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Dutch Get Creative to Solve a Prison Problem: Too Many Empty Cells

www.nytimes.com/ FEB. 9, 2017

The [Netherlands](#) has a problem many countries can only dream of: a shortage of prison inmates.

While countries like Belgium, Britain, Haiti, Italy, the United States and Venezuela have grappled with prison overcrowding, the Netherlands has such a surplus of unused cells that it has rented some of its prisons to Belgium and Norway. It has also turned about a dozen former prisons [into centers for asylum seekers](#).

About a third of Dutch prison cells sit empty, according to the Ministry of Justice. Criminologists attribute the situation to a spectacular fall in crime over the past two decades and an approach to law enforcement that prefers rehabilitation to incarceration.

“The Dutch have a deeply ingrained pragmatism when it comes to regulating law and order,” said [René van Swaaningen](#), professor of criminology at Erasmus School of Law in Rotterdam, noting the country’s relatively liberal approach to “soft” drugs and prostitution. “Prisons are very expensive. Unlike the United States, where people tend to focus on the moral arguments for imprisonment, the Netherlands is more focused on what works and what is effective.”

Recorded crime has shrunk by about a quarter over the past nine years, according to the country’s national statistics office, and that is expected to translate into a surplus of 3,000 prison cells by 2021. The government has shuttered 19 of nearly 60 prisons over the past three years, and a government report leaked last year suggested that more cuts were coming.

The relative dearth of prisoners has spurred the Dutch to be creative.

At jails transformed into [housing for asylum seekers](#), former cells for prisoners have been converted into apartments for families, albeit some with the original cell doors. At De Koepel, a former prison in Haarlem, refugees played soccer in a large interior courtyard that doubled as a soccer field. Some of the converted jails also have gymnasiums, kitchen facilities and outdoor gardens.

To make refugees feel more at home at a former prison in Hoogeveen, in the northeast, the authorities removed the high exterior walls and barbed wire and retooled the former cell doors so that they could open from the inside. Jan Anholts, a spokesman for the [Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers](#), said the agency took special care not to house former political prisoners in cells, unless they felt at ease. “We want people to feel safe and secure,” he said.

At a time of austerity, the government has also been able to raise money by outsourcing empty prisons to countries with overpopulated detention facilities.

Two years ago, [Norway agreed to pay](#) the Netherlands about 25 million euros, or \$27 million at current exchange rates, per year for a three-year lease of Norgerhaven Prison, a high-security facility, where it sent 242 prisoners. Earlier, [Belgium had sent](#) about 500 prisoners across the border.

At Norgerhaven, where some prisoners can raise chickens and grow vegetables, Norwegian convicts live under the watchful eye of a Norwegian prison superintendent and Dutch guards. To make room for the Norwegians, long-term Dutch convicts — who make up an exclusive club in a country with only 35 adults serving sentences of life without parole — were relocated from [comfortable cells](#), equipped with work spaces and televisions. None too pleased, they filed a lawsuit but did not succeed in blocking the move.

Criminologists say that, beyond a drop in crime levels, the repurposing of prisons can be attributed

to a building spree by the Netherlands in the 1990s that resulted in a glut of jails as crime decreased and the country's population aged.

Professor Swaaningen also argued that in the digital age, an increasing number of 12- to 18-year-olds — the most high-risk age group for committing petty street crime — spent time hunched over their computers, taking them off the streets and potentially reducing levels of criminality.

He said that prisons had also emptied because of an emphasis on other surveillance methods such as electronic tagging.

After a surge in jail population in the '90s, the Netherlands now imprisons roughly 61 of every 100,000 citizens, a rate similar to that in Scandinavia, according to data recently collected by the [Institute for Criminal Policy Research](#) at Birkbeck, University of London. [In the United States](#), that number is about 666, among the highest in the world.

In Europe, the countries with the most crowded prisons include Albania, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia and Spain, according to a recent report [from the Council of Europe](#).

Yet in the Netherlands, not everyone is rejoicing, including many of the roughly 2,600 prison guards who could lose their jobs in the next four years if more prisons close. Moreover, some law enforcement officials also say that the excess of vacant cells is a symptom of [poor policing and the reporting of fewer crimes](#), rather than a reflection of Dutch crime-fighting prowess.

Frans Carbo, a senior official with the union FNV, said the closing of prisons was the result of penny-pinching — not effective policing. “If you close prisons now, you will only have to open them in a few years,” he said.

With the center-right government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte facing a tough re-election bid later this year, officials have been careful not to gloat about the overabundance of vacant cells.

“Not losing too many jobs from the start was our main concern,” said Jaap Oosterveer, a spokesman for the Ministry of Security and Justice, which oversees the federal prison system.

The surplus of empty jail cells, he added, is “good and bad news at the same time.”

Correction: February 10, 2017