

Chapter 2

Prison as Context

When we talk about ways into criminality, we are also often dealing with “ways into prison.” Prison constitutes a more or less stable context in the lives of criminals. Many spend years behind bars, and some return again and again to serve shorter or longer sentences. These framework conditions can affect the mental condition of the inmates, with consequences for what they want to tell, or hold back from, the researcher.

It is necessary to get insight into the context that prison represents, both to understand criminal life in its totality and to be able to assess the research results. Because most of the informants in this study were interviewed in Oslo Prison, it is life inside there that will primarily be described as the “framework.” However, I will also include data from interviews in other prisons.

2.1 Inmates in Prison

According to figures from Statistics Norway, in 2008 there was an average of 3,387 inmates in Norwegian prisons. There were 27 % more inmates in 2008 than in 1998.¹ For the largest percentage of the inmates narcotics crimes were their chief offense, followed by crimes involving gambling and violence.

Oslo Prison, which is Norway’s largest with about 400 places for prisoners serving sentences or awaiting trial, had a total of 1,200 inmates in the course of 2005. Between 40 and 50 % had foreign background (Gotaas and Højdhahl 2006).²

To a greater extent than before, prison guards encounter inmates who have very different life experiences than they do, different cultural and class affiliation, and

¹ <http://www.ssb.no/fengsling/>.

² As of May 22, 2006—during the data collection period—there was a total of 3,253 inmates in Norwegian prisons, and 18 % of these were foreign citizens, from 75 different countries. In just over five years the number of foreigners in Norwegian prisons increased from 332 in the fall of 2000 to 585 in May 2006. Counting the cases where one or both parents are from another country, the number of inmates with immigrant background in the prisons will be much greater, but how much we do not know exactly because only citizenship is recorded, not parents’ country of origin.

different religious background. A large cultural and class divide has developed between those who take care of the inmates and the inmates themselves. Various dietary requirements, opportunity to practice other religions, and need for interpreters, etc. must be taken into account.

All over Europe a pattern is developing in which immigrants and foreigners, seen in relation to their percentage of the population, are over-represented in prisons. In England in 2002 78 % of the prison population was categorized as white, 15 % black, 3 % South Asian and 4 % Chinese.³ In 2002 8 % of the population in England was foreign-born, which does not count second and third generation. In France those who are born in North Africa, “maghrébins,” constitute 5.8 % of the population, but their representation in prisons is five times higher. Inmates whose mothers were born in North Africa make up 22.2 % of all inmates, but only 5.5 % of the French population. Muslims make up about 7 % of the French population, but unofficial estimates indicate that they constitute between 50 and 60 % of the prison population (Beckford et al. 2005).

In Denmark the numbers show the same pattern. The percentage of individuals who in 2004 were convicted of at least one violation was higher among individuals with foreign origin. Men with foreign background who violated the penal code had a criminality index of 114. Men from non-Western countries had a criminality index of 136, versus 100 for all men aged 15–79 in Denmark. The overview from 2004 shows that where violent crimes are concerned, men from non-Western countries have a criminality level that is 60 % higher than the total number of men in Denmark, even when this is corrected for differences in age and social status.⁴

Figures from Statistics Norway show corresponding patterns in Norway as in Denmark and other European countries. The figures from 2002 show that individuals from both Iraq and Somalia had 51.5 convicted per 1,000 residents, Iran 43.8, Morocco 49.7, Eritrea 40.2 and Lebanon 41.6. Pakistan had 36.7, Great Britain 8.1 and Norwegians 13.5 (Haslund 2004).

This development with over-representation of foreigners in prisons produces challenges for organization of life inside. In 2008 one in four inmates in Norwegian prisons had foreign background, for a total of about 800 foreigners from 89 nations out of more than 3,300 inmates.⁵ In 2012 almost one in three inmates were foreigners.⁶ An SSB-report (Skarðhamar et al. 2011) shows that immigrants from particular countries have a percentage of perpetrators or convicts several times higher. The report also shows that some countries are under-represented.

³ Prison Population Brief. England and Wales: March 2002. John Simes and Karl Chads. Home Office. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/prismar02.pdf>.

⁴ Danmarks Statistik (2004) <http://www.dst.dk/homedk/TilSalg/abonnementer/StE/emneopdelt.aspx?si=23&msi=5>.

⁵ <http://www.nettavisen.no/innenriks/article2090508.ece>.

⁶ In 2012 the percentage of foreigners in Norwegian prisons was up to 32 %. The percentage has doubled since 2006. Compared with other Nordic countries, Norway has surged. In Sweden the share is about 27 % of 6,500 inmates. In Denmark the share is 21 %. Source: Ragnar Kristoffersen at Kriminalomsorgens utdanningssenter (Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy, KRUS). <http://www.bt.no/nyheter/innenfriks/Utlendinger-fyller-fengslene-2665214.html>.

Islam has gained a stronger significance behind bars than before. Cultural and religious differences may manifest in different ways, and have consequences for how the inmates experience prison, and just as much for how the guards and other prison employees experience it. The cultural diversity that exists outside in the greater society, is also manifested inside the walls of prison, making new forms of competence and initiatives necessary. Individual inmates have fled war, been tortured or experienced persecution, hunger and a great degree of uncertainty. This may have affected them such that they have become more vulnerable than others for recruitment into criminality, and it may also have led to prison existence being more trying for them than for others.

2.2 Life in Prison

For the hardened criminal prison is part of life. Either they have been there, or else they will be in there again, or else they have close friends who have served time. Many of the informants that I interviewed have been in prison repeatedly. One in five informants was in prison for the first time. For the others it was the second, third or fourth time they were in prison. The inmates with Pakistani background had on average been in prison 4.6 times, while inmates from Africa had been behind bars 4 times. The Norwegians had been in prison an average of 3.5 times, while inmates from the Middle East had been in prison an average of 2.3 times. Eight informants with background from the Middle East reported that they had only been in prison once (see Table A.2 and A.3).

Inmates from Africa had an average longest sentence of 51.2 months, followed by informants from the Middle East with 44.4 months and inmates from Pakistan with 35.5 months. Inmates with Norwegian background had an average longest sentence of 22.5 months. Violence and narcotics were mentioned as the reasons for which the majority had served sentences (see Table A.3). This means that for the majority, prison life is not unfamiliar. Some may have built up networks and contacts, and have friends and acquaintances behind bars.

Everything inside is regulated to the slightest detail. This applies to movement inside and all communication between outside and inside, visits and telephone. Letters are read, telephone calls are monitored. When the inmates are moving between the cell blocks or out for exercise, they normally have to pass through a detector. It is also the purpose of prison to counteract future criminality through programs, conversations and education. There are cooking groups. Some exercise together. They volunteer for work inside the prison and take courses. Some complete higher education. For that reason there are a number of structured activities to which inmates are brought in order to participate.

But a prison has a surface structure and an underground structure. Despite all attempts to control activities, the inmates manage to create a separate, demarcated reality that is parallel to the controlled reality. Narcotics come in, even if attempts are made to control and prevent import. Messages are sent in secret, even if attempts

are made to control communication between criminals outside and inside. Controls and barriers that are set up for communication are crossed. In the evenings you can hear screaming and shouting through the bars of the prison where the inmates send messages to each other or to someone outside. Particular informants have related that they themselves have stood outside and thrown objects in. Some send letters to each other. Others communicate while walking in the exercise yard, or when there are group activities. I observed pieces of paper with messages on them and cigarettes being exchanged between persons in the cell blocks, in the short time I passed through the corridors.

Those who have it the hardest are those who sit in pre-trial detention and experience being in isolation 23 h a day, with long hours in front of the television, or staring into space, daydreaming, thinking or sleeping, and waiting for food to be served. The psychological pressure can be great, and if someone is in poor mental condition before coming in, it is not improved by isolation. Pre-trial detention has, therefore, been widely criticized, including by the European Commission's torture committee.⁷

As imprisonment proceeds, however, there is more activity and communication. The prison conditions become better, and the opportunities for leave increase. Some cell blocks are more popular and grant greater freedom.

At Cell Block B in Oslo Prison the majority are in pre-trial custody. This is a receiving and custody department, but during the time when the field work was going on, some were also there who had been sentenced. Cell Block A, which is called Bayern, was at that time primarily a cell block for those serving a sentence. This has changed over time. Now A has also become a pre-trial custody cell block. C3 was aimed particularly at repeat offenders, and the focus was moved from prison to rehabilitation, in order to motivate these inmates for a life outside prison. I interviewed inmates from all cell blocks. During the time period the field work was going on, it can be said that for an inmate there was movement throughout the stay in prison, from B to A and then possibly to C3. Contentment seemed to be greatest among the informants I interviewed from cell block C3, but that may also be because they were closer to release. In cell block A and C3 there were more activities that livened up the day and prepared the inmates for life outside.

When the inmates were asked about it, nine replied that they had been subjected to violence in prison (Table A.4). That is almost one in five. Of these more are foreigners than Norwegian. It is not known whether there are "prison gangs," as in the US, where gangs behind bars exert influence on life both inside and outside the prison. It cannot be ignored that this happens. Individuals and groups that are enemies and in conflict outside tone down the conflict and presumably channel their aggression toward the system when they come inside. The guards told about individuals who had a lot of power. As a rule these inmates were quiet and peaceful with exemplary behavior,

⁷ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: Preliminary observations made by the delegation of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (DPT) which visited Norway from October 3–10, 2005.

while those who were lower on the hierarchy of status were more uncontrolled and acted out more. Status outside the prison materialized inside the prison, some guards maintained. “When I came here to the prison, X, one of the leaders in the A gang, took care of me. No one dared bully me or do anything to me. I know everyone here now. We have a strong community, and when Pakistanis come in, I take care of them too” (inmate with Pakistani background).

There is also a hierarchy of sentences, where some offences have higher prestige than others. This emerged in the interview with an inmate from the Middle East.

I talked with a Pakistani out in the exercise yard. He said that he was in prison for murder. He seemed almost proud to tell me that. Then he asked me what I was in prison for. I told him that I was in prison for rape, and that I was innocent. He looked at me with great contempt. Since then he has not talked to me. Imagine that, he killed a person and feels completely superior to me (informant from the Middle East).

2.3 Contentment

For this study, it is important to keep prison as context in mind, especially when asking questions that concern mental health, which we will discuss in a later chapter. There is a great chance of becoming isolated if you belong to a language group that is not well represented in the prison, and you do not speak English or Norwegian. A kind of “double isolation” can arise just due to language barriers. Research instruments that are supposed to measure mental conditions that are thought to have origins in conditions in the past, and outside the context constituted by prison, may measure something quite different, namely conditions that have their cause in prison. For that reason it is important to describe how a prison stay can develop, based on statements by the informants, in order to better relate to and interpret the quantitative and qualitative material that is presented. Here are some statements about conditions in prison that may have an effect:

I was arrested after a robbery. That was the start of a five-year-long stay in prison. That was how it started. Yes, in a way it was a shock. . . . I thought that now I have to create routines. Twenty sit-ups every morning. I thought that if I don’t maintain focus now and discipline myself, I’ll go crazy (informant with Norwegian background).

Every day is equally monotonous. I experienced that I was falling apart as a person. It was the same problems all the time (informant with Norwegian background).

The worst thing is that it shifts so much between hope and despair. You hope that they haven’t discovered this and that, and in the next moment, yes, they have. You don’t know what they take you for. What you are caught red-handed for, you can’t lie your way out of, but otherwise. The police deliberately play on saying as little as possible (informant with Pakistani background).

In prison I entered a state of mind where I wasn’t really there. I simply existed. So I read everything. In prison you read more than in other places. I read Hamsun’s *Growth of the Soil*. Then I got my high school diploma. What I remember best from prison is the solidarity among the inmates. We felt enormous solidarity, a solid wall against the guards. We were in the same boat of arbitrariness. You never said anything, no matter what. That was an absolute code. But friends, I want to be careful about saying that they were friends. I had many acquaintances. Well, I played chess, I was in a cooking group, I was involved in

smuggling in drugs. I was involved in all the activities with the others. When the others got a beating from the guards, it was almost as though you felt it on your own body. It happened if someone had destroyed a cell, or if they were rejected for leave. Then people go berserk, or when they don't get out after 2/3 of the sentence is served. Then they attack the cell (informant with Norwegian background).

I made some extremely good friends. At first my privileges were taken away, then I got to go down to the library. The guy working there was an inmate. He had an extremely long sentence. So we got acquainted. It was basically ethnic Norwegians without drug problems. We were extremely selective (informant with Norwegian background).

The inmates were deprived of everything that gives status outside. They had to ask for permission for everything, as if they were children. We can't punish them, but we can slow down, if they ask about something, or ask for something, we can avoid fulfilling the request and behave arrogant and stuck up (guard in the prison).

The informants try to adapt to life, and gradually they feel more content than right in the beginning, while others never quite fit in. It is loss of control that can lead to aggression and frustration. For all informants the prison stay is a confirmation that they have failed in one way or another in life. If nothing else they have failed in concealing an illegal act from the authorities. They were discovered, and now they're here. The discovery, the revelation is irritating to many and may lead to shame. This irritation at being discovered can be transformed into indignation and despair. It can also lead to an aggressive relationship to the system, represented by the guards. This antagonistic attitude toward the guards, expressed by many, was obvious. It was a strongly dualistic and demarcated "us" and "them" attitude, which is also reflected in the quotes above.

Half of the 50 informants said that they had a very hard time in prison, one in five did fairly well, and one in five stated that they did very well in prison. The question that was asked was as follows: "On a scale of 1–10 give a rating of what prison is like for you." It appears as though Norwegian inmates were more satisfied than inmates with background from the Middle East and Pakistan. The average contentment was at 4 points on the scale, thus rather close to the middle (see Table A.5).

I noticed that while filling out the form a few were on the verge of checking moderately and very good on the question of whether they were content in prison. Suddenly there were a few who caught themselves doing that and said out loud, while they changed their mark: "No, I can't just check this off and say that I'm doing well in prison. You don't do well in prison." This means that some of the inmates checked a score of 1 and 2, not based on how they really experienced it, but because normatively they felt that they could not say that they were doing well behind bars.

Several international studies (Zamble and Porporino 1988; Jones and Schmid 2000) have shown that the early phase in prison is the most vulnerable and can lead to psychological imbalance and despair. Many adaptations have to be made by the individual, for example: dealing with the shock of the arrest, maintaining relationships to the outside world, even if the person in question is isolated behind bars, and finding stable activities. Several studies have also shown that in the initial phase there is a heightened risk of committing suicide (Beigel and Russell 1973; Liebling 1999), as well as self-mutilation.

It has also been shown that those who take responsibility for their own behavior and have a sense of inner control can adapt better in prison than those who do not have this sense of control (Rotter 1966; Wright et al. 1980). Adaptation means that the prisoners must learn the rules, the prison culture with its special forms of mutual relationship between prisoners and guards, but also create or maintain supportive relationships outside that can help them to uphold a positive self-image in a prison situation where they have lost control.

2.4 Health as Argument

The following episode was told to me by a guard: An inmate asked for treatment for pain that was due to an illness that was medically diagnosed. He got a tablet to relieve pain, but he put it in his false teeth without the nursing staff discovering it. Later he sold the tablet and was pressured by the inmates to sell tablets for 100 kroner (almost \$ 20) a piece. He came regularly to get more. The result was that he was going around in a chronic state of pain, while the medicine he was given was being taken by others who used it as dope. This sale of tablets was finally discovered by the guards.

Illness can thus be used strategically to get access to medicine that can be sold, but can also be used to get access to other goods, for example better prison conditions. Sometimes the guards discover that there has been a concealed purpose, and that the illness was a fabrication. Should stories about sickness, pain or depression told by an inmate be believed? Is this false information, or is it real? The guards live with a constant problem of trust. They are constantly discovering that they have been fooled. The guards' job is to control, but their control is constantly being manipulated and undermined. There is a surface structure and an underground structure that go their separate ways. The goal for many inmates is to take back the control that the system is trying to take from them. As a couple of guards expressed it:

In principle being in prison and controlling things and pulling strings outside should not be possible. But it happens. It happens through visits, through others who are released, and by phone. We can't stop it. If someone is going to be released, they can ask him to phone, or drop by so and so with messages. Everyone who comes to visit is a potential messenger. I have to remember that there is a lot of bad here too. Many of the inmates have done bad things. I have to keep that in mind, especially because it's so easy to forget that. They are manipulative and perhaps they've beaten and assaulted other people. They have two sides.

Trust is a huge challenge for everyone in prison, both for inmates and employees. Inmates experience that the guards delay and don't take them completely seriously, for example by not granting leave. This they interpret as ill will. They try to get control through underground activities which are illegal, by importation of narcotics and messages. With threats and violence. In this way trust is lost. In particular cases a sort of schism arises, a wall, between inmates and employees. But the employees and inmates are nevertheless dependent on each other to get along, and there is a great degree of empathy and sympathy between them. Individual guards were truly

worried about the well-being of many of the inmates, and they talked about them in an empathetic, understanding way.

When the inmates are having a rough time, often as a consequence this means that the employees have a rough time too. The challenges today are greater for the guards. There are more threats and violence. The inmates are still basically OK, but they feel powerless, and that can lead to them feeling hate and contempt. Those who are in pre-trial custody are subjected to severe isolation, and suddenly when they are released they often carry hatred out with them. Those who have a normal progression in imprisonment and go through the system lose some of that hate along the way and don't necessarily take it along with them (employee).

As we have seen, there is a progression in imprisonment. It is a movement in time and space that begins at the lowest level with the greatest frustration, depression and despair. Then conditions get better. The prison conditions are pedagogically structured so that they are perceived as progress. Contentment therefore goes along with the sentence, such that you are less content in the beginning, but more at the end. Perhaps you hate the system more in the beginning, but hate it less at the end. Such context-dependent conditions and processes may have consequences for the inmates. The processes and structures inside have consequences for the individual's mental health. The same can also apply to living conditions, as we shall see later.

2.5 Living Conditions with Lawful and Unlawful Debt

A number of studies from Norway and internationally document that inmates have major problems with living conditions (Christie 1982; Nilsson 2002; Skarðhamar 2002; Friestad and Hansen 2004). A large percentage have not completed education, they are characterized by a life with unemployment, poor health, drug and alcohol problems and poverty. Many are homeless.

Skarðhamar (2002, 2005) points out that inmates have an unstable connection to the labor market. He also shows that they are encumbered with debt, and that it is difficult for them to get a job after prison. He describes criminals as poor with major problems with living conditions. But research on inmates' problems with living conditions relates to registered, reported data, while many criminals live off of unreported funds. Several informants in my study told of incomes of 50,000 kroner (over \$ 8,000) per week, and large sums were also mentioned as the reason they were involved in criminal activities at all. "There's big money out there. I never would have earned that much if I'd been in a normal job." Many related that they had cars, apartments and houses that were strategically registered in a family member's name. The problem for some was being able to use the money in a way that avoided the eyes and ears of the system, that is, get money laundered without having it be discovered.

This means that the data on living conditions that is processed and discussed in official statistics primarily concerns reported and registered data. Illegal conditions, which nevertheless may provide opportunities for a lifestyle full of abundance, are not included in the accounts and statistics. This may lead to an understanding of

the context that surrounds criminals and inmates being presented in ways that are erroneous and false from the criminals' own perspective. One inmate told that he had invited a social worker out to dinner at a nice restaurant. When the bill came, he pulled out a thick wad of cash and insisted on paying: "Look here," he said. "This is what I make in one day. This is what you make in a month." The social worker turned pale, the inmate said, smiling. Another informant said that he was connected to an international gang. As soon as he got out, his friends would be standing outside with airline tickets to the Mediterranean. This was payment for him not informing on them, but instead taking all the blame himself. While he was in prison, they had taken care of his unpaid debts. On a previous occasion when he got out of prison, he got a trip to a Mediterranean island along with spending money. That would happen again, he said. He would soon be released.

For many of the informants the arrest itself meant that they have lost an apartment, job and close relationships. That is, the arrest takes from them everything they have built up in the form of capital, whether social, relational or financial. Their partner breaks up with them and gets a new partner. The apartment has to be sold, the car likewise disappears. With the stroke of a pen they have become poor. In addition the arrest may lead to debt increasing by the day, and this applies to both lawful and unlawful debt. They may have received fines as part of the sentence of several hundred thousand kroner. These have to be paid when you get out. In addition, a different kind of debt may have built up, also of several hundred thousand. When you are arrested, the business outside may fall to pieces, and the creditors are left with a loss. Interest is also added to unlawful debt with powerful suppliers, and fines. Then it is conceivable that irritation and a desire for revenge are increasing outside, such that inmates become nervous about getting out for financial and safety reasons too. A person may risk violent beatings by powerful, brutal creditors. The punishment can also affect innocent family members, while you are not there to protect them. This may be the basis for great worry while you are in prison. This may lead to insomnia or anxiety about the future. If you avoid informing, in some cases you may be rewarded for silence with the unlawful debt being eliminated. Keeping your mouth shut can have major positive economic consequences. Informing is the most negative trait from an inmate's point of view, and those who have talked so that others got harsher sentences risk a fairly unpleasant stay in prison. For that reason you might be nervous about the reprisals and risks you run when you get out and perhaps have an enforcer or criminal gang after you to collect the debt, or settle up for informing. In such cases prison may despite everything represent security, protection, a better life.

2.6 Religion

Due to worries, a monotonous existence and fear of reprisals, many in prison look to religion to find meaning and strengthen their moral identity. Religious literature is read in large quantities.

Because religion concerns morality and ethics, there is a conception that religion may work to prevent criminality. The two quantities, religion and criminality, are usually viewed as incongruent: If you are religious, in any event you cannot be a criminal. Christian missionary pastors have a belief that if someone finds Jesus and is baptized, the person is reborn and ends their involvement with crime. In the Christian tradition missionary work and social work have gone hand in hand, and pastors throughout history have been on frequent visits in prison to change and influence the behavior and values of inmates, based just on the idea that being saved in the name of Jesus will cancel out a criminal way of life. There is a minister or priest in the majority of prisons in Europe.

In recent years the imams have also made inroads. However an imam is not equivalent to a pastor. Traditionally in Islamic communities imams have called to prayer, but not been occupied with social work. When social work is done in the context of religion in Muslim countries, it is usually a *sufi pir*⁸, or *marabout*⁹, who is in charge of the work, but they do not have a tradition of making prison visits either (Lien 2004). In recent years Muslim imams have adopted patterns from the Christian pastors, and begun to visit prisons.

When in 2004 I interviewed various imams in Oslo about their work against criminality (Lien 2004), it turned out that many of them thought it was quite necessary to work within the walls of prison to prevent criminality. They told about a coordinated system whereby turn they visited the various correctional facilities in the Oslo area to hold Friday prayers and talk with the prisoners. For that reason I was very surprised when during the field work I found out from the guards at Ullersmo and Oslo Prison that this arrangement worked poorly. Not because the prisons put up barriers against the imams, but because the imams were absent from Friday prayers, and were not very motivated, which was noticed by both prisoners and guards.

Several of the inmates confirmed the situation and told that they were constantly disappointed by cancellations of Friday prayers. Some went to the Sunday service with the pastor instead, simply to get a change from the everyday routine. Some had private, personal talks with the pastor, but not with the imams.

We have tried several times to get imams to come and hold Friday prayers. First we tried with the mosque on Åkebergveien. We thought it was natural since it is so close. Then we tried the mosque on Urtegata. It always starts well, but falls apart pretty quickly. They come very strong at first, with leaders at a high level and imams. But then it declines, the levels go down, finally a taxi driver who will come inside. We're trying to get it started again now, but I doubt that we'll get it to happen. It's something about them having to show up punctually, that's how the system is here. They have to arrive when they're supposed to, or else they don't get in. And they have to let someone know when they can't come. This is difficult. The inmates are happy, and then they don't come (guard in Oslo Prison).

There were two permanent pastors in Oslo Prison. In addition there were regular visits from Free Church congregations and Pentecostals, the Salvation Army, the

⁸ This is a holy man in the Sufi Muslim tradition. He does social work for his followers, tries to heal and give advice on the spiritual and practical planes.

⁹ This is correspondingly a *sufi pir*. He is called *marabout* in some Muslim countries, and *sheikh*.

Pathways to Gang Involvement and Drug Distribution
Social, Environmental, and Psychological Factors

Lien, I.-L.

2014, IX, 133 p. 10 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-01663-4