



Characteristics of the Scandinavian Criminal Policy Model, its Features in Iceland, with a Special Focus on Alternative Solutions and Challenges

Márta Miklósi

PhD, senior lecturer
University of Debrecen,
Institute of Education and Cultural Studies
miklosimarta@unideb.hu



Abstract

Aim: In our study, after presenting the Scandinavian model of penal policy, we analyse the specific features of the Icelandic prison system. We examine the benefits of alternative sentencing in this island country, which already has a very low crime rate.

Methodology: To gain a thorough understanding of the topic, we searched the relevant national and international literature, especially Icelandic literature. I was assisted in this by spending a week in the island country as an invited lecturer of the Icelandic Society of Criminology, building up professional contacts with the main researchers in the field.

Findings: The main finding of the study is that Iceland is even more committed than other Nordic countries to running open prisons, with an emphasis on alternative sentencing, halfway houses and the use of imprisonment as an “ultima ratio”, or last resort.

Value: The main value is to summarise the main features of Scandinavian penal policy and to show how Iceland is different from other European, or even Northern European, countries, and how it achieves a reduction in the harms of imprisonment.

Keywords: Scandinavian penal policy, Icelandic prison system, ultima ratio, alternative sentences

English-language republication. The Hungarian version of this article was published in *Belügyi Szemle* 2025, issue 12. DOI link: <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.i12.pp2421-2439>

Introduction

In examining penal policy models, it is worth devoting particular attention to the so-called Scandinavian model found in Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland, whose operation is underpinned by the principles of liberalism and normalization. The Nordic countries recognised decades ago the harmful effects of imprisonment on those incarcerated – a phenomenon described in detail, among others, by Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961) and Crewe (2011) – and therefore set as a fundamental objective that imprisonment should be used only as an *ultima ratio*, a measure of last resort. These states accordingly give preference to the use of alternative sanctions. A number of Hungarian scholars have analysed Scandinavian penal policy – among them Péter Ruzsonyi (2011), Katalin Gönczöl (2018) and Ferenc Sipos (2017) – and all have referred to the penal practices of the Nordic countries as a positive example.

In this paper, after outlining the Scandinavian prison system, we turn to an examination of the specific features of the Icelandic prison system. In this island country, a significant proportion of prisons are not closed but open facilities; they are not surrounded by perimeter fences, so that, in this respect at least, prisoners' rights are not further restricted. Within the prisons, a core principle is to ensure that prisoners' daily lives resemble life in the community as closely as possible: they should spend as little time as possible in their cells and be able to participate in as many activities and programmes as possible, thereby supporting their reintegration. We pay particular attention to the range of opportunities available in Iceland for serving sentences in alternative forms. At the same time, it must be noted that, in line with international trends, this small country is also facing increasing difficulties in organising the execution of sentences. The problems associated with the waiting-list system – a distinctively Icelandic phenomenon that has been in place for years – remain unresolved.

The Scandinavian Penal Policy Model

The Scandinavian penal policy model has become a widely known paradigm across the world; in this chapter, we set out to present its core characteristics. In Scandinavia, the operation of the prison system is grounded in the principle of liberalism, which can be observed in the basic features of prison design and development as well as in the ways in which prisoners are managed and engaged with (Ruzsonyi, 2011). The primary aim of Scandinavian prisons is to prepare prisoners for their return to society, and this goal is pursued first and foremost

by providing realistic living conditions (Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018). As Garland puts it, “in the application of penal measures, wherever possible, the rehabilitative dimension should prevail over a negative, retributive approach” (Garland, 2001). In relation to Scandinavian prisons, it is often said that they are places of punishment but not places for punishment “*Nordic prisons are places of punishment but not places for punishment*”. This formulation suggests that, for prisoners, the true punishment is the deprivation of liberty; at the same time, the experience of imprisonment should promote the prisoner’s personal development (Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018).

The emergence and subsequent expansion of alternative forms of punishment to imprisonment are advantageous in several respects. In this regard, one may highlight the high costs associated with running prisons, the substantial human resources required to operate them, and the reduction of the harmful effects of imprisonment (such as removal from one’s familiar social environment, the disruption of normal life, exposure to criminal peer groups, and the negative impact of incarceration on personality). Taken together, these factors make the positive contribution of alternative sanctions difficult to dispute (Dashti et al., 2024; Heard, 2016; Mamak, 2024; McAlinden, 2011). A further undeniable advantage of alternative sanctions is that they facilitate social reintegration, since offenders remain in their own environments and communities, allowing them to maintain family ties and employment—both of which are crucial for preventing future offending (Pântea, 2024; Zohren & Rösner, 2020). At the same time, experts (for example, Jones, 2014) also point out that, in the case of alternative sanctions, the traditional aims of punishment (deterrence, retribution, general and special prevention) are not always fully achieved, and as a result, their social acceptance is still not universal.

Numerous scholars have sought to identify the sources of the success of Scandinavian penal policy. The first to address this question in depth was the British criminologist John Pratt. In 2006, Pratt travelled to the Nordic countries in order to determine in what respects Scandinavian penal policy differs from penal practice elsewhere in the world. Ironically, he concluded that the key component of this exceptionalism is in fact its apparent opposite: normalization (Pratt, 2008). This term refers to efforts to ensure that life in prison resembles life in the outside, free world as closely as possible, and that the restrictive impact of security measures is kept to a minimum (Crewe, 2011). Prisoners are viewed in a holistic manner and regarded as members of the wider society (Gunnlaugsson, 2021; Ruzsonyi, 2011). Even during the period of their punishment, they remain full citizens who are able to exercise almost all of their rights and fulfil almost all of their obligations (Gunnlaugsson, 2021; Ruzsonyi, 2011).

Pratt (2008) initially highlighted two main aspects. The first was that in the Scandinavian countries (his early research in 2006 focused on Finland, Norway and Sweden) the rate of imprisonment was lower than in other countries; prison was used as a measure of last resort. The second aspect concerned the conditions prevailing in the prisons of these countries. Pratt found that relations between staff and prisoners were more favourable and more strongly grounded in notions of equality, that food provision was of higher quality, and that prisoners were offered more opportunities to engage in meaningful activities (Pratt, 2008).

Pratt later examined the context of Scandinavian penal policy together with Anna Eriksson, and in their work they further refined the description of this paradigm (Pratt & Eriksson, 2011). In their article, Pratt and Eriksson (2011) identified seven features characteristic of Scandinavian prison systems: (1) prisons tend to be smaller; (2) there is more routine contact between officers and prisoners; (3) quality of life is higher (for example in terms of food, accommodation and hygiene); (4) prisoners are more likely to work or participate in training courses; (5) a higher proportion of prisoners are held in open institutions; (6) prison officers are less likely to have a military background; and (7) security is less of an overriding priority in the Nordic prison systems. They illustrate the more relaxed attitude toward escapes with the story of an inmate named Larsen: Larsen was seen leaving an area outside the open prison grounds while Pratt was talking to the prison governor, yet this sight did not cause any alarm (Pratt & Eriksson, 2011).

Pratt was frequently criticised for his methodology. He relied heavily on his visits to prisons – a practice referred to by experts as “prison tourism” (Pakes, 2020). Critics argued that during such brief visits he could gain only limited insight into the actual operation of prisons; moreover, it was also held against him that, as a Briton, he did not speak the Scandinavian languages and therefore, during his visits, could only partially understand what was being said within the institutions he toured (Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018).

It is also a fact that not everyone agreed with Pratt’s theory, and numerous scholars voiced reservations. Ugelvik (2012) explicitly warned of the possible pitfalls of overly positive depictions of the Scandinavian penal paradigm, particularly with regard to the “differential treatment” of those within and outside the Norwegian criminal justice system. Scharff Smith (2012) draws attention to the growing strength of penal populism, primarily in Denmark but also in other Scandinavian countries (while at the same time highlighting Danish open prisons and the possibility of conjugal visits as examples of the traditionally humane Scandinavian ethos of imprisonment). Mathiesen (2012) cautions against assuming that the development of penal policy in the Nordic states has

everywhere been uniformly harmonious and consensus-based, and further notes that prison conditions may vary considerably from one institution to another. According to Barker (2013), the Nordic states (she writes primarily about Sweden) have always been both lenient and repressive, generous and intrusive at the same time—in a word, Janus-faced. Severity and harshness are often reserved for outsiders, particularly foreign nationals, while their own citizens are treated more leniently and permissively. Barker's claim calls into question the assumed straightforward link between the generosity of the welfare state and a mild penal orientation (Barker, 2013; Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018).

In their joint work, Scharff Smith and Ugelvik (2017) also draw attention to the visual appeal of Nordic open prisons. As they put it, these institutions differ markedly from the archetypal Western prison: many specific facilities operate in former farm buildings, barracks and the like, sometimes without a fence or wall, which also contributes to their appearance as very open environments (Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017).

Alongside the physical features of prison buildings, it is crucial to examine the pivotal role of staff, in which respect Scandinavian penal policy again differs from comparable systems in other states. Although the architecture and its characteristics are significant, it is ultimately the staff working there who embody the ethos that permeates the operation of the Scandinavian prison system (Ruzsonyi, 2011). Much is revealed by the fact that prisoners are referred to as “clients”. In Scandinavia, the role of the prison officer diverges markedly from common practice elsewhere: officers become, in effect, “personal officers” (in some institutions they are explicitly called “contact officers”). In the course of their work, officers are responsible for supporting a maximum of three prisoners; their task is not merely custodial supervision, but active involvement in the prisoners' development and in facilitating their social reintegration. In fulfilling their duties, they not only deal with the prisoner's everyday life inside the institution, but also place strong emphasis on the planning and support of post-release arrangements, which are crucial from the perspective of successful reintegration into society.

The essence of the paradigm is that one of the greatest assets of the Nordic prison systems is understood to lie in the cultivation of humane relationships between staff and prisoners (Ruzsonyi, 2011). Members of the custodial staff are expected to perform four key functions: “ensuring security conditions, providing care and social support, supervising work activities, and organising leisure-time programmes” (Ruzsonyi, 2011). Having outlined the distinctive features of Scandinavian penal policy, the next chapter turns to the characteristics and structure of the Icelandic prison system.

The Icelandic Prison System

In Iceland, all prison facilities are operated by the state, under the authority of the *Fangelsismálastofnun Ríkisins* (in English: the Prison and Probation Administration; hereinafter: Prison and Probation Administration) (Prison and Probation Administration, 2020). This multifaceted agency was established in 1989, modelled on similar Scandinavian organisations. Its primary responsibility is to manage the prisons and supervise the enforcement of sentences in accordance with Act No. 15/2016 on the Execution of Sentences, adopted by the Alþingi (the Icelandic Parliament) in 2016, and the regulations issued under that Act. In addition to overseeing the day-to-day operation of all facilities, its remit also extends to monitoring offenders who are serving their sentences by means of community service and those placed under electronic surveillance (Prison and Probation Administration, 2020).

In 2019, there were five correctional institutions in operation in Iceland—this number has since fallen to four—with a total of close to 200 cells (Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018). The development of the number of prisons and available places is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Changes in the number of correctional facilities in Iceland between 2018 and 2022.

| | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Number of open prisons | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Capacity (number of places) | 22 | 22 | 21 | 21 | 21 |
| Number of closed prisons | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Capacity (smallest prison – largest prison, number of places) | 10–78 | 10–78 | 56–78 | 56–83 | 56–83 |
| Total (number of institutions) | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 4 |

Source. Kristoffersen, 2024.

One prison is located in the vicinity of Reykjavík (Hólmsheiði Prison), while the others are scattered across different regions of the country: three in South-west Iceland [Litla-Hraun, Sogn and Kópavogur (now closed)], one in West Iceland (Kvíabryggja), and one in the largest town in North Iceland [Akureyri (now closed)]. Originally, only the new Reykjavík prison was purpose-built as a prison; the other buildings were designed for different functions and were later converted so that they could operate as correctional institutions.

The Reykjavík prison at Hólmsheiði opened at the end of 2016 and operates as a high-security closed prison, with capacity for a maximum of 56 prisoners. The complex is divided into three wings, separating remand prisoners, those

serving shorter sentences, and long-term female prisoners (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). In this prison, every effort is made to ensure that inmates spend as little time as possible locked in their cells and can participate in as many activities as possible, including studying, sports, work and visits to the library (Pétursson, 2024).

For a long time, the institution responsible for holding persons on remand was Iceland's largest prison, Litla-Hraun, but in 2017 this function was transferred to Hólmsheiði Prison. Litla-Hraun Prison is a high-security facility located roughly 60 kilometres south-east of Reykjavík and is surrounded by a tall metal fence. Around half of Iceland's entire prison population serve their sentences here; the prison has a capacity of 87 places. The unit designated for remand prisoners also used to operate here, but it has now been given a new role, providing accommodation for prison staff and space for family visits (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

Kvíabryggja is an open prison in the Snæfellsnes area of north-west Iceland; it resembles a farm more than a prison and can accommodate 23 prisoners. It is reserved for inmates who have less than two years remaining on their sentence, are able to serve their punishment under minimal supervision, and do not suffer from substance addiction. Prisoners either work or take part in education (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). Finally, in 2012 a new open prison named Sogn was opened not far from Litla-Hraun, with capacity for twenty inmates (Gunnlaugsson, 2017). These two open prisons, Kvíabryggja and Sogn, have recently been the subject of a detailed study by an international researcher, who has written extensively about his experiences there (Pakes, 2020).

We also briefly present two prisons (Kópavogur and Akureyri) that are no longer in operation and were closed down in the recent past. Kópavogur Prison was opened in 1989 for women, and for more than a quarter of a century all female prisoners served their sentences there, until its closure in 2015. Typically, fewer than ten female inmates were held there at any one time; the remaining part of its maximum capacity of twelve places was filled by male prisoners. In the new prison at Hólmsheiði, a separate unit has been created for women, who began serving their sentences there in November 2016 (Gunnlaugsson, 2017). The prison in Akureyri, in northern Iceland, operated within the local police station and could accommodate ten inmates, most of whom were serving shorter sentences. In 2020, the Ministry of Justice announced that, due to the high costs associated with running such a small unit, the facility would be permanently closed; this was implemented in September 2020 (Ólafsdóttir, 2020; Ciric, 2020), leaving a total of four prisons in Iceland instead of five. When Akureyri Prison was closed in 2020 and its funding was transferred to the budget of Hólmsheiði Prison, the prison authorities planned to expand the staff complement at Hólmsheiði in order to make better use of the facility. The latter institution is

more economical to operate than the small unit in Akureyri and can accommodate twenty additional prisoners (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

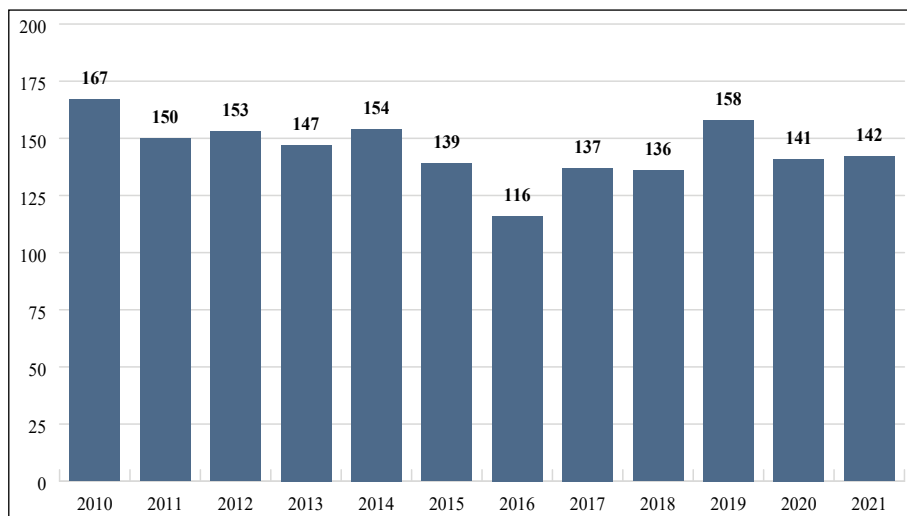
Icelandic correctional institutions can be divided into two groups: closed and open prisons; in addition, there is one halfway house. Of the four prisons currently operating in Iceland, two are open and two are closed. The open prisons are Sogn and Kvíabryggja, while the closed prisons are Hólmsheiði and Litla-Hraun. The open prisons are not surrounded by perimeter fences, there are fewer CCTV cameras, and the rooms are not locked at night. Furthermore, visits take place in the prisoners' own rooms rather than in a separate visiting area, and internet access is subject to less stringent control than in closed prisons. By contrast, in closed prisons the accommodation blocks are fenced off, cells are locked at night, and visits take place in dedicated visiting rooms (Davíðsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2024).

In Iceland, sentences are most commonly commenced in a closed prison (usually Hólmsheiði), after which the Prison and Probation Administration assesses whether the individual should continue serving their sentence in an open or a closed prison. This is not entirely clear-cut, however, since those placed in a closed prison may later be transferred to an open institution, while those initially allocated to an open prison may be moved to a closed one if their behaviour is deemed unacceptable (Davíðsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2024).

The Vernd halfway house forms part of the Icelandic correctional system; it is located in Reykjavík and operates as a transitional home. As part of the reintegration process, up to 20–25 residents can spend a maximum of 18 months there after leaving an open or closed prison; this period counts towards their sentence and forms an integral part of it (Vernd Fangahjálp, 2025). Most residents struggle with alcohol- or drug-related problems, regularly attend AA meetings and participate in therapeutic groups. The majority are in employment, and a basic rule is that during the day everyone must be either at work or in a therapeutic group or other organised activity (Farestveit, 2021).

The imprisonment rate in Iceland is relatively low: 35 prisoners per 100,000 of the population, which is lower than in almost all other European countries, including the other Scandinavian states (World Prison Brief, 2024). The development of prisoner numbers in the island state is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows that following a dip in 2016 the figures have remained broadly stable from 2017 onwards, with only 2019 standing out as an exceptional year.

Figure 1.
Changes in the number of prisoners in Iceland.



Source. Statista, 2025.

Although the number of prisoners does not necessarily reflect the overall level of crime in a society, it implicitly supports the idea that Iceland is a low-crime country. Even in comparison with the other Scandinavian states, Iceland occupies an exceptional position (Pratt, 2008). The prison rate in Iceland – as in the Faroe Islands and Åland (Lauritsen, 2019) – is lower than in the other Nordic countries, and its prisons are smaller as well. Moreover, Iceland's modest prison estate includes not only open prisons but also the halfway institution Vernd, which indicates that, like the other Scandinavian nations, Iceland is committed to operating an open, positively oriented prison system (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

Distinctive features of the Icelandic Prison System: Non-Custodial Sanctions and Alternative Measures

In Iceland, alongside the serving of prison sentences, non-custodial sanctions are playing an increasingly important role. Such options include conditional release (parole), placement in a halfway house, electronic monitoring and community service.

The proportion of prisoners released on parole has been steadily rising. Between 2000 and 2008, around 60 per cent of inmates were able to leave a correctional institution before serving their full sentence (with 40 per cent serving their entire sentence in prison). By 2008, this figure had increased, with more than 70 per cent being granted parole (and roughly one quarter serving the full length of their sentence in custody) (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). The upward trend in the use of conditional release had, in fact, begun earlier: during the 1980s and 1990s, an increasing number of prisoners were released on parole, with the proportion rising from 36 per cent in 1985 to 57 per cent by 1998 (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2000).

In recent decades, a higher proportion of prisoners have been granted parole, while at the same time the absolute number of prison sentences has also shown an upward trend. Under the former Icelandic Penal Code (Act No. 19/1940), parole was possible once the prisoner had served two-thirds of their sentence (and this had to amount to at least two months' imprisonment). In practice, however, exceptions were frequent, and many offenders were released after serving only half of their sentence (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). The new Act No. 15/2016 on the Execution of Sentences (Article 80) provides that offenders under the age of 21 may be granted parole after serving one-third of their sentence, whereas adult offenders become eligible after serving one-half.

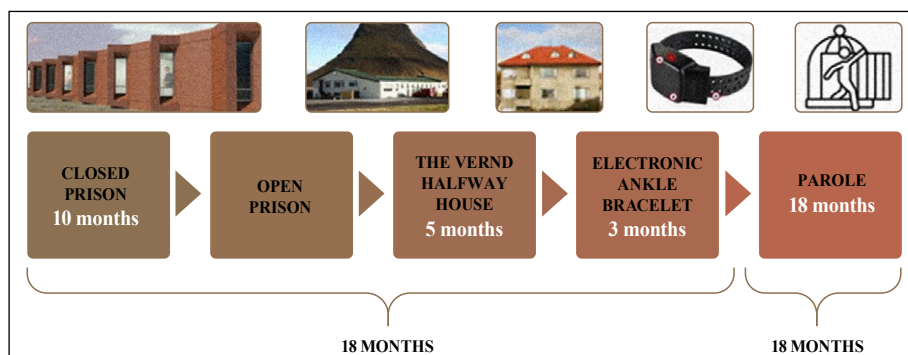
Those approaching the end of a long prison term who have secured employment or are participating in an educational programme are eligible to serve part of their sentence at Vernd, the halfway house in Reykjavík operated by a non-profit organisation, before being placed under electronic monitoring at their home and workplace (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

Electronic monitoring has been in use in Iceland since 2012. It is currently available to offenders who have been sentenced to imprisonment for 12 months or more, and it allows them to leave prison earlier than would otherwise be the case (a so-called “back-door policy”).

If we take as an example a person sentenced by a criminal court to three years' imprisonment, then after serving half of this term in prison they may be released on parole—a typical procedure in Iceland for first-time, non-violent offenders. In such a case, the person may spend a total of ten months in an open or closed prison, followed by five months in the Reykjavík halfway house and finally three months under electronic surveillance (amounting to 18 months, i.e. one and a half years) before being granted conditional release (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). This process is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Alternative Forms of Serving Prison Sentences in Iceland



Source. The author's own editing.

In recent decades, community service has been used with increasing frequency in Iceland as an alternative to deprivation of liberty. Community service as a sanction has existed since 1995; initially it was available only to those sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment, but it is now an option for offenders who have received an unconditional prison sentence of 24 months or less (Davíðsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2024). The decision to substitute community service for the execution of a prison sentence is taken by the Prison and Probation Administration rather than by the criminal courts, which marks a departure from common practice in other Nordic countries. The Prison and Probation Administration may decide that the sentence be served in the form of unpaid community work for a period of not less than 40 and not more than 480 hours. In Iceland, as many as two hundred individuals a year may serve their sentence in the form of community service instead of imprisonment; as a result, they do not appear in the usual prison statistics and do not place additional strain on the prison system (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

The use of the various alternatives to imprisonment demonstrates that, in seeking to curb crime, the Icelandic authorities prefer to impose sanctions that can facilitate offenders' reintegration into society—whether through placement in a halfway house, the imposition of community service, or the use of electronic monitoring.

A further advantage of these measures is that, being less costly, they reduce state expenditure on prisons and are therefore politically attractive. In addition, these alternatives help to ease the pressure on the prison estate. Most of the offenders initially selected for such programmes were non-violent offenders

convicted of property offences or breaches of traffic regulations. Over time, the possibility of alternative sanctions has been extended to those convicted of more serious offences as well, thereby further relieving the burden on the prison system (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

At the same time, an examination of the Icelandic prison situation cannot ignore the fact that, despite this undeniably generous regulatory framework and the clear preference for alternative solutions, significant challenges remain—above all the growing waiting list in recent years and the rising number of foreign offenders.

Operational Challenges of the Icelandic Prison System: Waiting Lists and the Rising Number of Foreign Offenders

The aim of Scandinavian penal policy is to reduce the harmful effects and costs associated with crime; however, as a result of international trends—rising numbers of offences and an increasing share of (especially foreign) offenders—the waiting-list-based system that has operated up to now has become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Waiting list

In Iceland, when a person is sentenced to a term of imprisonment but no prison cell is available in any institution, they are placed on a waiting list. They may only be able to begin serving their sentence months, or even years, later (Pakes & Gunnlaugsson, 2018). The steadily growing waiting list (in 2009, 200 people were on it, and this figure continued to rise) was one of the contradictions that prompted the partial construction of the new prison at Hólmshéiði and the adoption, in Act No. 15/2016 on the Execution of Sentences, of provisions aimed at replacing or mitigating custodial sentences. These changes, however, were still not sufficient: following continuous growth, the waiting list reached 500 people at the beginning of 2017 and had risen to 600 by 2020 (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). In March 2020, the Minister of Justice appointed an expert committee to draw up proposals for shortening the waiting list for offenders. The increase was attributed to the greater number of criminal court decisions reaching the prison authorities in recent years. In addition, there has been a clear trend towards a higher proportion of suspects being remanded in custody while their criminal cases are investigated. Financial and staffing problems affecting Hólmshéiði Prison have likewise contributed to tensions within the system (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

The committee's first task was to analyse the nature of the waiting list and the types of offenders appearing on it. The vast majority had received short prison sentences—at most a few months—for minor offences. If those sentenced to community service and those who had already left Iceland were to be excluded, the waiting list would shrink to fewer than 300 individuals still awaiting enforcement of their sentence and admission to a prison. Some of them (up to 30 people) had already been on the list for more than three years. The committee formulated a number of recommendations as to how the list might be shortened. The main thrust of these proposals was to identify a broader range of non-custodial options as alternatives to imprisonment (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

The committee recommended, first, that more offenders should be allowed to perform community service instead of serving a prison sentence. Those sentenced to imprisonment for up to two years, rather than just one year, should be eligible to apply for community service. Second, greater emphasis should be placed on restorative justice measures, and an amendment to the law should be considered to incorporate such provisions into the Penal Code. Third, suspended sentences should not be reserved exclusively for young offenders, but should be available for offenders of all ages. With the exception of the most serious offences, the general rule should be that prisoners are released on parole after serving six months in custody (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). Drug-related offences—such as the production, importation and distribution of narcotics—are excluded from this; in most such cases, parole is only possible after two-thirds of the sentence has been served in prison, which indicates that the Icelandic authorities take drug offences very seriously (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). Various therapeutic options should also be used more frequently prior to conditional release, effectively as a substitute for a custodial sentence. Finally, those who have been on the waiting list for more than three years should be granted clemency, provided they meet certain criteria (for example, that they are not subject to any other ongoing criminal proceedings) (Gunnlaugsson, 2021).

According to the expert group's estimate, implementing all or most of these recommendations would significantly reduce both the length of the list and the waiting time. At a press conference, the Minister of Justice welcomed the proposals (Justice Ministry, 2020) and announced plans for their implementation. As an example, it was mentioned that all those who had been on the list for three years or more were to be granted clemency (World News, 2020).

Foreign Nationals in Icelandic Prisons

The emerging and intensifying pressures on the Icelandic prison system in recent years – culminating in long waiting lists for offenders – are due in large part to

the increasingly heterogeneous character of Icelandic society. During the economic upswing of the first decade of the new millennium, large numbers of foreign visitors came to Iceland and many chose to settle there. In 1999, around 2.4 per cent of the population were of foreign origin; by 2010 this proportion had increased fivefold to 10 per cent. Following the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent recovery driven by a boom in tourism, the share of immigrants rose to a peak of 15 per cent by 2020 ([Statistics Iceland, 2020](#)). Most immigrants arrived from Eastern Europe, primarily motivated by the prospect of earning money and taking up employment in the island state. Today, Iceland's population exceeds 365,000, and much of its growth over recent decades is attributable to foreign nationals. The increase in the number of foreign immigrants and tourists is also reflected in the country's criminal justice statistics, with a rise in offences committed by non-Icelandic citizens (Gunnlaugsson, 2019).

Whereas in 2000 an average of around two foreign nationals were serving sentences in Icelandic prisons on any given day, by 2008 this number had risen to 24, representing roughly 17 per cent of the total prison population ([Prison and Probation Administration, 2017](#)). In addition, six foreign nationals were being held on remand while the police investigated their cases (Gunnlaugsson, 2019). In 2011, the number of foreign nationals serving prison sentences during the year increased to 89, accounting for about 24 per cent of all prisoners in that year. More recently, however, the proportion of foreign prisoners has declined somewhat: in 2019, around 22 per cent of inmates—70 individuals in total—were foreign-born (Gunnlaugsson, 2019).

The types of offences committed by foreign nationals are generally similar to those committed by Icelandic offenders; the most common are property offences, drug-related crimes and violent offences (Gunnlaugsson, 2019).

Summary

In the Nordic countries, the harmful effects of imprisonment on those detained were recognised decades ago. As a result, it became a fundamental objective that imprisonment should be used only as a measure of last resort, and the development of harm-reduction strategies was defined as a central task (Gunnlaugsson, 2019; Ruzsonyi, 2011). Although the penal policies of the Scandinavian countries differ from one another in matters of detail, their criminal justice systems all place emphasis on the use of alternative sanctions (Lappi-Seppälä, 2007).

Iceland is a small and relatively homogeneous island state, characterised by a low crime rate even in comparison with the other Scandinavian countries

(Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2000; Ólafsdóttir & Bragadóttir, 2006). In addition to its low crime rate, Iceland—like the other Scandinavian states—is receptive to the use of alternative sanctions, and views on crime are not sharply divided along party-political lines: no political party is actively pushing for a more punitive approach (Gunnlaugsson, 2021). With its consistently low imprisonment rates and relatively short sentences, Iceland exemplifies what Pratt (2008) terms “Nordic exceptionalism”. Prisons in Iceland are small; of the four institutions, two are open and not even surrounded by fences. Relations between staff and prisoners are marked by a positive attitude and informality (Pakes, 2020). Moreover, the tacit acceptance of long prison waiting lists suggests that this is not perceived as particularly problematic: many offenders simply go home after receiving their sentence and only report to prison months or even years later to begin serving it. The favourable reception of the proposals put forward by the committee established to reduce the waiting lists clearly indicates that, in seeking to resolve the waiting-list crisis, experts are inclined not to demand more prison places, but instead to look for non-custodial, alternative options.

The many positive outcomes associated with Scandinavian penal policy are beyond dispute, and certain elements of this approach could be usefully employed even in states that operate conservative, retributive prison systems. Prioritising alternative sanctions reduces the costs of maintaining prisons, and their use can help to prevent the kinds of negative effects on prisoners’ lives and personalities that are an almost inevitable consequence of spending shorter or longer periods in custody. Finally, and importantly, by focusing not on isolation and segregation but on reintegration and return to society, the application of alternative sanctions is more likely to contribute to a reduction in reoffending (Pântea, 2024).

References

-
- Barker, V. (2013). Nordic exceptionalism revisited: Explaining the paradox of a Janus-faced penal regime. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480612468935>
- Ciric, J. (2020, July 9). Prison closure in Akureyri faces oppositon. *Iceland Review*. <https://www.icelandreview.com/politics/prison-closure-in-akureyri-faces-opposition/>
- Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509–529.
- Dashti, M. S., Jamadi, A., & Janipour, A. (2024). The moral and social effects of implementing alternative punishments of imprisonment. *International Journal of Ethics and Society*, 6(1), 43–54.
- Daðiðsdóttir, R. J. B., & Jóhannsdóttir, A. S. (2024). *The prison system in plain language = Fangelsiskerfið á mannamáli*. <https://vernd.is/all-articles/fangelsiskerfidh-a-mannamali>

- Farestveit, Þ. B. (2021, May 14). *Þú ert víst fangi (You are probably a prisoner)*. Vernd. <https://www.vernd.is/component/content/article/fangi-2?catid=20&Itemid=101>
- Garland, D. (2001). *The culture of control: crime and social order in contemporary society*. Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.
- Gönczöl, K. (2018). Megőrizhető-e a skandináv büntetőpolitikai modell? [Can the Scandinavian criminal justice model be preserved?] *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis: acta juridica et politica*, 81, 349–357. https://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/53981/1/juridpol_081_323-331.pdf
- Gunnlaugsson, H., & Galliher, J. F. (2000). *Wayward Icelanders: Punishment, boundary maintenance, and the creation of crime*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gunnlaugsson, H. (2021). Criminal justice in a small Nordic country: The case of Iceland. *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab*, 108(1), 27–45.
- Gunnlaugsson, H. (2017). Criminal justice in Iceland: A case of Scandinavian exceptionalism? In *Nordisk Samarbejdsråd for Kriminologi* (pp. 155–166).
- Heard, C. (2016). *Alternatives to imprisonment in Europe: A handbook of good practice*. Penal Reform International.
- Jones, C. (2015). Does alternative sentencing reduce recidivism? A preliminary analysis. *Xavier Journal of Politics*, 5(1), 18–31.
- Justice Ministry. (2020. júníus 29.). Kynnti aðgerðir til að stytta boðunarlista [Introduced action plans to shorten waiting list]. Stjórnarráðið. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/gogn/rit-og-skyrslur/stakt-rit/2020/06/29/Kynnti-adgerdir-til-ad-stytta-bodunarlista/>
- Kristoffersen, R. (2024). *Correctional statistics of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden 2018–2022*. University College of Norwegian Correctional Service. https://www.fangelsi.is/media/skjol/Nordic-Statistics-2018_2022_final.pdf
- Lappi-Seppälä, T. (2007). Penal policy in Scandinavia. *Crime and Justice*, 36(1), 217–295.
- Lauritsen, A. N. (2019). *Crime and crime control in four Nordic island societies: The Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and the Åland Islands*. Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology.
- Mamak, K. (2024). A new opening for the alternative punishments debate: Applying the extended mind thesis. *Ratio Juris*, 37(3), 248–268.
- Mathiesen, T. (2012). Scandinavian exceptionalism in penal matters: Reality or wishful thinking? In T. Ugelvik & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Nordic prison practice and policy: Exceptional or not?* (pp. 13–37). Routledge.
- McAlinden, A. M. (2011). Transforming justice: Challenges for restorative justice in an era of punishment-based corrections. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 14(4), 383–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2011.616369>
- Ólafsdóttir, H., & Bragadóttir, R. (2006). Crime and criminal policy in Iceland: Criminology on the margins of Europe. *European Journal of Criminology*, 3(2), 221–253.
- Ólafsdóttir, K. (2020, July 6). *Loka fangelsinu á Akureyri (Akureyri Prison to be closed)*. Visir.is. <https://www.visir.is/g/20201988680d/loka-fangelsinu-a-akureyri>

- Pakes, F. (2020). Old-fashioned Nordic penal exceptionalism: The case of Iceland's open prisons. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 21(2), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578983X.2020.1809199>
- Pakes, F., & Gunnlaugsson, H. (2018). A more Nordic Norway? Examining prisons in 21st century Iceland. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 57(2), 137–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12244>
- Pánteá, A. (2024). The effectiveness of alternative sanctions through the lens of the punitive system. *Acta Universitatis Danubius. Juridica*, 20(3), 76–91.
- Pétursson, V. Ö. (2024). A constant struggle against not having people in isolation. *Visir.is*. <https://www.visir.is/g/20242597699d/-stans-laus-bar-atta-vid-thad-ad-vera-ekki-med-menn-i-ein-angrun->
- Pratt, J. (2008). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess: Part I: The nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(2), 119–137. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azm072>
- Pratt, J., & Eriksson, A. (2011). 'Mr. Larsson is walking out again': The origins and development of Scandinavian prison systems. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 44(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004865810393105>
- Prison and Probation Administration. (2017). *Ársskýrslur (Annual reports)*. <https://www.fangelsi.is/english>
- Prison and Probation Administration. (2020). *The Prison and Probation Administration home page*. <https://www.fangelsi.is/english>
- Ruzsonyi P. (2011). A skandináv országok büntetés-végrehajtási rendszerének elemzése. *Börtönügyi Szemle*, 30(1), 1–19.
- Scharff Smith, P., & Ugelvik, T. (2017). Introduction: Punishment, welfare and prison history in Scandinavia. In T. Ugelvik & P. Scharff Smith (Eds.), *Scandinavian penal history, culture and prison practice* (pp. 3–31). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scharff Smith, P. (2012). A critical look at Scandinavian exceptionalism: Welfare state theories, penal populism and prison conditions in Denmark and Scandinavia. In T. Ugelvik & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Nordic prison practice and policy: Exceptional or not?* (pp. 38–57). Routledge.
- Sipos F. (2017). A közérdekű munka szerepe a börtönnépesség csökkentésében: a finn tapasztalatok. *Pro Futuro*, 7(2), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.26521/Profuturo/2017/2/4764>
- Statista. (2025). *Number of people in prison in Iceland from 2010 to 2021*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1269089/number-prisoners-iceland/>
- Statistics Iceland. (2020). *Immigrants and persons with foreign background 2020*. <https://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/inhabitants/immigrants-and-persons-with-foreign-background-2020/>
- Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press.
- Ugelvik, T. (2012). The dark side of a culture of equality: Reimagining communities in a Norwegian remand prison. In T. Ugelvik & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal exceptionalism? Nordic prison policy and practice* (pp. 119–138). Routledge.

- Vernd Fangahjálp. (2025). *Introduction*. <https://www.vernd.is/index.php/vernd/starfsemi>
- World News. (2020, October 3). *Vill náða þá sem beðið hafa lengi eftir afplánun (Plans to pardon all who have waited a long time for the completion of their sentence)*. <https://theworld-news.net/is-news/vill-nada-tha-sem-bedid-hafa-lengi-efir-afplanun>
- World Prison Brief. (2024). *Iceland*. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/iceland>
- Zohren, D., & Rösner, V. (2020). *Alternative punishments: The impact of prison sentences and the necessity of alternative punishments for convicts*.

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

- Miklósi, M. (2025). Characteristics of the Scandinavian Criminal Policy Model, its Features in Iceland, with a Special Focus on Alternative Solutions and Challenges. *Belügyi Szemle*, 73(12), 2555–2572. <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.i12.pp2555-2572>

Statements

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

Funding

This study was prepared with the support of the Bolyai János Research Scholarship (grant no. BO/00099/24/2).

Ethics

No dataset is associated with this article.

Open access

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The article may be used, shared and redistributed in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes, provided that appropriate credit is given to the author(s) and the source, and a link to the license is included. No derivatives are permitted (including adaptations or translations), and commercial use is not allowed.

Corresponding author

The corresponding author of this article is Márta Miklósi, who can be contacted at miklosimarta@unideb.hu.