
THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN EUROPEAN PRISONS

Submitting author: Dr Jikkemien Vertonghen
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sports Policy and Management
Brussels, 1050
Belgium

All authors: Jikkemien Vertonghen (corresp), Marc Theeboom

Type: Scientific
Category: 9: Sport for Good

Abstract

1. AIM

The aim of the present study is to examine the role of sports in the prison environments of the Council of Europe Member States in order to gain more insight into the use of sports as a means for personal and social development of prisoners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Imprisonment is a punishment where the offender loses his or her liberty because he or she has broken the law (Johnsen, 2001). European standards emphasise the importance though of the protection of fundamental rights of prisoners and the elaboration of an active prison regime (van Zyl Smit & Snacken 2009). However, several studies reveal that prison conditions contribute to the emergence of many physical and mental health problems for prisoners compared to the wider community (e.g., Loeb & Steffensmeier, 2011). Therefore, physical and mental health protection and promotion activities are important issues to be addressed by the prison system of every country to attend to the rights and needs of people in confinement. In this situation, physical activity and sports have been considered as key activities for the health protection and promotion of inmates and research has been addressed to such purpose. However, the simple fact that people engage in a sport setting does not automatically imply that improvements in personal or social outcomes can be expected. It therefore becomes clear that more attention must be paid to the structural components and processes of management and guidance within the sports context in order to provide greater insight into the complexity of the underlying processes that are presumed to generate social benefits (Theeboom, Schailleé & Nols, 2011). To date however, there is a lack of insight into the nature of these structural and organisational mechanisms and into which sports and sports programmes would best suit the interests of detained persons and the public. For example, in a more general sense, Coalter (2008) stated that research on the 'sufficient' conditions that are needed in order for

sport to provide social benefits is sorely lacking.

This shows that, there is a need for programme evaluations to consider not only outcomes but also the underlying processes and mechanisms in order to establish and disseminate principles of best practice. Such work will help to challenge what seems to be the uncritical acceptance of the positive value of sports provision within policy and across the current diverse practical delivery of sports in prisons.

3. METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the present study a quantitative research methodology was used in order to obtain a better understanding of the role of sports in prison and how they are structured and organised across different European countries. In total, 135 directors of prison administrations and probations or members of the council for penological co-operation of 31 European countries responded to a questionnaire. In particular, this study examined (a) legislation regarding sports in prisons, (b) available sports facilities, (c) sports programme and (d) staff and resources.

4. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The data of the present study has already been collected, but they have not been analysed yet. However, we guarantee that the analyses will be executed on time in order to be able to present the results at the conference.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The present study was conducted by order of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) of the Council of Europe.

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