

The 'world's most humane' prison system is so overcrowded, it's now sending criminals abroad

[Rick Noack](#)

Norway's prisons are overcrowded, but the Scandinavian country has found a simple solution: sending some of its prisoners abroad. As [the Telegraph](#) reports, up to 300 prisoners could be sent to the Netherlands, which has so few criminals that it's about to close 19 penal facilities.

Dutch Justice Minister Fred Teeven defended the deal in simple economic terms: "In Norway there is a capacity shortage, and right now we have a surplus," he said. Accepting foreign prisoners is expected to save more than 700 Dutch jobs, and it's been done before: In a particularly interesting example of European cooperation, 550 Belgians are currently serving their sentence in a Dutch jail. Sweden had [previously declined](#) to accept the Norwegian prisoners.

The reality of Norwegian overcrowding belies the longstanding reputation the country has had for prisons that looked more like modern art museums than penal facilities. Not long ago, Norway's jails were [described](#) as "the world's most humane" by TIME magazine.

Let's revisit some of the photographs that were widely distributed when Anders Breivik, the terrorist who killed 77 people on the island Utoya three years ago, was about to face charges.

Some Norwegian cells look even more luxurious than student dorms:



(Trond Isaksen/ Statsbygg)

Even the prison walls are less bleak than elsewhere:



(Trond Isaksen/ Statsbygg)

And what about about some sports in this bright and modern gym?



(Trond Isaksen/ Statsbygg)

Such extensive and modern facilities are affordable for the government because the country doesn't have that many prisons. Norway has only a tenth of the American prison population relative to the country's population size. This is partially due to lower crime rates, but shorter sentences play a major role, as well. The Norwegian understanding of justice puts a huge emphasis on the reintegration of prisoners into society.

The Post's Charles Lane [wrote](#) an insightful piece on the origins of this culture, drawing some lessons for America: Contrary to Norway, some U.S. maximum-security prisons "are overcrowded breeding grounds for recidivism," he wrote. And here it is again: The word "overcrowded" - this time referring to the United States. The situation is not comparable though.

There are at least three reasons why Norway's problem is distinct: Planned maintenance on prison facilities will shrink the country's detention capacity over the next few years. Already today, [there are](#) 1,300 people waiting to finally go to jail and serve their sentences. Furthermore, a more conservative Norwegian government is pushing for harsher sentences.

The solution, however, might have serious consequences. When the three hundred prisoners move to the Netherlands they will most likely face a major challenge: warders who don't speak their language. Only the prison's management would be Norwegian, but the warders are [reportedly](#) Dutch. Authorities defend these plans saying that the prisoners who will be sent abroad are supposed to be foreigners anyway (who account for about 30 to 35 percent of all Norwegian prisoners because Scandinavian states have an unusually high percentage of immigrants).

Thomas Mathiesen, a Norwegian sociologist specialized on the country's prison system, is skeptical the plan will work: "Quite a lot of Norwegian officers speak English and are able to communicate with these foreign prisoners at the moment. However, apparently only very few Dutch officers speak English which will become a serious communication problem."

Norway's methods of rehabilitating prisoners as they serve their prison sentence will be harder to implement. "With Dutch guards such a preparation will be impossible," says Mathiesen.

"In sum, we will see an inequality between prisoners sent to other countries like the Netherlands, and prisoners who remain at home," Mathiesen predicts.