

EPTA Workshops Syntheses:

Training the prison staff to gain the cooperation of the difficult inmates

1. Issue

This workshop started with a general question: As we have noticed in different presentations, dynamic security aims to ease social relations between inmates and between inmates and prison staffs. This procedure seems to be relevant and effective if it is proposed only to inmates who do not create problems in detention.

The question which remains without answer until now is to know how the schools of thought think to utilize this dynamic security for the inmates known as « difficult ».

Thus, it was interesting to question ourselves: what is a « difficult » person.

2. Definition of « difficult inmates »

First of all, it is important to underline that the word used throughout this workshop is « difficult » and not « dangerous » ... This specific word gives in this way another vision and another approach of these people, as will see throughout this discussion.

Regarding the very definition what is meant by the notion of "difficult resident", as we have seen from country to country, is that the difficult types are characterized in different ways, and, in general, defined by a category.

For some people, difficult prisoners are those who have a "developmental disability", for others, those "who have committed a serious crime or a specific offense like terrorists", or ... those who come from a foreign country or those whom the prison no longer wants, those "who have psychiatric disorders", those with "behavioral problems", or "young people from difficult neighborhoods".

Now two questions arise:

1) How to integrate these people in prisons? Should they be grouped in specific units with special care or should they be integrated with other persons held in ordinary detention?

2) Can we have alliance relations, cooperation with these difficult people while they are often out of dialogue, communication, exchanges?

So we come to the strategies implemented by different countries to adapt to these different profiles.

3. Implemented strategies

Most of the countries mention setting up specific units created to accommodate a small group of so-called "difficult" inmates (often not more than a dozen), in a building with maximum security. The aim is to keep these people on short periods of time so they do not get isolated too long. For this group of prisoners, different management strategies are implemented:

- Some inmates considered too "difficult" (it means extremely "violent" for themselves or for the others, or "radicalized") are isolated and confined to protect the rest of the detention.
- For the inmates with psychiatric diseases some other countries raise the idea of a setting up of a significant involvement from the medical service: these inmates have the obligation to be medicated. A link is directly made with the lack of places in psychiatric hospitals for these inmates.

In both contexts, some countries (especially Belgium) focus on the place of the relations and communication with the staff. For them it's an « essential axis »:

Promoting specific strategies from prison officers' point of view not to « enter in conflict » (for instance, « the ear strategy » that aims to « listen without discussing »).

This « containment » of difficult people has several limits that have been also raised.

4. Limits

1. The first limit relates to staff training. If, for some people these units are led by staff trained to manage violent inmates (with medical involvement), other countries regret the lack of staff training to face these issues. Depending on the definition given to « difficult » inmates, the lack of training will not affect the same topics: it can be for example on the topic of « youth psychology » or on the « radicalization ».

The questions of the burnout or the absenteeism of the prison staffs who feel helpless in facing difficulties and violence are also raised.

2. Isolation has also a second limit: « a violent subculture ». Indeed, these closed units lead inmates to retreat on themselves or on inmates with the same issues exacerbating in this way Violence when they return to normal detention».

3. Thirdly, it is mentioned that these units stigmatize inmates, and, later on, inmates build themselves on this stigmatization. Indeed, these units sometimes give a specific status to inmates, raising inmates as « celebrity ». Once again, it is really difficult to « send back »

those inmates in normal detention without producing a negative impact on the other inmates.

4. Finally, the difficulty to implement a follow up or an effective support on the long term with some « difficult inmates » is raised because a lot of inmates are convicted for short period (important turn-over).

5. Future Prospects

Finally, the workshop ends on different solutions and future prospects to face, circumvent or mitigate these limits.

On one hand, the importance to continue to train staff to these issues (radicalization, dangerousness, psychiatric diseases, psychology of the youth...) is raised as well as the relative approach of the dynamic security.

On the another hand, the importance to not « giving up » isolated inmates is raised: it is necessary to support them and to maintain with them a link, a communication, a cooperation. For this it is mentioned the importance to develop a work of alliance with inmates in a general way. For instance this could be: training inmates in order to establish them as alliance actors with difficult inmates.

Training them to the regulation (of Issues and conflicts)

Training them to be mediators (in and of this relation)

The aim is to reestablish the link, while making them actors in these relationships and therefore, associated with other actions, make them actors in their detention.