. In all countries, difficulties are encountered in fulfilling the obligation and they work, in different ways, to both increase the level of occupational activities and improve their content. As in Sweden, they appear to adapt the length of a normal working day to these difficulties. In the Netherlands and Norway, for example, the prisons are not required to offer inmates paid occupational activities more than 20 hours per week

All of the countries studied largely offer the same types of occupational activities as in Sweden. However, the scope of the occupational activities varies from country to country, and not all occupational activities are wage-based. In Denmark and Norway the inmates (as in Sweden) also receive compensation for occupational activities such as treatment and ASV. In the Netherlands, as a rule, no compensation is paid for participation in such programmes.

Work activities are the dominant occupational activities in all of the countries studied. The possibility of being allowed to participate in other occupational activities appears to vary. Brå's impression is, nevertheless, that ambitions in respect of education and treatment in prison are at approximately the same level in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The Netherlands, on the other hand, does not focus on education or treatment efforts to the same extent.

### *Several countries have difficulty procuring work*

As is the case in Sweden, it is difficult in both Norway and Denmark to procure sufficient work activities for the inmates. The Netherlands has a more direct emphasis on work activities (and vocational training) than the other countries. In this area, it appears that the Netherlands is more in the forefront in respect of access to contracts and the link between work activities and working life outside of the prison. There is legislation in the Netherlands which requires employers to employ disadvantaged groups on the labour market, for example former inmates. They also have a clearer aim to get companies which outsource to prisons to be open to employing inmates who worked with the outsourcing for similar tasks after release.

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<sup>8</sup> However, discussions are underway in the Netherlands regarding changing the law to do away with the occupational activities obligation. In practice, the obligation already has a limited impact, since the inmates, apart from withheld wages, are not penalised for refusing to work.

## Brå's assessment

The issue of occupational activities in prison is a broad one which encompasses many different activities and aspects. The overall picture which Brå has obtained is that there is significant and increasing involvement with the issues among personnel at the prisons.

The largest problem which Brå has seen is that there are not sufficient occupational activities. Increasing occupational activities is an urgent task for the Prison and Probation Service – as is ensuring that there are sufficient work tasks during the hours which are offered.

The range of education and treatment programmes has, in fact, increased and an increasing number of inmates are offered the opportunity to participate. Nevertheless, the need and demand for these types of occupational activities still exceed the number of available places. On the other hand, essentially everyone can participate in work activities. However, at the same time, the problems are greatest in this sector. These problems involve both access to work tasks and the relevance of the work tasks to the inmates' needs. In this light, the Prison and Probation Services beginning efforts in the area of work activities, with enhanced resources at the central office for these issues, is positive.

Taken as a whole, Brå sees a great number of areas for improvement in respect of occupational activities in prisons. A number of the shortcomings are result of a lack of resources, which can be difficult to change. However, there are other issues that are not primarily resource-related. There may be things which work well at certain prisons but not at others. There is cause for a greater exchange of information between the prisons and, perhaps, increased support from the central office.

Brå's recommendations within the three areas of development are set forth below:

*Access to (meaningful) tasks*

- Conduct an ongoing dialogue regarding the scope of the work shortage.
- Increase the control and coordination of tasks within work activities.
- Adapt the number of scheduled hours in work activities to the scope of customer outsourcing.
- Increase the possibility to provide inmates with other occupational activities in the event of a work shortage.
- Enhance efforts to find activities for those who are difficult to place in occupational activities.
- Increase the possibilities for occupational activities for individuals with short sentences.

*Comprehensive view of the goals for occupational activities*

- Discuss and define what the goals formulated in the Prison and Probation Services handbook regarding occupational activities and compensation in prisons mean in respect of the different activities.
- Ensure that safety requirements do not limit occupational activities more than necessary.
- Create space for learning activities within the work activities.
- Increase communication between staff for better understanding of the different activities aims and needs.

*Assigned occupational activities in relation to the inmates' individual needs*

- Update the information regarding the prison's offerings for occupational activities.
- Ensure that the inmates' needs are the point of departure when assigning occupational activities.
- Create time to motivate inmates for the occupational activities they need and review whether new incentives can be created.
- Monitor how the assigned occupational activities function based on the inmate's needs.
- Enhance release preparation measures so that the inmates' gained knowledge can be better used after release.