

# Sentenced to Serving the Good Life

Norway's criminal-justice system follows one fundamental rule: treat inmates humanely and they'll come out better people. How the country's innovative prisons and liberal policies are successfully rehabilitating offenders—and making society safer

BY WILLIAM LEE ADAMS/BASTOY, HALDEN AND OSLO

**T**HE SEAGULLS BEGIN SQUAWKING at 6 in the morning and the cigarettes cost too much, but Lars, 41, knows there are worse places to call home. On Bastoy, an island 46 miles (74 km) south of Oslo, he and 124 other residents live in brightly colored wooden chalets, spread over one square mile of forest and gently sloping hills. Besides enjoying views of the surrounding fjord, they go horseback riding and throw barbecues, and have access to a movie theater, tanning bed and, during winter, two ski jumps. Lars' neighbors often conceal the reasons they are there, but, as in any small community, word gets around. "I try to be as nice to the pedophiles as I am to the drug dealers," he says. Despite all its trappings, Bastoy island isn't an exclusive resort: it's a prison.

Arne Kvernvik Nilsen, Bastoy's governor and a practicing psychotherapist, describes it as the world's first humane-ecological prison—a place where inmates learn to take responsibility for their actions by caring for the environment. Prisoners grow their own organic vegetables, turn their garbage into compost and tend to chickens, cows, horses and sheep. They also operate the ferry that shuttles a number of them to school and jobs on the mainland, make their own dinner (they're allowed to use knives) and

chop wood (using axes and chainsaws). Although authorities carry out routine drug tests, the prison generally emphasizes trust and self-regulation: Bastoy has no fences, the windows have no bars, and only five guards remain on the island after 3 p.m. and on weekends. "They are among the worst criminals in Norway. They are murderers, they are rapists, they are Hells Angels," says Nilsen. "But they keep the whole society alive and running."

In an age when countries from Britain to the U.S. cope with exploding prison populations by building ever larger—and, many would say, ever harsher—prisons, Bastoy seems like an unorthodox, even bizarre, departure. But Norwegians see the island as the embodiment of their country's long-standing penal philosophy: that traditional, repressive prisons do not work, and that treating prisoners humanely boosts their chances of reintegrating into society. "People in other countries say that what Norway does is wrong," says Lars, who is serving a 16-year sentence for serious drug offenses. "But why does Norway have the world's lowest murder rate? Maybe we're doing something that really works."

Countries track recidivism rates differently, but even an imperfect comparison suggests that Norway's system produces overwhelmingly positive results. Within two years of their release,

20% of Norway's prisoners end up back in jail. In the U.K. and the U.S., the figure hovers between 50% and 60%. Of course, Norway's low level of criminality gives it a massive advantage. Its prison roll lists a mere 3,300 inmates, a rate of 70 per 100,000 people, compared with 2.3 million in the U.S., or 753 per 100,000—the highest rate in the world.

John Pratt, a professor of criminology at New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington and an authority on Scandinavian prisons, believes that the secret to the low crime levels in Norway and its Nordic counterparts is strong welfare systems that reduce poverty and inequality—key drivers of criminality. Studies show that countries and states investing more in education, health and social security typically spend less on their prison systems. Last year, California spent 11% of its state budget on its prisons—more than it put into higher education. "For marginalized populations in Anglo countries, the prison increasingly acts as a kind of surrogate welfare state," says Pratt. "That's not only much more expensive than running a welfare state, it's also brutalizing and

**(Not so) hard time** Bastoy inmates enjoy seaside views through barless windows, while those at high-security Halden admire \$1 million worth of art