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Prison Populations as Political Constructs: the Case of Finland, Holland and Sweden

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Abstract

Countries such as Finland, Holland and Sweden have witnessed similar economic and social developments and have been affected by similar crime trends. However, over the past 50 years, the daily prison populations in these three Northern European countries have developed very differently. An attempt is made here to discuss these diverse developments in the light of a perspective that treats daily prison populations as political constructs.[1]

KEY WORDS: Comparison, Crime policy, Finland, Holland, Netherlands, Prison population, Sweden, Trends

During the past 50 years, prison populations in Finland, Holland and Sweden have followed different trends. The Finnish prison population has shown a marked decrease, in Sweden it has remained more or less stable, whilst the prison population in Holland has followed a U-shaped trend.

Keeping people in prison is costly – not only in financial but also in humanitarian terms. For these reasons, it is of great political and scientific interest to try to understand the driving forces that underlie both the size of prison populations and of trends in this size over time. How is it possible, that three Northern European countries such as Finland, Sweden and Holland can have witnessed three principally different trends in prison population size?

Caveats

When reading this article, it should be kept in mind that the paper stresses a dynamic and developmental perspective. On the basis of such a perspective, it is easy to discern important differences between the three countries. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the level of differences at the end of the period examined are rather small. In fact, in 1995, the prison population rates were very similar across the three countries – indicating that there might be some kind of an adaptation process at work (the mysterious 'regression to the mean'?) somehow pulling prison populations towards some kind of 'standard'.

The time horizon is also significant for potential explanations. One reasonably sound hypothesis is that the longer the time perspective, the more clearly will structural factors, common to the three countries, appear to constitute a crucial driving force behind the changes in prison populations. The shorter the period, the greater will be the emphasis

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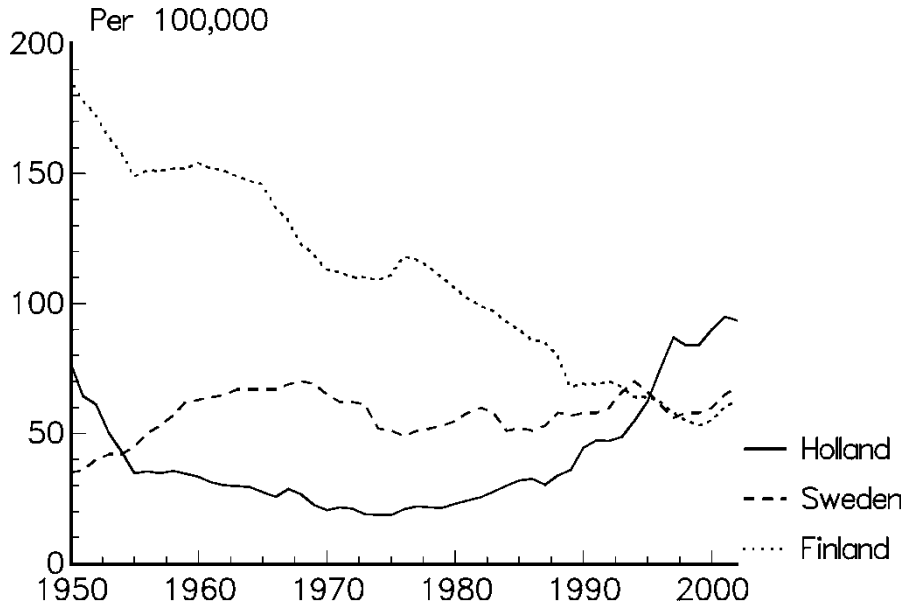

Figure 1. *Daily prison populations in Finland, Holland and Sweden, 1950–2002. Per 100,000 population.*

on systemic factors such as crime rates, sentencing practices and so forth. Thus, prison data dating back to the early 19th century show very high prison rates in all three countries during the first half of the 19th century (Christie, 1968; Junger-Tas, 2001:181 citing van Ruller & Beijers, 1995). Since then, prison populations have decreased considerably.

The main focus of this paper is directed at a middle-range time frame covering approximately 30–40 years.

Previous research and hypotheses

In line with the main body of existing research in this area (cf. Kuhn, 2003), trends[2] in the daily prison populations of Finland, Holland and Sweden do *not* mirror the trends followed by registered criminality in these countries. In all three countries, officially registered offences (e.g., violence, theft, drug and traffic offences) have increased significantly over the past 50 years (Nordic Criminal Statistics, 1997; Westfelt, 2001; Huls et al. (no date)). According to data from victim surveys (both national and international, dating back to the 1980s), this increase had slowed down or may even have levelled off completely in all three countries by the end of the period examined (van Kesteren et al., 2000; Crime in Finland 2001 (no date); Westfelt, 2001; Wittebrood & Junger, 2002). Nor do factors such as economic development, unemployment or social marginalisation appear to provide particularly good *uniform* explanations for the long-term decrease in Finland, the stability in Sweden and the U-shaped trend witnessed in Holland.

This paper therefore examines a third set of hypotheses.[3] Daily prison rates

[2]It should be noted that this paper focuses on a trend-based perspective and not on annual fluctuations. Research into annual and short-term fluctuations has produced results that differ in some respects from those presented here (see, e.g., Sutton, 2003).

[3]This perspective has, nevertheless, been contested by eminent writers such as Bauman (1998:115–116).

Table I. *Reported offences in Finland, Holland and Sweden, 1950–2000. Per 100,000 of the population.*

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Homicide (completed)						
Finland	3	2	..	2	3	3
Holland	..	..	1	1	1	1
Sweden	1	1	1	2	1	1
Assault						
Finland	148	126	246	292	414	537
Holland	81	76	67	97	151	278
Sweden	105	116	229	297	475	663
Robbery						
Finland	5	7	21	39	53	50
Holland	..	..	..	30	80	117
Sweden	3	6	19	41	70	101
Theft						
Finland	507	700	1,359	2,280	3,648	4,217
Holland	459	650	1,368	3,427	5,552	5,403
Sweden	1,575	2,723	4,855	6,187	8,581	7,832

Sources: Nordic Criminal Statistics (1997; updated); Westfelt (2001; updated); Council of Europe (1999; updated).

may be understood as a political construct, i.e., given a certain framework,[4] ''prisoner rates are to a great degree a function of criminal justice and social policies that either encourage or discourage the use of incarceration'' (Aebi & Kuhn, 2000:66 with explicit references to Young & Brown (1993), Killias (1991), Morris (1991), and Tonry (1999)).[5] At the superficial level, the mechanism behind this 'construction' process is quite simple. Since prisons are financed through state budgets, governments and parliaments have to monitor[6] developments in prison rates in order to allocate what are deemed to be adequate resources. In theory, this monitoring process provides a continuous opportunity for the regulation of prison populations. Whether or not such regulation takes place in practice, however, is an open question, and one that is very difficult to answer, because it is always up to politicians whether they choose to act or to react or whether they choose to do nothing and simply allow things to ride.

In the following section, a short account is provided of *criminal justice* policies in Holland, Sweden and Finland

[4] E.g., macroecomic conditions (Rusche & Kirchheimer, 1968); degree of inequality (Wilkens & Pease, 1987); public sensibilities (Garland, 1990); market state *versus* welfare state (Weiss, 1998); the nation-specific institutionalisation of knowledge production and decision-making (Savelsberg, 1999); national and cultural idiosyncrasies (Tonry, 2001).

[5] One should also mention Christie (1993:13) who wrote: ''The size of the prison population is a result of decisions. We are free to choose. It is only when we are not aware of this freedom that the economic/material conditions are given free rein.''

[6] See, for instance, Moolenaar et al. (2002), Direktoratet for Kriminalforsorgen (2002).

in order to illustrate that it is indeed feasible to treat daily prison populations as political constructs. The analyses are, first and foremost, restricted to criminal policy decisions at the surface level, for the most part leaving aside the deeper structures involved.

Holland

The decrease in the Dutch prison population during the 1950s and the 1960s has been described in detail by von Hofer (1975) and analysed by Downes (1982; 1988; 1998; see also Franke, 1990 and Downes, 1990). Downes concluded his analysis by stating that:

> "In sum, three phases in post-war sentencing trends in the Netherlands can be discerned. In the first, ranging from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, the impact of a rehabilitative anti-penal philosophy seems crucial in explaining the trend towards shorter sentences. In the second, from roughly the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s, constraints of the capacity of the criminal justice system as a whole [...], assume an increasing importance in enabling the judiciary to effect a continuation of these trends. In the third period, from the late 1970s to date, the period of shortening sentences has ended, and pressure to expand the capacity of the system is working through the political processes" (Downes, 1982:355).

Indeed in 1972, prison capacity had been decreased as part of a general restructuring of the Dutch system. This drop in capacity coincided with a growing need for more inmate places, however. The 1972 decision resulted in a serious shortage of prison cells, and persons sentenced to short terms in prison were at times collectively reprieved at the same time as it took longer and longer to put short prison sentences into effect (Haen Marshall, 1988; Baerveldt & Bunkers, 1996).

It was not until February 1981 that a working group was appointed (*Capacity Problems in the Prison Service*) which one year later proposed introducing permanent increases to prison capacity (SCP 1982). In 1983, a large majority in the second chamber of the Dutch parliament demanded that the coalition government – comprised of Christian Democrats and Liberals – produce a plan for the maintenance of law and order. The resolution motivated this demand by reference to: 1) increasing levels of concern about rising crime within the population at large; 2) the risk that the public might lose confidence in the government and its role as guarantor of private and public interests; and 3) fears of an ongoing undermining of citizens' perceptions of norms and social control (Ministerie van Justitie, 1985). The so-called 'Roethof-Committee' was appointed (cf. Tak, 2001), and the decisive step towards an increase in prison numbers was then taken in 1985 in the Justice Ministry's policy statement entitled *Society and Crime. A policy plan for The Netherlands*, which was in turn based on preliminary proposals put forward by the Roethof-Committee.

The policy statement reported that crime in Holland had increased very substantially, and particularly organised crime that was deemed to lie behind much of the drug-related offending in the form of property crime and violent offences. The rise in crime and reduced levels of resources within the justice

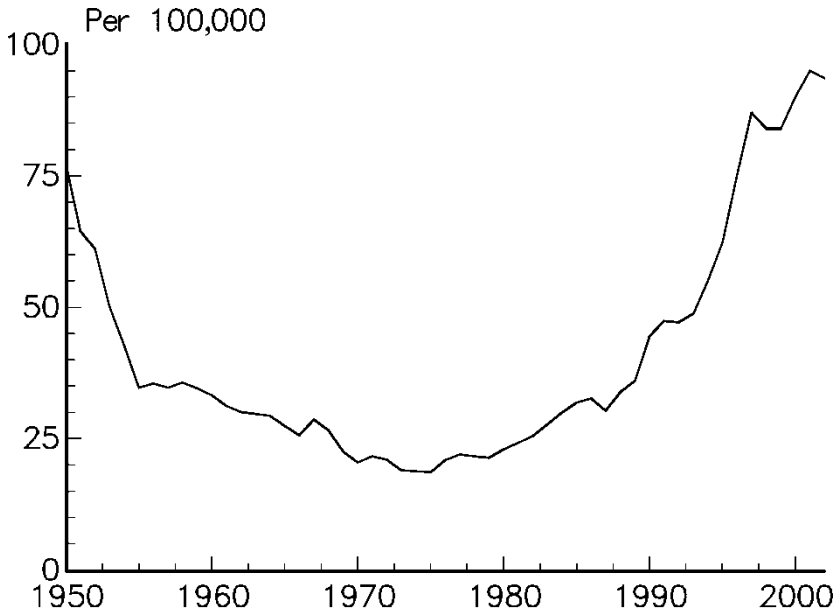

Figure 2. *Daily prison population in Holland, 1950–2002. Yearly average. Per 100,000 population. (Preliminary data for 2001–2002)*

system were perceived as having led to a dramatic decline in efficiency within the justice system, which had in turn undermined the general credibility and preventive function of the penal system. Profound changes would therefore be required. A bi-level strategy was proposed. The control of petty crime would be transferred to the management of the local community, whilst the combat of serious crime would be pursued through intensified criminal justice measures by means of increasing the risk of discovery, more prosecutions and harsher sanctions. As a consequence, proposals were also put forward for a far-reaching program to extend existing prisons and to construct new ones.

The Minister of Justice was

> ''forced to conclude that the criminal justice system is no longer able, with its present resources, to maintain a minimum standard of law-enforcement which is essential in a state based on the rule of law. The gap between the number of infringements of standards embodied in the criminal law and the number of real responses to them by the criminal justice authorities had become unacceptably wide.
>
> In the present situation not only was it impossible to secure the objectives of deterrence and standard-reinforcement to an adequate degree, it was even feared that the ever-present tendency of citizens to take the law into their own hands can no longer be satisfactorily kept in check. [...]Order must be restored in the affairs of criminal justice. [...]''. (Ministerie van Justitie, 1985:20)

The plans for expansion and to increase prison service resources were put into effect, and reliance on this strategy was re-confirmed in a renewed policy plan in 1990. The plan stated

dryly that: ''Despite the efforts made by the authorities to tackle the causes of the increase in the prison population [...], it will be necessary to make further increases in capacity [...]'' (Netherlands Ministry of Justice, 1990:70–1). In all, between 1985 and 2000, the penitentiary capacity increased from 5,900 places to 15,700 (Tak, 2003:123) and the expenditures rose at an even faster pace (CBS, 1996:13; DJI, 2001:11,13). Dutch commentators have reasonably drawn the conclusion that the expansion in prison places led to a *structural* increase in the prison population in Holland, which is very likely to endure for some considerable time to come (van Kalmthout & Tak, 2001). Not even a further increase seems to be out of the question (Justitie, 2002a).

The underlying reasons

What then might be the underlying reasons for this shift in strategy in an apparently liberal country such as Holland with a record of hostility toward the use of prisons? Within the space of approximately ten years – between around 1975 and 1985 – Holland witnessed a fundamental shift in crime policy strategy, from decarceration to incarceration. What factors might have served to condition such a shift? The following possible scenario of how politicians understood the situation and reacted to it may be inferred from the available Dutch literature.

The 1985 policy document was published towards the end of a period at the beginning of the 1980s during which Holland had experienced a deep economic crisis (after the second oil shock in 1979). Even prior to this point, however, the traditional foundations of Dutch society were perceived to have become subject to a severe stress, something which had been further intensified during the mid 1970s as a result of immigration (Junger-Tas, 1997; de Haan, 1997) and the establishment of the drug problem (Leuw, 1991; Korf, 1995). The steep rise in crime levels (according to official police statistics) that was also witnessed during this period came then to be associated with an all-encompassing process of secularisation and with the crumbling of the so-called 'pillars',[7] together with a growing material surplus and the shift from tolerance to permissiveness witnessed during the 1960s and 1970s (de Haan, 1997).

The justice system was considered unable to meet the growing demands for increased control as a result of its poorly dimensioned resources and the diffuse nature of the objectives that criminal justice interventions were intended to achieve. The likelihood of sanctioning was perceived to be dropping rapidly in line with the falling risk of discovery, as was the likelihood that those penalties that *were* imposed would actually be put

[7]This concept attempts to summarise a number of essential characteristics of the Dutch social structure. The following description is to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Suecia*: ''Political life in the Netherlands, like social life in general, has for a long time been characterised by the *Verzuiling*-system. The designation is based on the Dutch *zuil* or 'pillar', and proceeds from the way in which society has been strictly divided on the basis of religious and socio-political affiliation, which has affected people's social and political lives and determined for example the clubs and societies to which people have belonged and the way they have voted. These divisions have become institutionalised, and have given rise to very powerful interest groups. These have been regarded as the 'pillars' on which Dutch society rests, and the interaction and compromises taking place between them have determined the political life of the Netherlands. [...] the Verzuiling-system has been broken down over recent decades [...]'' (Johansson, 1994:87 [my translation]; see also Therborn, 1989).

into effect. This last factor in particular created public indignation and 'ill will' in relation to the justice system. "It hardly needs to be said that failing to place remand prisoners in custody constitutes a disturbing breach of a fundamental judicial principle, namely that rulings issued by judges must also be put into effect" (Ministerie van Justitie, 1985:16).[8]

As distinct from the 1960s and 1970s, at which time crime policy issues were not a major focus for the interest of the press and politicians (Johnson & Heijder, 1983) and 'tolerance from above' could be practised more or less unhindered by the functionaries of the justice system (Christie, 2000:55), law and order had now become a 'hot' political question (Beki et al., 1999:403). Both politicians and the mass media[9] came to place an increasingly strong emphasis on effective crime control. Here, the perception that the handling of narcotics was of central importance to the crime situation played a key role (Haen Marshall et al., 1990; cf. Martineau & Gomart, 2001): drug use, which was visible everywhere, had given rise to petty crime and public order disturbances that the general public experienced as both irritating and disturbing. Junger-Tas (2001:188) summarises:

> "Others have observed that the Dutch criminal justice system and the Ministry of Justice have long been operated by a liberal and tolerant elite of experts, legislators, and high-ranking civil servants. [...] However, this situation has changed dramatically as the numbers of victims of petty offences increased. Moreover, crime became a highly topical and marketable subject in the media. [...] Pressures on the government, Parliament, and the judiciary for tougher laws and harsher penalties increased."

It is also worth noting that, as Franke (1990) has pointed out, there has been no obvious organised political opposition to the plans for expansion. An alliance of prison staff, inmates, inmate organisations and pressure groups *against* the introduction of *multi-inmate cells* (as a means of creating space in prisons) in fact helped to pave the way for the new building program. "Partly due to this unanimous resistance, the minister of justice had to abandon his plan for group cells, although a large majority in Parliament would have supported him. Criticism of the building of new prisons was thus regarded as antisocial, and accordingly died down" (ibid, p. 90).

In addition to these domestic trends, there was also pressure from abroad (primarily from France, Sweden, the USA and the then West Germany) to abandon liberal policies in relation to the drugs issue (Downes, 1988; Fiselier, 1992; Baerveldt & Bunkers, 1996). Up until the early 1980s, Dutch drug policy appeared to be moving even further from the control strategies of other western countries. Holland promoted her own isolation by exaggerating her liberal view in the international arena (Haen Marshall et al., 1990).

In summary, the formerly appropriate

[8] This problem does not seem to have been resolved, however. The number of remand detainees released as a result of lack of prison space is reported to have varied between 1,200 and 5,300 during the period 1987–1995 (CBS 1996, Table 3.10) and the criticisms remain (for details, see Tak & van Kalmtouth, 2001:162).

[9] On the media's importance for prison growth, see Mathiesen (1996).

description of Dutch crime policy (Downes, 1982) as not being the result of systematic political planning (but rather the consequence of a host of different circumstances) needs now to be replaced by the opposite description (cf. van Swaaningen & de Jonge, 1995; Rutherford, 1996; Downes, 1998): crime policy is today to a large extent characterised by what the literature refers to as 'planned justice' or 'managerialism, i.e., "a bureaucratic quest for greater cost-effective forms of social regulation" (Cavadino & Dignan, 1997:222) – in relation to which an expanding body of criminologists, specializing in both planning and evaluation,[10] appear to play an important role. According to Rutherford (1996), the Netherlands experienced a loss of popularity of the socio-liberal model, with increases in the moralistic law-and-order rhetoric and actual policy reflecting planned justice. The role of the joint moral community in shaping criminal justice policy during the 1990s had become more precarious. The populist agenda, combined with the pressure of managerialism, served to dilute and perhaps even eliminate the limits that protected society from seeking more simplistic and authoritarian solutions to crime (Rutherford, 1996).

Sweden

Against the backdrop of a rising prison population, the Swedish Prison Administration forecasted in the early 1960s that Swedish inmate numbers would increase to 6,200 in 1967 (Kriminalvården 1963 (1964:15)), and a program of building new prisons was initiated in the meantime. However, the forecast turned out to be an overestimate, the prison building program was checked and prison population size did not reach the forecast figure until 30 years later in 1993/94. But why did the forecast increase fail to materialise?

During the 1960s and early 1970s, grass roots movements such as KRUM (cf. Mathiesen, 1974) introduced a view of imprisonment as being an expensive, ineffective, and detrimental form of punishment, the use of which should be limited to as great an extent as possible. This view also came to be accepted by the political establishment (both social democratic and centre-right governments and parliament), by those responsible for the administration of justice (the judiciary and the prison administration) and by the media. This becomes very clear when trends in inmate numbers are examined over the last 30 years. Figure 3 shows that since the mid-1970s there has been an underlying pressure towards an increase in inmate numbers. This increase has been capped on several occasions, however, by means of focused legislative changes that have decreased the size of the prison population.

The fall in inmate numbers at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s coincided with the widespread criticism of the prison sanction that characterised this period (Tham, 2001a). The introduction of the rules for discounting time served on remand[11] further reduced the prison population at the beginning of 1974. The upward pressure on inmate numbers continued to increase however – particularly in connection with major police operations directed against the

[10] See, for example, van Tulder's (2000) paper on 'Crimes and the need for sanction capacity in the Netherlands'.

[11] I.e. time served on remand prior to a court hearing is automatically deducted from the prison term to which the court then sentences the individual.

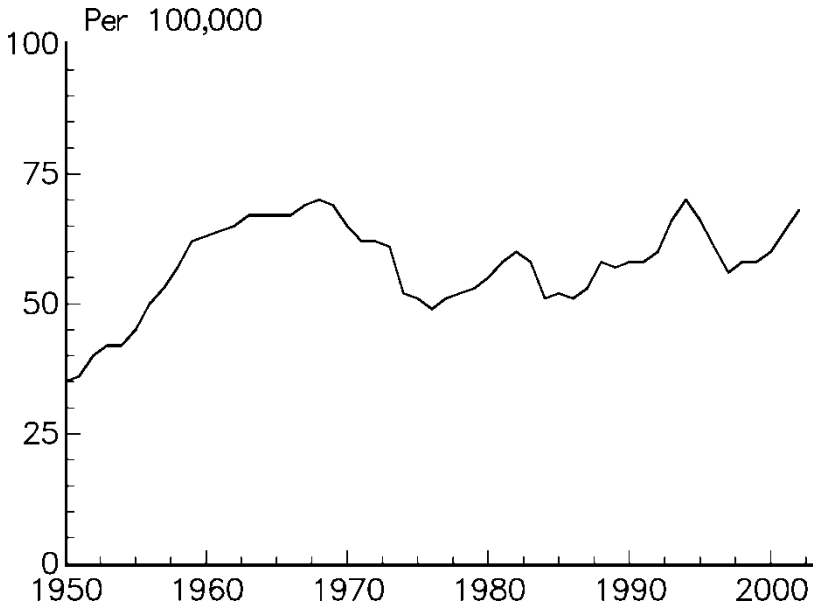

Figure 3. *Sweden: Daily prison population, 1950–2002. Yearly average. Per 100,000 population.*

street-level drugs trade during the years 1980 to '82 – and the next measure to regulate the size of the prison population came in the summer of 1983 with the introduction of release on parole after serving half the sentence for those sentenced to a prison term of between four months and two years.

The introduction of new remand regulations – as a result of a court ruling against Sweden in the European Court – increased the number of remand inmates and thus also the size of the prison population. At the end of the 1980s, however, contractual treatment was introduced partly as an alternative to a short prison sentence. The use of the prison sanction for drink-driving offences became restricted in 1990. It was not until the short period of centre-right government (1991–1994) that certain more expansionist decisions were taken (such as the return to release on parole after two-thirds of the sentence had been served) and the inmate population was allowed to grow past the 5,000 mark. New steps were taken to regulate inmate numbers at the end of the period, however, *inter alia* through the introduction of supervision by means of electronic monitoring in 1994 and the extended use of community service in 1999.

At the general level, Swedish prisons policy over the past 30 years may be characterised as having constituted a relatively successful attempt at keeping increases in the prison population under control in line with crime policy ambitions of the time to restrict the negative effects of prison sentencing.

Since the end of the 1990s, however, the trend has been such as to indicate that the inmate population will be settling permanently above the 6,000 mark. The principal reason for this prognosis is that in 2002, the Prison Administration pronounced plans to *expand* prison capacity (with approximately 1,000 places) for the first time in a very long time. The plan had not been

preceded by a public political debate of any kind but should rather be regarded as an administrative measure aimed at reducing the level of crowding in prisons. In exactly the same way as in Holland, the temporary doubling of the inmates-to-cell ratio has led to protests from both prison service staff and from inmates. The lack of any public political discussion on the dimensioning of the prison system is in turn a result of the fact that – unlike the situation at the end of the 1960s – the use of prison sanctions *per se* is no longer in question as a crime policy measure. On the contrary, the demand for more and longer prison sentences has once again become a common feature of the crime policy debate, and during the period between 1991 and 2001, the sentencing scale has been tightened in relation to a number of different offences (Andersson et al., 2001). In addition, the Government appointed a commission of inquiry in 2002 with the task of producing a proposal for new prison and probation service legislation, prioritising 'the work of preventing re-offending' and 'the requirement of the secure and credible execution of sentences' (Dir. 2002:90, p. 6). The direction of this focus is very reminiscent of what had already happened in Holland. There, a new Prisons Act had been in force since 1999, which toned down the importance of rehabilitation as a goal connected to the execution of sentences, focusing instead on the importance of security and sobriety (Pakes, 2000; Tak, 2001; Tak 2003).

The renewed popularity of the prison sanction in both Holland[12] and Sweden[13] has also manifested itself in various survey studies.[14] The well-known *International Crime Victims Survey* (ICVS; van Kesteren et al., 2000) asked respondents to choose which of a variety of sanctions they felt to be most suitable for a 21-year-old male being found guilty of his second burglary, this time stealing a color television set in the process. Given the choice between fines, a prison sentence, community service, a suspended sentence or any other sentence, the answers were distributed in the following way (see Table II).

Whilst the number reporting a preference for a prison term is generally high in the English speaking countries (cf. Kuhn, 1993), Sweden and Holland differ significantly at the end of the period from the rest of the non-English speaking countries, and Sweden also differs significantly from both Denmark and Finland.

Finland

The stunning decrease in the Finnish prison population has been analysed in detail by Törnudd (1993) and Lappi-Seppälä (1998; 2000). Only a short summary of the trend is therefore required here. This summary focuses on the different techniques employed to bring about the decrease.

Technically, the decrease was brought about by two groups of measures. On the one hand, admissions were reduced through the depenalisation of certain offence types (such as drunken driving

[12] See also SCP 1994 (1995:424–427); Downes (1998).

[13] See, e.g., Jareborg (1995), Tham (1995; 2001a).

[14] Correlational analyses use to indicate that there is a positive relationship between national incarceration rates and the proportion of the population that chose prison (Kuhn, 1993; Besserer, 2002).

It remains, however, an open question whether these changes should be regarded as having been triggered from 'above' and/or from 'below' (cf. Beckett, 1997; Tham, 2001b).

Table II. *Sentencing preferences for a young recidivist burglar, percentage in favour of a prison sentence.*

	1989	1992	1996	2000
Austria	..	..	10	..
Belgium	26	19	..	21
Denmark	..	..	..	20
England & Wales	38	37	49	51
Finland	**15**	**14**	**18**	**19**
France	13	..	11	12
Germany (West)	13	..	..	..
Italy	..	22	..	..
Netherlands	**26**	**26**	**31**	**37**
Northern Ireland	45	..	49	54
Norway	14	..	..	..
Poland	..	31	17	21
Portugal	..	..	..	26
Scotland	39	..	48	52
Spain	27	..	..	..
Catalonia	..	..	..	7
Sweden	**..**	**26**	**22**	**31**
Switzerland	9	..	9	..
All countries	24	25	26	29

Source: van Kesteren et al., 2000:Table 27.

and theft), the increased use of suspended prison sentences, and the introduction of community service as an alternative to unconditional imprisonment (1991). On the other hand, the size of the inmate population was reduced through the use of shorter prison sentences and the expanded use of the parole system. The combined effect of all these measures has been the continuous decrease of the size of the inmate population, whilst the *average* length of stay in prison seems to have varied very little since the middle of the 1950s.

Equally important is Lappi-Seppälä's assertion that "the decrease in the Finnish prison population has been the result of a conscious, long-term and systematic criminal policy." This has been due to: 1) the fact that Finnish criminal policy has been exceptionally expert-oriented; 2) the existence of an 'attitudinal readiness' among the judiciary – particularly within the courts of first instance; 3) an absence of political opposition to reform proposals prepared by the Ministry of Justice; and 4) the fact that until the early 1990s at least, the Finnish media retained a "fairly sober and reasonable attitude towards issues of criminal policy" (Lappi-Seppälä, 2000:37–38).

Kekkonen (2003; see also Christie, 1968:171) goes a step further by claiming that the decrease in the Finnish prison population should be understood in the light of the Finnish civil war, which broke out in late January 1918 and is counted among the bloodiest internal conflicts to have taken place in Europe during the 20th century. In its aftermath, Finnish control policy became harsher and by comparison with the other Nordic countries, it contained fewer alternatives of either an ideological or legislative character. This situation did not begin to change until 1960s when Finnish society became subject to major structural changes which would in turn pave the way for the experts' reform endeavours.

In light of the Dutch and the Swedish case histories described above, one might point to two additional circumstances that may have facilitated the reduction in the large numbers of Finnish prison inmates: the one relates to the question of immigrants and the other to the question of narcotics.[15] Due to her geopolitical

[15] The importance of narcotics and immigrant policies for prison populations has been shown, for example, by Christie (2000:69–74) and Wacquant (2001). See also Weiss (1998).

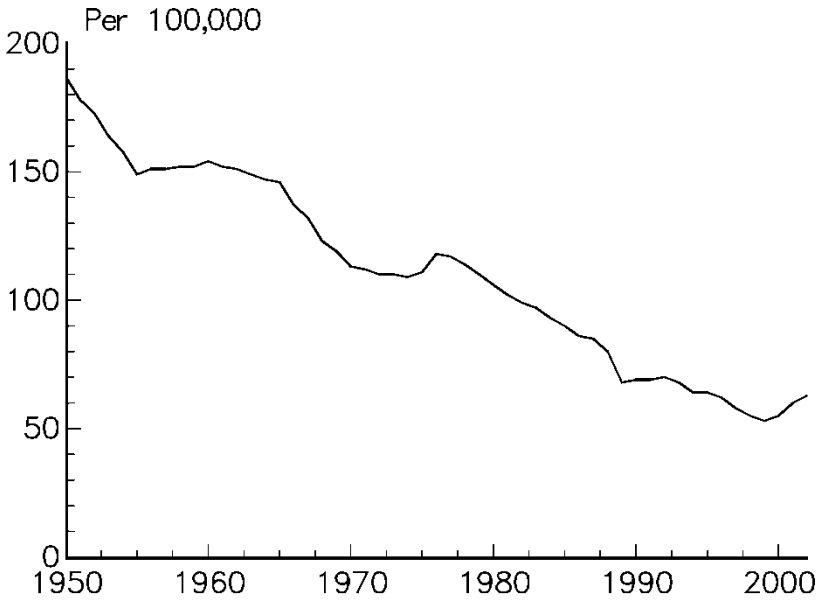

Figure 4. *Finland: Daily Prison Population, 1950–2002. Yearly average. Per 100,000 population.*

location, Finland has been insulated from these two major sources of political concern. In both Holland and Sweden, the way the issues of immigrants and drugs have been dealt with politically has played an important role and has been among the driving forces behind increases in prison admissions and changes in the daily routines within the prison system. In both countries immigration has served as a catalyst for real or constructed popular fears, and foreigners constitute a substantial proportion of the prison populations in both Sweden and Holland. By contrast, Finland experienced a net *emigration* during the 1960s and 1970s;[16] and "drugs have been overpowered by the extremely strong position of alcohol in Finnish culture. Due to this, drug issues have long remained a strange element for Finns" (Hakkarainen et al. (1996:16)).

Conclusion

Much of the research on prison populations and crime policies in general is of an *ad hoc* and rather speculative nature, because we lack good theories or at least good empirical generalisations (cf. Tonry, 2001:531). Even the explanations put forward here suffer from this weakness. This is easily understood when looking at the prison populations in the neighbouring countries of Denmark and Norway. Both countries define drug use and immigration as major political problems and, in addition, prominent extreme right-wing populist parties (cf. Rydgren, 2002) – taking law-and-order to market – have had representatives in parliament for many years. Nevertheless, prison populations show different paths

[16] Lenke (1983) has maintained that a group of Finnish emigrants who came to Sweden in the 1970s included persons with serious social problems. These people came to Sweden because the opportunities to 'make it' were greater in Sweden than in Finland, even for people with serious problems. In this connection, Lenke refers to 'social political refugees'.

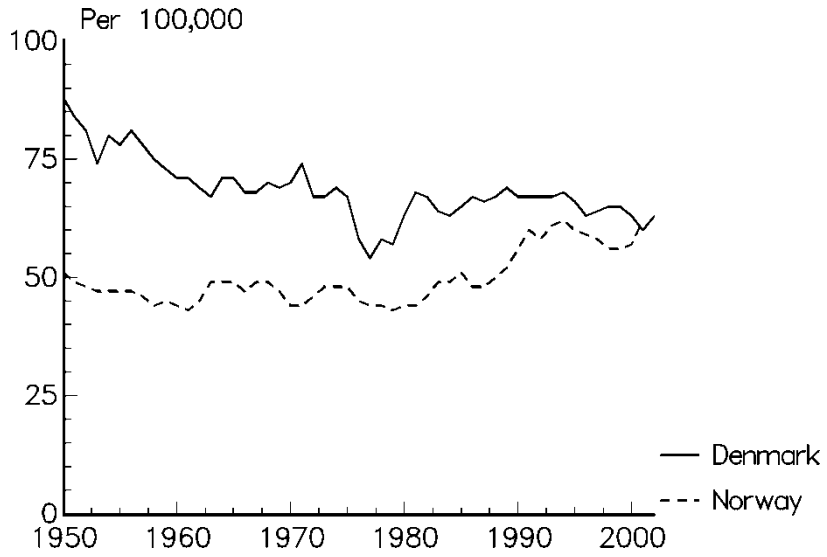

Figure 5. *Daily prison population in Denmark (1950–2002) and Norway (1950–2001). Yearly average. Per 100,000 population.*

over the past 50 years, with a decrease in Denmark and an increase in Norway.[17]

In summary, the case histories presented in this paper show very different patterns. One common trait appears to be discernible, though. The increase in Holland, the decrease in Finland and the long stability in Sweden were made possible because no strong *political opposition* challenged the course of events. Thus, political power and counter-power and the absence of counter-power seem to play an important role in relation to the size of prison populations. For this reason, it will be most interesting to follow what does or does not happen in these countries over the coming years. For Holland, the question is whether the prison population is allowed to continue its increase. In October 2002, the Minister of Justice announced that the Dutch prison population could increase by another 5,000 places as a consequence of a newly adopted *Security Plan* (Justitie, 2002a; 2002b). For Finland, the question arises whether prison figures will be kept low despite the prospects of increasing drug use and increasing immigration due to Finland's ongoing integration into the European Union. For Sweden, finally, the question is whether some form of political opposition will emerge and gain sufficient strength to pull the country's prison population back to the 'standard' Nordic level.

[17] The increase in Norway between 1987 and 1994 (from 48 to 62 prisoners per 100,000 of the population) is largely due to intensified drug controls (Christie, 2000:71–72).

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