

A Swedish Substance-Abuse Program: Results of the Drug Misuser Treatment Program at the Osteraker Prison

Substance abuse has become a serious problem across the globe over the last two decades. This is particularly evident in the microcosm of inmate populations in various jurisdictions, including Sweden. In fact, surveys conducted by the Swedish Prison Administration indicate that at any given time in recent years, approximately 30% of the sentenced prison population could be classified as substance abusers.

Special substance-abuse programs have existed for some time in several Swedish correctional institutions. The program under study is considered the most comprehensive in the country and has been described as similar to those provided in therapeutic communities. It started in 1978 and is located in the closed national prison of Osteraker.

The Osteraker substance-abuse program can accommodate a maximum of 50 inmates, housed in five wings of the institution. Offenders, who must apply to enter the program, are expected to remain in it for at least eight months, but the average length of stay for offenders in the study was one year. Offenders must agree to daily urine tests to monitor possible drug use.

The sample comprised 133 inmates, who participated in the Österåker program between January 1, 1979, and December 31, 1981. Two thirds of the sample were under the age of 30. The majority (80%) had been incarcerated at least once before, and more than half were serving time for a drug-related offence. Interestingly, very few (approximately 13%) had been sentenced for a violent offence.

Of the 133 persons accepted into the program during the period under study, 53% (70) completed treatment while 47% (63) dropped out, either because they left at their own request or were expelled for violation of the terms of their program contract.

Over half of the 70 inmates who completed the program were transferred to Bogesund (a nearby open prison), one third were conditionally released directly into the community, and the remainder (14%) were transferred to local institutions pending acceptance by an external therapeutic community or an institution with special study facilities. Of the inmates sent to Bogesund, one third failed to complete their stay satisfactorily.

The program's success was measured on the basis of recidivism rates and offenders' discontinuation of substance abuse. Follow-up data for a two-year period were collected for the 133 inmates admitted to the program, regardless of whether they had completed the program or dropped out. Nearly one third of the total sample had not recidivated. Of those who did, the overwhelming majority were sentenced to new terms of imprisonment.

There was a clear difference in the recidivism rates of those who had completed the program and those who had dropped out: 46% of the graduates did not recidivate, whereas only 16% of the drop-outs did not.

Another significant difference between the two groups was the length of time on conditional release

before being sentenced for a new offence. Of the offenders who completed the treatment program, 72% of the recidivists were sentenced again by the end of the first year, whereas the corresponding proportion for the drop out group was 94%.

Of the total sample, 53% misused drugs after their discharge from the program, with no significant differences between the offenders who completed the program and those who dropped out.

While some of the study findings indicate only moderate success in the early stage of the program's life, a subsequent study on inmates who were released during 1982-83 and 1983-84 reports more positive findings. According to the researchers, this is attributable to an improved selection process, more sophisticated treatment methods, and the program evolution.

The most striking difference between the findings of the two studies was in the one-year recidivism rates. A full 53% of the offenders released during 1979-80 and 1980-81 recidivated within one year, compared with only 29% of those released during the two following years.

The researchers concluded that the reduced recidivism was probably to be expected, given the changed composition of the population, which was less prone to recidivism.

Results of the Drug Misuser Treatment Program at the Österåker Prison (Report 1986:2). Swedish National Prison and Probation Administration, Planning and Co-ordination Unit, Research and Development Group.