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## Positive Psychology - A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Correctional Systems

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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY – A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF  
CORRECTIONAL SYSTEMS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major program  
in Psychology in the College of Sciences  
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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes and compares the effectiveness of the correctional systems in the United States of America and Europe, with some emphasis on Scandinavia. To make the comparison, I looked at previous research on the correctional systems in the United States and Europe. I reviewed articles from PsycInfo EBSCO Host and Google Scholar. The main points of comparison used are recidivism rates and rehabilitation services offered by the prisons in different countries. The results of this comparison show that countries that offer better rehabilitation services in the prison system, like Scandinavian countries, have lower recidivism rates than the United States, where the focus is on punishment rather than rehabilitation. Research has been done before on countries individually, but there is not enough research comparing correctional systems among nations. The purpose of this paper was to expand the available literature comparing these different correctional systems.

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## **Introduction**

The United States has expanded its correctional system dramatically over the last few decades – from around 500,000 in 1980 to over 2.2 million in 2010 – due to many policymakers insisting on tougher criminal sanctions (Cochran et al., 2013). Americans make up 5% of the world's population, but they constitute 25% of its prisoners (Cochran et al., 2013). The common belief and justification for such actions is that tougher sanctions reduce offending (Cochran et al., 2013). The study by Cochran et al. (2013) explored the effectiveness of penal sanctions, and it was found that only 33% of people on probation recidivate, compared to 47% of ex-prisoners. Why is that the case? Why are people who have only served probation less likely to offend again, if the tough-on-crime policies are considered by many to be true?

There are several possible reasons why tougher sanctions may lead to more or less recidivism. First, stricter forms of punishment provide less support and services, while less severe sanctions – such as probation or a local jail – allow for easier reintegration and treatment (Cochran et al., 2013). Second, less severe sanctions reduce a person's exposure to criminogenic environments – for example, there are substantial deprivations in prisons and jails, and they provide exposure to violence which in turn does not help with the rehabilitation process of an individual during their incarceration and after (Cochran et al., 2013). The questions as to why less severe punishments are more effective seem to have relatively simple answers – they offer a nice balance of punishment and rehabilitation before re-entering the community (Cochran et al., 2013). This thesis will examine and compare the effectiveness of the correctional systems in the United States and abroad and will discuss potential changes that could be made to improve the

quality of these systems to reduce re-offending and increase the quality of services offered in prisons.

## **Methods**

### **Search Criteria**

I searched PsycINFO EBSCO Host and Google Scholar for research articles on international recidivism rates and different programs utilized in correctional systems, emphasizing the United States in contrast to Europe, and most specifically Scandinavia. I used keywords such as “recidivism rates”, “correctional system”, “rehabilitation in corrections”, “criminogenic effect”, and “positive psychology” followed by the name of the country or “Europe” to find more comparative research. No publication date restrictions were used. I restricted my search to English only.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

#### ***Geographical***

The search was restricted to the United States and European countries. There was an emphasis on Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

#### ***Populations***

Different countries define recidivism differently, which made the search difficult. Some countries define *recidivism* as beginning at rearrest, while others do not classify it as recidivism until the individual is sent to a correctional facility again. The primary data used was from countries that define *recidivism* as any form of repeat punishment, but the main focus was imprisonment.

## **Criminogenic Effect and Labeling Theory**

Many believe that incarceration increases crime, the so-called criminogenic effect. The direct opposite is the belief that non-imprisoning options such as probation avoid this effect. Labeling theory, introduced by Lemert (1951), focuses on the concepts of primary and secondary deviance. Lemert suggested that individuals who engage in primary deviance, which is the onset of criminal behavior, do not internalize a pro-criminal identity associated with former punishment; secondary deviance is a result of internalization of the pro-criminal identity in response to punishment associated with primary deviance (Nedelec & Silver, 2019). This theory suggests that accepting and internalizing the status of a deviant contributes to individuals continuing their cycle of deviance. This is in some ways also supported by the restrictions posed on deviant individuals who have been in contact with the system – restricted access to housing and fewer job opportunities. These restrictions make the individual feel isolated, which often leads to repeat offending in the future. Isolating an individual can harm their mental health and their chance of rehabilitating. However, in their study, Nedelec and Silver (2019) found a lack of long-term criminogenic effects from contact with the criminal justice system. Instead, their study highlighted the importance of considering genetic factors in criminology. Research suggests that 50% of the variance in antisocial behaviors is due to heritability (Barnes et al., 2014). When analyzing criminality, two kinds of criminal risk factors must be considered – static and dynamic. Static factors cannot be changed, for example, criminal history and biological factors; dynamic factors are called criminogenic needs and are comprised of attitudes, feelings, and values that favor law violation (Gendreau, French, & Gionet, 2004). To rehabilitate an incarcerated individual, the correctional system must address the dynamic factors, majorly

formed by an individual's environment and socialization factors (Gendreau, French, & Gionet, 2004). If a person grows up in an environment that promotes and encourages committing crimes, they are very likely to develop values and attitudes that do not perceive crime as wrong (Gendreau, French, & Gionet, 2004). If these factors are not addressed while a person is in the system, the individual will likely re-offend upon their release and go back to prison (Gendreau, French, & Gionet, 2004).

### **Recidivism**

Butorac et al. (2017) define recidivism as “a relapse of criminal behavior, which can include a range of outcomes, including rearrest, reconviction, and reimprisonment”. When examining the effectiveness of a correctional system, one of the main factors considered in the evaluation is recidivism. In a study by Katsiyannis et al. (2017), it was found that 77% of offenders in the United States who were released in 2005 were rearrested within five years, and 29% of them for violent crimes. This is an alarming rate, which results in many people questioning the effectiveness and success of the United States' correctional system (Katsiyannis et al., 2017). Since the 1980s, there has been a three-fold boom in incarcerations, which some attribute to the success of the legal and correctional systems, while others attribute it to its failure (Clements et al., 2007). A study by Fazel and Wolf (2015) reviewed recidivism rates on a global scale and found a variation in how recidivism is defined and reported. This creates discrepancies in the reported statistics, making it challenging to create an accurate comparison. For example, recidivism reports in the United States include rearrest, reconviction, and reimprisonment, while other countries included in the study do not include all three, and some may even include additional forms of punishment. Sweden reported a two-year reconviction rate of 43%; however,

a separate report includes fines as part of the reconviction measure, which brings the reconviction rate up to 66% (Fazel & Wolf, 2015).

### **Harsh prison conditions**

The United States is known for its “get tough on crime” philosophy, resulting in the incarceration boom and the lack of change in offenders. Do harsh prison sentences ensure that criminals have learned their lesson upon release? Specific deterrence argues that “criminals learn from their own experiences about the severity of penalties” and suggests that harsh prison conditions are likely to decrease an individual’s propensity to recidivate (Chen & Shapiro, 2007). However, another argument is that harsh prison conditions correlate to inferior labor market outcomes, life in prison induces a taste for violence, and encountering peers in prison often influences crime upon release (Chen & Shapiro, 2007). These arguments propose that harsher prison conditions and longer sentences achieve the opposite of what they aim to do. Instead of reducing recidivism rates, they seem to lead to more crime upon an individual’s release. The study conducted by Chen and Shapiro (2007) suggested that inmates housed in above-minimum security prisons are 41% more likely to be rearrested in the year following their release than their minimum-security counterparts.

### **Correctional programs**

#### ***The United States***

Because of the drastic growth in the prison population across the United States, there is a growing disparity between treatment needs and treatment resources (Clements et al., 2007). Specific programs have been put in place to help offenders reintegrate into society upon release. A few examples of such programs are more extensive risk-assessment procedures, screening of

offenders with mental health problems prior to release, educational and vocational training programs to teach job skills, vocational and work programs to develop good work habits, better discharge planning activities, and meaningful community linkages to make services available on release (Wormith et al., 2007). Considering the United States is housing around seven million offenders, there are not enough human and financial resources to successfully apply these ideas and programs in real life (Wormith et al., 2007).

Dowden and Andrews (2000) describe in their research the risk principle, which suggests that the level of treatment service must be matched to the offender's risk level. Specifically, high-risk offenders should receive more services than low-risk offenders. This principle provides information about an offender's needs that should be targeted and addressed in the correctional treatment programs. If the end goal is to reduce recidivism, the criminogenic needs of offenders should be the primary target (Dowden & Andrews, 2000). One principle of effective correctional treatment is responsivity, which does not receive much attention in research. There are two kinds of responsivity – general and specific. General responsivity is the most effective service to induce positive change based on behavioral and social learning approaches, for example, modeling, rehearsal, role-playing, reinforcement, and graduated practice (Dowden & Andrews, 2000). On the other hand, Dowden and Andrews (2000) describe specific responsivity as focusing on the offender's characteristics, such as interpersonal sensitivity, interpersonal anxiety, and verbal intelligence.

Most high-risk offenders in the United States are held in solitary confinement or under surveillance. They are not allowed to interact with the rest of the general population, which results in them not receiving the same level of intervention as the rest of the prison population

because of the level of security they require. Dowden and Andrews (2000) examined the relationship between the effectiveness of correctional treatment and reduced recidivism. They concluded that programs incorporating behavioral and social learning were associated with more significant treatment effects when compared to non-behavioral programs. Aos et al. (2006) studied specific correctional programs that reduce recidivism rates among offenders. It was discovered that the most successful program for drug-involved offenders is drug treatment in the community, which reduces recidivism by 12.4% (Aos et al., 2006).

In comparison, prison-based therapeutic communities without community aftercare only resulted in a 5.3% reduction in recidivism (Aos et al., 2006). When sex offenders were looked into, it was found that cognitive-behavioral treatments for low-risk offenders while on probation reduced recidivism by 31.2%, and cognitive-behavioral treatment in prison reduced recidivism by 14.9% (Aos et al., 2006). Overall, Aos et al. (2006) discovered that treatment-oriented programs with intensive supervision resulted in a 21.9% decrease in recidivism compared to the surveillance-oriented programs with intensive supervision, which resulted in no decrease in recidivism.

Bahr et al. (2009) examined parolees and what differentiated successful ones from unsuccessful ones. About 95% of inmates are released back into communities on parole, making parole a critical issue in examining the correctional system's success (Bahr et al., 2009). Multiple different theories may be used to understand the process of re-entering back into society.

According to Bahr et al. (2009), social learning theory suggests that criminal motivations are learned through associations with significant others, which means the interactions with peers and family members give parolees reinforcement for different behaviors. Some parole conditions include being drug-free, having stable employment, and not associating with felons. These aim to

encourage offenders not to participate in delinquent behaviors that might send them back to prison (Bahr et al., 2009). Like social learning theory, social control theory suggests that developing bonds with people involved in conventional and legal activities is likely to complete parole (Bahr et al., 2009).

### ***Denmark***

The objective of the Danish correctional system is to reduce crime and promote the reintegration of offenders upon release. Correctional personnel agrees that it is difficult to accomplish such goals in an institutional setting where certain liberties are taken away or limited; in scenarios where deprivation of liberty is necessary, the Danish correctional philosophy states that the conditions in correctional institutions must resemble conditions in society as much as possible (Hornum, 1988). Because of these expectations, Danish prisons focus on individualized treatment of offenders and providing home-like amenities in prisons. There are three kinds of prisons in Denmark. Unlike in the United States, the concept of minimum, medium and maximum-security prisons do not exist. The first kind of prison is a closed prison, where recidivists and offenders with long sentences are placed (Hornum, 1988). These prisons have the most restrictions regarding rights and liberties, but even there, prisoners are allowed many more liberties than a standard prison in the United States. For example, after the prison reforms in the 1970s, Danish prisons no longer restrict hair length, reading materials, and telephone use. A crucial aspect of inmate rehabilitation is contact with family and friends on the outside. The Danish system does not restrict prison mail and visits – mail is not censored, and the only times where inspections are conducted is when there is reasonable suspicion regarding prohibited activities. Visitations are often unsupervised and are allowed as often as it is considered

practical, with a minimum of once a week. During visits, prisoners are allowed privacy with their visitors, and the room door can be closed. The guards are only given access to it after knocking – this practice provides enough privacy for sexual activity when spouses visit. The Danish system even allowed inmates and their visitors access to private quarters for extended weekend visits, providing even more privacy for conjugal visits.

The second kind of prison institution in Denmark is an open prison. In an open prison, inmates are often allowed to leave for home visits of family and friends, there are no fences, inmates have their private rooms, and there are no restrictions on permitted activities during the day – inmates can watch as much television as they want, they can spend as much time in the recreation room as they want, and they are also allowed to spend time with other inmates in their private rooms. Room decorations are allowed, even encouraged. Open prisons aim to create an atmosphere of living outside of a prison, and these institutions are widely considered successful. The last kind of prison facility is a local prison, usually small, and houses inmates awaiting trial.

The furlough system in Denmark is strongly developed. In open prisons, prisoners are allowed one 72-hour leave every three weeks after a four-week stay. In closed prisons, furloughs are granted for extraordinary circumstances and are usually supervised. Another prison program with a high success rate is the work program inside the prisons. Prison employment aims to simulate the same kind of productive work in the outside world in preparation for future release into society. Work-release programs have even been implemented in certain open prisons. On top of prison employment, the correctional system has also implemented voluntary educational programs with courses offered at the primary, secondary, and even post-secondary levels. Similar to work-release programs, study-release programs have been implemented in some

prison institutions. Every prison offers counseling services to its inmates. However, intensive psychological services are reserved for inmates with mental disorders, usually housed in designated prisons for the criminally insane.

In the Danish correctional system, staff members have to undergo extensive training – a prison officer needs to pass written tests and be interviewed by a selection board; during the first two years on the job, they are rotated between the different kinds of prisons (closed prison, open prison, and local prison) and complete different training programs before they can get certified as a competent prison officer (Hornum, 1988)

### ***Sweden***

Like the Danish system, the correctional system in Sweden emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment. Due to its size, Sweden has been divided into fourteen correctional regions. A lot is done to ensure prisoners serve all or most of their time in a local prison to maintain contact with friends and family. Hornum (1988, p. 71) states that much like the Danish, the Swedish correctional system relies on maintaining inmates' liberties and rights:

*“(1) the right to establish associations which represent inmate interests; (2) the right to bring formal complaints against prison personnel; (3) the right to retain all civil rights, including voting, while in prison; (4) the opportunity to communicate with the outside by telephone and uncensored mail; (5) the opportunity to leave a local prison on “town passes”; (6) the opportunity to receive regular furloughs from prison; and (7) the opportunity to receive unsupervised visits in prison.”*

Swedish prisons also pride themselves on their well-developed work programs. Even better than in Denmark, the Swedish correctional system has designed market-relevant work programs in which inmates work a regular workweek, up to 40 hours.

### ***Norway***

The Norwegian penal philosophy is that repressive prisons do not work well when rehabilitating offenders, but it believes that humanely treating prisoners can improve their chances of successfully reintegrating into society (Butorac et al., 2017). The government ensures released convicts have housing, employment, health care, and any treatment they need (Butorac et al., 2017). Prisoners are two to four times more likely to have some mental illness, which is why mental illness is recognized as a significant risk factor for recidivism (Butorac et al., 2017). Because of this, it is essential to provide prisoners and former convicts with accessible treatment. One of the significant differences between the United States and Europe is the accessibility of these treatment programs – very often, in America, it can be highly costly to seek out such services and commit to them. Meanwhile, European countries provide more social services to those in need at a meager price or free of charge (Butorac et al., 2017).

### **Recidivism in Europe**

Recidivism in Europe is a lot lower than in the United States. The International Center for Prison Studies releases its annual World Prison Brief, which shows every country's prison population per 100,000 people annually. In 2013, every 716 people in 100,000 in the United States were incarcerated, which put America in first place for incarceration rate in the world (Butorac et al., 2017). In contrast, some European countries in those rankings were Russia (10th place, 475 per 100,000), the United Kingdom (102nd place, 148 per 100,000), the Netherlands

(161st place, 82 per 100.000), and Denmark (172nd place, 73 per 100.000) (Butorac et al., 2017).

Scandinavian countries have always been known to have low re-offending rates to the point where recidivism is not impacting prison population rates (Butorac et al., 2017).

## **Positive psychology**

Positive psychology is a relatively new field of psychology. It concerns the individual's well-being and studies positive experiences and individual traits (Duckworth et al., 2004). Plenty of research has been done on the causes of psychopathology, and plenty of techniques have been developed to work on these conditions and improve them. Cognitive behavioral therapy, for example, teaches patients how to identify and fight automatic negative thoughts (Duckworth et al., 2004). However, little research has been done on how positive psychology impacts prevention and treatment. Positive psychology's focus is to increase clinical psychology's focus beyond suffering and its direct effect on an individual's life.

Positive psychology is split into three domains. The first is a pleasant life, which concerns positive emotions about the past, the present, and the future (Duckworth et al., 2004). Positive emotions concerning the past are contentment, serenity, and satisfaction; positive emotions about the present include both somatic (immediate and momentary sensory delights) and complex pleasures (pleasures that require learning); positive emotions about the future consist of hope, optimism, and faith (Duckworth et al., 2004). Duckworth et al. (2004) describe the second domain in positive psychology as the engaged life, which consists of utilizing positive individual traits such as strengths of character and talents. Qualities considered as character strengths are leadership, kindness, integrity, and the capacity to love and be loved. They are considered virtuous across different cultures and historical periods (Duckworth et al., 2004). The third domain is the meaningful life which constitutes being a part of positive institutions and serving them. According to Duckworth et al. (2004), the main focus of psychologists, anthropologists, and politicians has always been harmful and disabling institutions. However, positive

psychology seeks to find the institutions that promote and enable the best traits in human nature. Positive psychologists want to focus on positive institutions: mentoring, strong families and communities, democracy, and a free press (Duckworth et al., 2004).

### **Positive psychology and crime**

Hope is a fundamental human emotion that has aided human survival and well-being throughout history. Researchers have recently begun testing its usefulness in everyday life and mental health (Duckworth et al., 2004). Specialists have suggested that hope might be responsible for positive outcomes in interventions. Many criminals, especially ones who are currently imprisoned, feel intense hopelessness. It was found that increasing hope correlates with being empathetic, enhanced intimacy, and decreased loneliness (Duckworth et al., 2004). A study by Martin and Stermac (2009, p. 701) demonstrated that individuals with lower hope levels are at more risk for engaging in criminal behavior, and they even go as far as to define hope as “a protective factor that results in less risk.” The study by Duckworth et al. (2004) investigated the relationship between hope and future criminal behavior. It was discovered that inmates with lower levels of hope are at high risk of re-offending.

## **Conclusion**

Different correctional systems are founded on different principles, and it is essential to consider the country's structure. Collectivistic societies, such as Denmark and Sweden, emphasize the bigger picture and what benefits society. Rehabilitating individuals who stray from legal activities is in society's best interest. After all, the goal of the correctional system is to "correct" individuals and release them back into society as law-abiding citizens ready to contribute to their communities positively. They are spending time behind bars by getting an education or receiving job training results in opportunities upon release. There are fewer restrictions on previously convicted individuals. There are plenty of employment opportunities available, which leads to being able to afford housing which there are also not many restrictions on. If someone committed a violent crime against another individual, they would be restricted from working directly with people, but other than that, the restrictions are minimal. In contrast, the United States focuses a lot more on punishment and provides far fewer opportunities for personal development while behind bars. This reflects on an individual's situation upon their release into the world again – many employers are not willing to hire former convicts, which means they often stay unemployed and can also not afford housing. This further continues the cycle of crime and deviance. Often it is purely out of necessity, except for violent crimes.

In recent years, positive psychology has made its way into research involving corrections, and scientists have explored the relationship between hope and recidivism. So far, research has shown that hope negatively correlates with recidivism – the more hopeful an individual is, the less likely they are to re-offend. One thing that Scandinavian countries do very well is motivating individuals to make positive changes in how they live their lives. That change starts with

programs implemented behind bars, such as education and job training that prepare the individual to lead a quality life in the outside world. Hope is a concept that needs further investigation into corrections and recidivism in the future. It may lead to some clarity on what works and what does not.

Further research should focus on analyzing correctional systems individually before comparing them. Researchers should look at each correctional system's conditions inside the prisons – how are prisoners treated and what their accommodations look like. In addition to that, researchers should examine rehabilitation programs, work programs, and education programs inside the prisons and a potential correlation between the effectiveness of these programs and future re-offending rates upon being released from prison. One way this can be done is by researchers traveling to the prisons they want to examine and conducting direct supervision of the prison programs. For a long-term study, it would be beneficial to identify groups of offenders to observe over the years while they are imprisoned and then later upon their release as well. Some points of focus should be: 1) what kinds of prison programs they participate in; 2) what their offenses are – are they considered a serious offender or not; 3) what level of education they have; 4) after being released, what path do they choose? Do they end up back in prison? Are they considered rehabilitated?

All of these factors need to be considered to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the prison environment affects these individuals, and then later on examine whether there is an actual correlation between extensive prison programs aiming to rehabilitate rather than punish, and successful integration back into society. Research in that area is scarce, and hopefully

investigating that relationship will lead to prison reform in the United States, which will lead to decrease in recidivism rates.

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