"Fathers in Prison" program may create a basis for desistance among Norwegian prisoners

Many inmates have had their own fathers in prison, been in care as children or had other childhood experiences resulting in a lack of good father role models to learn from (Purvis, 2013). Correctional services in a number of countries have therefore offered incarcerated fathers various training programs to enhance their performance of fatherhood. Some of these programs have been regular parenting courses aimed at families with children, while others have been specifically designed for correctional settings (Loper & Tuerk, 2007; Hoffmann et al., 2010; Purvis 2013). This article presents experiences from a Norwegian program called "Fathers in Prison". The evaluation asks whether "Fathers in Prison" helped the participants towards a greater desire to live a law-abiding life.

Norwegian correctional services

Penal policy in Norway is based on a humanistic approach. It is strongly emphasized that the prison sentence should prepare offenders for their release and transition back into the community. This is done in various ways, including cooperation with employment and education services in order to provide opportunities for prisoners to study and gain qualifications during their time in prison. Prisoners are assigned a personal contact officer who has the primary responsibility to assist in the planning and implementation of the prison sentence, to provide support in a desistance process, and to facilitate effective follow-up after release (Kriminalomsorgen, 2016; Rundskriv G-8/2006; Rundskriv KSF 1/02; Rundskriv KSF 2/02).

During the sentence, the correctional services may offer various types of courses, or programs as they are commonly called. Many of these programs aim to motivate offenders to change their ways to prepare them better for a life of freedom. Here we will examine one of these programs, entitled "Fathers in Prison". The article is based on a re-analysis of data collected in connection with the evaluation of the program (Hansen et al., 2013).

Why may programs for fathers lead to change?

In recent years, the Norwegian Correctional Service has placed increased emphasis on theories that focus on what makes people law-abiding, rather than on what leads to crime (Hansen et al, 2014). These theories are often linked under the term "positive criminology". Positive criminology is not a theory in itself but an umbrella term for several different theoretical perspectives. In the Norwegian context, the predominant theories are rooted in the concepts of desistance, restorative justice, salutogenesis and social role theory. Positive criminology focuses primarily on what causes a person to desist from criminal behavior, permanently or at least temporarily (Ronell & Elisha, 2011). Such an approach means that the correctional services have become more aware of how they can support offenders in a process of reintegration into society and desistance from crime. Positive criminology therefore involves providing support for prisoners' own wishes and their process away from crime (Hunter et al., 2013). In this approach, great emphasis is placed on the movement away from crime as an individual process, where there is no standard solution that will work for everyone. There is no clear answer as to what causes crime and how it can be stopped. The most effective measures are likely to vary from person to person; this often means trying out a number of different interventions to find out what works best, before the desired results may be expected (Weaver & McNeill, 2011). Today, there is clear evidence of that offenders who give up a life of crime go through a change process in which they become more mature, have

distanced themselves from the social networks identified with crime, have qualified for participation in ordinary social life (for example, through education or work), and have changed their social identity by becoming more responsible, more concerned for others and more concerned about the future (McNeill, 2006). Social support is clearly also an important factor (Panuccio et al., 2012). If the offender identifies with other roles, such as that of a father, this can make him more determined to distance himself from the role of a criminal (Magaletta & Herbst, 2001; Lösel et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2013). Activities that help prisoners to see themselves in a new role can thus motivate them to desist from criminal activity (Ronel & Segev, 2013).

Programs for fathers

There is a wide variety of programs for fathers (Hunter et al, 2013). Some are only aimed at prisoners, while in others children are directly involved. Some programs utilize various technological solutions to strengthen contact between prisoners and their children, such as DVDs or audio files where the father reads to the child; some involve sessions with a number of fathers and children, either in or outside the prison (Hoffmann et al., 2010). A primary aim of these programs is to reduce the negative effects (such as loosing contact with the father and fear for their father's well-being) of the imprisonment for the children. Another aim is to improve the fathers' parenting skills and prepare them for an active fatherhood after release (Gavelli, 2015).

Improved contact between the prisoner and his family also has another dimension. A number of studies suggest that stronger family ties reduce criminal activity after release. Ryden-Lodi et al. (2005) point out that programs for fathers initiate various processes that would seem to

create a basis for reduced criminal activity. Firstly, there is reason to believe that strong family ties are the best catalyst for a successful transition from prison to society. Key elements here are good contact and good communication skills between prisoner and family (Magaletta & Herbst, 2001). Furthermore, typical post-release issues such as employment, housing and finances may be easier to solve if the person has a satisfactory social network to help him (Hunter et al., 2013).

Several recent studies do in fact reveal differences in life after release for those who have completed programs for fathers in prison and those who have not (Lösel et al., 2012; Markson et al., 2015). Lösel et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive longitudinal study of fathers in prisons and how they manage after returning to their families. The study collected data roughly four months before release and six months after release. The return was considered as positive if there was a good father-child relationship, a good husband-wife relationship, effective problem solving strategies, fewer problems with finances and work, reduced use of alcohol and drugs and less criminal activity. The conclusion was therefore that programs for fathers, including follow-up work, during the prison term reduced problems and crime among participants (Markson et al., 2015). Awareness of the role of the father may help the inmate to realize that it is difficult to take responsibility for one's family and children if one is involved in crime and risks being imprisoned (Weaver, 2012).

"Fathers in Prison"

In Norway, the correctional services have developed a program for incarcerated fathers called "Fathers in Prison". The program was developed in a Norwegian prison in the years 2004-2005, inspired by a similar Scottish program. During these years, it has been adjusted several times, partly on the basis of the experience of the instructors and the feedback they have

received from the participants. The main aim of the program is to help offenders gain new perspectives on their criminal behavior and how this affects their children and other family members. The program is thus intended to motivate inmates to take responsibility for living a life in accordance with the rules of society. By participating in the program, prisoners will enhance their knowledge, skills and attitudes to better enable them to perform fatherhood in accordance with the expectations of their children, family members and society at large. Key elements of the program are (Hansen et al., 2013):

- Network map, family and family situation

- Communication

- Developmental theory – child development

- Role theory – roles and role models

- Emotions – how to relate to emotions – coping

- Challenges and problem solving

- Child health – prevention and treatment

- Children's rights – parents' responsibilities

- Public services – who can we cooperate with?

All potential participants are interviewed before the start of the program and only motivated inmates considered likely to benefit from the program are invited to participate. Sexual offenders or others considered unsuitable are not invited. In order to motivate participants to begin a change process, the course is dialogue-based and the instructors employ principles from theories of motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995) and the so-called "wheel of change" (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982) in communication with the participants. The program also includes learner-based activities, such as making a DVD movie where participants show their family how they live and what life is like in prison. The program also requires participants to plan and implement a family day. The entire program takes four weeks

and consists of 16 sessions, four per week. The program is led by two instructors, who have received special training and authorization.

A number of Norwegian prisons now include family quarters within the prison compound where the offender can stay with his family for short periods (usually 24-48 hours) during his sentence. It is generally a requirement that he has completed a "Fathers in Prison" program before being allowed to use this family house. The program is therefore an important part of the correctional strategy to improve contact between the inmate and his children.

Data collection and methodology

Some of the research on the role of the father in prison places great emphasis on documenting statistical relationships between programs for fathers and social reintegration (Hunter et al., 2013; Markson et al., 2015). Such correlations are interesting, but this seems to be an approach that pays insufficient attention to the fact that crime is largely influenced by individual choices (McNeill et al., 2012; Weaver 2012; Ronel & Elisha, 2013). There are many other factors, such as whether ex-convicts receive housing and/or employment after release, which may affect the degree of reintegration into society. If participants indicate that the "Fathers in Prison" program motivates them for change, this shows that the program has the potential to contribute to positive reintegration. Whether it actually does so will in many cases depend on various other factors such as how release is planned and organized (Hansen, 2013; Hansen et al., 2014). Here we assume that reintegration involves changes in individual priorities and we are therefore primarily concerned with whether participants indicate that they are in a change process (McNeill, 2006). We wished to obtain maximum insight into how the participants experienced the program, and therefore chose to interview all participants

(Danermark, Ekström, Jacobsen & Karlsson, 2003). Data collection was conducted in three prisons in eastern Norway. These were the only three prisons that planned to implement the program during the six months we had set aside for data collection. Two of these were closed high-security prisons and one was an open prison. The study was approved by the Privacy Ombudsman for Research and was conducted in accordance with the relevant regulations. These state that study participation must be voluntary and that data must be stored on password-protected computers in secure networks. All course participants in the three prisons agreed to participate in the study and were informed orally and in writing that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

All participants in the three prisons were to be interviewed three times - at the beginning of the program, immediately after conclusion of the program and about six months later. For various reasons such as release and transfer to other prisons, the number of participants interviewed decreased from 16 (one prison had six participants and the other two had five) in the first round to 13 in the second round and 9 in the final round of interviews. A total of 38 interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in the prisons in a designated room where we could sit undisturbed with each participant. At the two high-security prisons, the interviewer, like any other visitor, was equipped with an alarm, but this was not practiced in the open prison. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour, depending on what the participant wanted to talk about.

The participants had a wide variety of backgrounds. Their ages ranged from the early 20s to well into their 40s. They all had children; some only one child, others more than one. Some had young children, while others had children in their teens. Some were in a stable marriage or cohabitation, while others had had children with more than one woman and had more than

one ex-partner/ex-wife. Sometimes the inmate's family lived near the prison, in other cases the family lived at some distance from the prison, even abroad. Some participants had recently begun their sentence, while others were nearing the end. The length of the sentences also varied considerably.

The interview guide was semi-structured, enabling us to emphasize an open dialogue with the interviewees and allow them as far as possible to direct the conversation (Kvale, 2001). The interview guide was therefore primarily used as a checklist to ensure that we had covered all the planned topics. The same researcher interviewed the participants on all three occasions. This meant that the researcher and participant got to know each other quite well and the conversation flowed fairly easily in most cases.

All interviews were recorded digitally. A number of participants agreed to the interview and the recording on condition that the interview would only be available to the interviewer and that personal information and reactions would be treated with care. We considered it important to respect this request. The three researchers who conducted the interviews therefore studied their recordings separately, and only transcribed the parts that were considered to be of central importance. The separate analyses were made directly on the basis of the audio files, where we noted down meaning condensation for each statement. These meaning condensations were then categorized (Kvale, 2001). Afterwards, each researcher presented an analysis of his/her own data to the two others, explaining how the interviews were processed and which meaning condensations and categorizations were made. Interviews were initially analyzed on the basis of Malterud's systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012) where we followed her procedure through the four steps she describes: 1) total impression – from chaos to themes; 2) identifying and sorting meaning units – from themes to

codes; 3) condensation – from code to meaning; 4) synthesizing – from condensation to descriptions and concepts.

We emphasized respect for the informants' privacy, and some of the quotations presented here have therefore been adjusted in order to conceal their identity. For the same reason, we also decided not to provide information on the participants' background.

Data presentation

The first round of interviews at the start of the program involved the questions of why the participants had signed up for the program and their expectations for it. All participants had joined voluntarily and many of them stressed that the requirement that prisoners had to complete the program before being allowed to use the family house was an important reason for attending. There were also some who said that they were taking part because they had heard many positive things about the program. A few said they had been encouraged to join, but did not quite know why. Reactions to the implementation of the program were mainly evident in the interviews immediately after conclusion of the program. The quotations below are therefore all from the second round of interviews.

Responsibility and willingness to change

The responses from the participants indicate that they became more concerned about their role as fathers as the program progressed. For some of them, the program gave them new perspectives at their own role as a father.

> *We talked a lot about our families and the situation we've put them in. It was tough to hear what a bad father I am, putting my family in a situation like that when I know I have children. Of course I knew I could have got arrested.*

Here it is evident that the informant comes to realize how difficult it is to combine the roles of criminal and father. One of the others expressed a similar sentiment as follows: *I reckon many people don't think much about crime affecting your family so much. I did realize it before, but I'm thinking more about it now.*

To a certain extent, although the participants knew that crime affected their family, they apparently needed to be reminded about this in order to relate to it. It was therefore interesting to hear the participants' own conclusions about how they should relate to their role. One said: *You easily forget you're a father when you're inside and this course gives you the energy to ... you're a dad and you have to take responsibility.*

The conclusion is clear: a father must take responsibility. Another participant is quite sure about what that means:

> *I've made up my mind – I've managed without drugs here in prison – now it's over – the kid's four years old, he's not going to grow up with a father who doesn't care. He's the important one – he's the one who made me decide – I'm done with drugs now.*

An important point of the program is that it does not merely focus on fatherhood, but also the fact that family and networks are more than the nuclear family. The use of the so-called "family network map", where participants were asked to plot their relationships to many other

family members, gave them new perspectives on family relations. More than half of the participants brought up this topic spontaneously.

> *My experience with the network map was a tough one – my closest family was a bit more people than I'd realized. After that day, I understood better that I mean something to more people than I'd realized.*

In this way, participants were confronted with the fact that more people than their nuclear family were affected by their crime. Some also realized that, although contact with certain family members was not helpful, there were others who represented a worthwhile resource to keep in touch with. One informant said: *I've started to work at getting back better contact with my brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces.*

For most participants, crime had led to broken relationships; if mended, these could now be an asset in their efforts to give up crime. Much of their feedback suggested not only that they were keen to improve their relationship with their nuclear family, but also that they realized how better relations with the non-criminal parts of their wider family could be of benefit.

New knowledge

The program not only provided participants with a different focus, they clearly also learned from it and gained a kind of expertise that could also benefit them outside prison. When asked how his partner reacted to his joining the program, one prisoner replied:

> *She was very pleased, she can see I've taken a course. I've learned to communicate better with the kids and with her.*

Another informant provided a more detailed description of the new knowledge:

The course was very good. You learn about a lot of things you maybe know, but you quickly forget them. Like communication with kids. How to deal with children and so on. The kind of things people take for granted, but there's so much more. For example, it's important to make memories, to find things to do together. Going fishing for example. Bonding with the children. Doing things that aren't just fun for you.

Such feedback is typical of almost all participants. They learned and they acquired new skills in communicating with others. That gave them the opportunity to interact with their immediate family in a way that helps to prevent and reduce conflicts.

Social support

For practically all participants, the program was a safe haven where they could talk about things they could not bring up elsewhere. One of the participants explained it in this way:

Oh yes, there's a big difference between how we talk in the wing and on the course. It's like night and day. Nobody talks about kids and families in the wing. There everyone's supposed to be so tough and talk about crime – it's basically just stories about cops and robbers. But in the group it's really different – there we can talk about anything – that's why we've tried to start up a kind of father group afterwards.

One's family is thus apparently a difficult subject to talk about in general in a prison. Another participant elaborates on this with the following statement: *I've exchanged experiences with the others. We could bring up stuff about the feelings of being a dad – there's kind of nobody else you can talk to about being a dad in jail.*

Not only were the other participants important, the instructors also had an important role. All of these were prison officers who had received special training to lead the program. For the participants, these were key figures. The majority of participants made comments such as: *The instructors are important - they understood me - what it's like being a father in prison - they were friendly, nice people.* Some elaborated on this attitude, as the following statement shows:

> *Things worked very well with the group leaders. The best thing about them is that they are dads themselves. They don't talk like out of a textbook, because that's not what I'm interested in.*

> *For me, the leaders weren't staff, they were ordinary civilians. I didn't look at him like a prison officer. Today I saw him in uniform for the first time and it made me puke. It got a bit gross again. But the fact that they wear civilian clothes is important.*

In many ways, participants felt that they had a different relationship with the instructors than with other prison staff. An important aspect was that they viewed the instructors more as mentors and allies than as guards.

How important the program had been to the participants was clearly revealed in the interviews we conducted a few months later.

> *The program was really good, but now it's over – that's bad. Now we've got used to having somewhere to talk about the kids – now there's nowhere we can do that. That's bad. It's a long time since I've had anyone to talk to about that stuff – my family, kids and school. You can't talk to the others – the others always put on a tough act – they*

start laughing at you.

Such feedback was typical for all the participants who were still in prison some months afterwards. Firstly, it was evident that they still felt that the program had been important. Secondly, they clearly missed a setting where they could maintain their focus on fatherhood. One of the others thought there ought to be a possibility for the participants to get together again: *There hasn't been any follow-up – I miss that – it would be good if we could get together sometimes – talk together – discuss a bit among ourselves - things like that.*

One participant had a definite idea about how to solve this challenge.

> *I want to form a group of fathers who have children in the same age group. We should join forces and try to influence the prison in the right direction. We need to be together.*

Here he talks of an initiative to create a regular group of fathers where former participants in the program could maintain their focus on the father's role. Later, it appeared that this initiative was followed up, as the prison did arrange such a group.

Discussion

Our point of departure is that desistance is an individual process of change and that it is difficult to find a standardized intervention that will work for all (McNeill, 2006). The participants in this program were not randomly selected, but were the most strongly motivated inmates. The assessments presented below must therefore be seen in light of what can be

achieved when recruitment to such a program is based on an evaluation of motivation and likely benefit.

Responsibilities and competencies

Our data indicate that the "Fathers in Prison" program made the participants more responsible. They realized that if they wanted to be a positive father, they had made some wrong choices. They said that they understood that a criminal career was not consistent with their desire to be a good father. They found themselves in a situation where they felt there was a gap between the life they had lived and what they wanted (McNeill et al., 2012). The participants also realized that if they were to achieve the life they wanted – as an active father – they needed to take responsibility and choose another way of life. Interestingly, they were also concerned with their responsibilities as a father towards the rest of the family. There was feedback that the use of the family network map, helped the participants realize that their crime had not only affected themselves and their nuclear family, but also their wider family. A development where offenders become more concerned about relationships with others and take greater responsibility for improving these relationships is central to a desistance process (McNeill, 2006). The "Fathers in Prison" program therefore appears to have provided motivation for such a change.

Motivation is important, but it is also important that participants enhance their competence. Many convicts were in care as children (Friestad & Skog Hansen, 2002), or had lacked good father role models for other reasons (Purvis, 2013). Several participants therefore lacked basic knowledge of how fatherhood should be performed. Participation in the program enabled them to interact better and be more involved with their children, and function in the family network in a more positive way. Improved communication skills with their partners and

greater competency in avoiding unnecessary conflicts enhanced their chances of being able to re-establish their family life after release. The establishment of a wider family network is also beneficial. These competencies give participants a better chance of reintegration into society (Lösel et al., 2012; Markson et al., 2015).

Social support

Social support is important in a movement away from crime (McNeill, 2006; Panuccio et al., 2012). The participants emphasized its importance for them during the program. Social support in this context takes place on two levels. Firstly, a sub-culture develops in the group that participates in the program together. Within this sub-culture, issues related to fatherhood and involvement in family life, are central and accepted. But that is hardly true of the prison environment in general (Grambo, 2002). Contact with other inmates becomes more important the longer one remains in prison (Gordon & McConnell, 1999; Christie, 2007). The expectations and norms represented by the prisoners as a whole are the most important factor in enduring a long prison sentence. We know that children and fatherhood have limited space in typical prison life (Grambo, 2002). The participants also indicated that this applied in their case. The prison system is a place where emotions like pain, weakness, fear and loneliness are difficult subjects to talk about (Magaletta & Herbst, 2001). Such sentiments appear to gain scant acceptance in general, not only in relation to children and families. Focus on children and family through "father programs" or "father groups" thus provides a justification for discussing such "soft" emotions (Grambo, 2002; Hedin, 2000). Fatherhood and the challenges involved was not a topic that could be discussed outside the program. For the participants, the program sessions were thus a setting where they could focus on fatherhood, receive support for focusing on it, and find help to deal with the challenges involved.

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Interestingly, the participants generally agreed that the instructors were also a part of this social support. They did not perceive the instructors primarily as prison officers, but more as qualified fathers. Together, participants and instructors can therefore create an arena where fatherhood can be discussed and an understanding of fatherhood can be developed. This leads to a situation where the outcome of the program is created in interaction between participants and instructors. Such interaction is a key aspect of the process of developing desistance (Weaver, 2012; Panuccio et al., 2012; Turner, 2015). Many convicts are skeptical of correctional services and whether they can trust the staff (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). We also know that precisely the relation to the professional and the development of a trusting relationship between client and professional are key elements of effective strategies in substance abuse, mental health and social work (see for example Hubble et al., 1999; Redco et al., 2007; Topor et al., 2011). This also applies to work with convicts (Mapham & Heffron, 2012; Panuccio et al., 2012). This program therefore creates a basis to build up a positive relationship between prisoners and correctional staff.

The program enhanced the participants' focus on their role as a father – at least as long as it lasted. Several of the interviews were conducted four to six months after the program ended; these naturally involved those participants who had longer sentences. The feedback provided by these participants gave us important information for an understanding of how fatherhood can be developed in a prison. In this connection, the order of analysis was that all three interviews with each participant were analyzed before we proceeded to the next person. It was noticeable how the participants in the first two interviews, at commencement and conclusion of the program, were committed and interested in performing the role of a father. The interviews after four to six months revealed a very different picture. The participants appeared passive and disillusioned and tended to focus on how difficult everything was and the fact that

they received little or no support to be a good father. Almost all of them therefore wanted the program to be followed up. Scholars who emphasize that the transition away from crime is an individual process underline that this is not a linear process, but rather continuously fluctuates between successes and setbacks (Turner, 2015). In order to achieve lasting change in the prisoner's priorities, the process must therefore continue (Weaver, 2012). It is a challenge that prison culture strongly glorifies crime (Gordon & McConnell, 1999; Christie, 2007). If the desistance process which begins with participation in the program is not followed up, there is a risk that the process will cease and be reversed because the participants no longer receive support to change. If an attempt is to be made to maintain social support after the program has ended, this could involve the establishment of groups of fathers and/or regular talks with the personal contact officer.

Summary

The participants in this program indicated that they had become more responsible, gave more thought to how their crimes affected others, learned how to be more involved with their children and communicate better with close family members and realized that they ought to stop their criminal activity. They also found it important that the program was an arena for support by the other participants and the instructors in such a change process. The challenge was that this social support disappeared after the program and the participants then became less motivated to change. This shows, as many researchers have argued, that desistance is a continuous process that must be followed up. Comments from the participants suggest that "Fathers in Prison" has the potential to initiate a desistance process, but that they must also receive follow-up assistance after the program ends, if this potential is to be realized.

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