

# Greenland -a country without prisons: Images of Greenlandic institutions of delinquents and its population

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## **Abstract**

In 2018, Greenland is expected to have its first prison, and the idea of Greenland as the country without prisons will be history. However, even before the first prison is built, Greenland is among the hardest punitive countries in Scandinavia with more than 200 prisoners per 100 thousand of the national population. Most of the Greenlandic inmates are serving sentences for violence, homicide or sexual crimes.

For decades, the image of Greenland as the country without prisons has been successfully maintained. The background for a society without prisons is found in the Greenlandic criminal code of 1954. Prisons had no place in the criminal code – nor in Greenland. The link between guilt and punishment was broken and measures were adopted based on what best served the re-entry of the offender into society. Instead of serving a sentence in prison, the country's offenders were to serve in open institutions in order to retain social connections to the surrounding community.

The article examines the Greenlandic prison system and how it differs from ordinary prisons. Moreover, an insight to the social background of the prison population in Greenland will be provided.

**Keywords:** Greenland, Imprisonment, Resocialization, Criminology, Social exclusion, Poverty, Polarization.

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## Introduction

*“Greenland is the only place in the world where people cannot be punished.  
There is no penal code, only a criminal code.  
There are no prisons, only institutions for delinquents.  
No matter what crime a person may commit in Greenland,  
in principle one cannot be punished – only helped”* (Lynge 2010).

As the Greenlandic social commentator Finn Lynge wrote, there are formally no prisons in Greenland. And persons who have broken the law will be helped rather than punished. This was at least the purpose of the Greenlandic Criminal Code. And for more than fifty years this has been widely believed, and frequently expressed in relation to the Greenlandic criminal justice system.

For more than half a century the Criminal Code of Greenland has been held as a unique example in European sociology of law, as the sanctions had to be selected from a perspective that would ensure the most successful rehabilitation of the perpetrator. Prisons had no place in the Criminal Code – nor in Greenland. Instead, imprisonment takes place in an open institution for delinquents.

Although Greenland Home Rule Government was introduced in 1979 and from 2009 the autonomy Greenland Government came in to force, the judicial system remains Danish; meaning the Greenlandic judicial system continues to be regulated by Danish legislation.

This article will seek to answer the following questions: What kind of institutions are the Greenlandic institutions of delinquents? Why does Greenland have such a high rate of inmates compared to Scandinavian countries? Who are the inmates in the Greenlandic institutions for delinquents?

## Historical Background

In 1948-1949 the Danish Government sent an expedition to Greenland to investigate local legal conditions. It was the impression of the expedition that Greenlandic legal practice was characterized by an individualizing personality system. Therefore it was the conclusion of the expedition that the Greenlandic system should be developed with norms adjusted to Danish penal legislations, while sanctions should be based on Greenlandic practise – the perpetrator principle. This means that the link between the seriousness of the crime and the severity of the response was broken. It

was what served the offender's resocialization and integration into society that was to determine the response (Goldschmidt 1954).

The code's rejection of prisons had its origins in, as the Legal Expedition claimed to have seen, that one did not isolate offenders in Greenland. It was possible to keep everybody under supervision in small societies, and those who had been incarcerated tolerated it so poorly that it was necessary quickly to release them. And moreover it would be particularly costly to construct prisons in Greenland (Goldschmidt 1953).

By supporting the ideological draft legislation, it became possible for Denmark to appear innovative in the area of justice while, at the same time, it was not necessary to allocate funds to building prisons in Greenland. It was furthermore an exceptional opportunity to observe how legal principles were practically implemented – and thereby let the code be a social experiment in Greenland.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Greenlandic society underwent a profound modern industrialization process. The occupational bases were reorganized, and features of the Danish welfare society reproduced with the purpose of making Greenland a modern society. With this started the emergence of a class-based society along with the development of capitalist conditions of production and an increase in wage labour (Dahl 1986). The old ways of society with small communities and strong primary control were eroding. Institutions started to make headway while persons with a need for special institutions were sent to appropriate institutions in Denmark (Jensen 2010).

When a wave of institutional incarceration swept Europe, Greenland was initially unaffected. But starting with an amendment to the criminal code in 1963 it became possible to place convicts in institutions for delinquents. It was, however, emphasized, that the Greenlandic institutions were not to have the characteristics to prisons. They were to avoid the harmful effects known to be caused by prisons (Folketingstidende 1962-63).

## **The Great Greenlandic Incarceration**

The first Greenlandic institution of delinquents saw the daylight in 1967. The institution was constructed in the capital Nuuk with an 18 person capacity. The inmates were supposed to work in town outside the institution in daytime while serving their sentence in the institution. The

most important principle of the institution was the inmates were to maintain in connection to the surrounding society through employment in town; they were to be re-socialized and supported toward a future existence free of crime.

The small institution for delinquents in Nuuk quickly faced overcrowding, and more institutions were created. Even though the institutional capacity increased, the problem of overcrowding continued in the Greenlandic institutions. In the 1980s and 1990s started what may be called “The Great Greenlandic Incarceration”. Institutional capacity doubled during those years, and the number of inmates exceeded anything comparable seen in Europe.

### **The Greenlandic institutions of delinquents**

While doing my Ph.D.(Lauritsen 2011) the dissertation’s qualitative research relied on fieldwork in two institutions of delinquents, in Nuuk and Ilulissat.

For a large proportion of the inmates in both institutions, long periods of their entire lives were to be lived within the confines of the institution. Everyday routines are directed by fixed timetables and rules, supervised by uniformed guards, and all activities are conducted along with the same group of people. Common to the majority of those interviewed was the feeling of wasted life, a time that was merely to pass.

In both institutions was found a hierarchy among the inmates. Sexual crimes, particularly against children are a legitimate cause for exclusion, just as inmates who inform on fellow inmates to the staff are excluded. In Ilulissat it was primarily a social exclusion, whereas informers or sex criminals in Nuuk could risk physical harassment by fellow inmates. Among the crucial factors determining hierarchical placement, it was particularly the character of the crime, the physical size and strength of the body, as a dominant personality that were prominent.

The life emerging in the institutions for delinquents bears practically all the hallmarks of the total institution, the prison (Goffman 1967). One important difference, however, is that in the prison there are facilities designed to remedy life in isolation. Similarly, there are work and education opportunities. In the open institution there is naturally nothing – precisely because it is an open institution, which is not intended to be resided in 24 hours a day. But when the open institution is closing up, and

is only offering inmates a life based on the open institution's deficient activity opportunities and facilities, life here become much more painful than in the prison.

In the open institution of delinquents the intention is that the inmates are to retain their connection to the society; they are supposed to be employed in town and through a series of re-socializing initiatives to improve their future prospects. But as is apparent the institutions are far from being open for most inmates. The intention with these institutions was to help inmates to a future life without crime. The inmates were supposed to work in town outside the institution in daytime while serving their sentence in the institution. Over the years these institutions have developed into being closed institutions, and today it is only very few inmates who experience the principle of the open institutions.

### **Images of the Greenlandic inmates**

To compare how strictly different countries punish, one of the most commonly used measures is to compare the rate of prison population, inmates per 100.000 of the national population. If we take a look at the Nordic countries, the prison populations are divided as it appears here ([www.prisonstudies.org](http://www.prisonstudies.org) 2016): Norway: 70 inmates per 100.000 citizens; Denmark: 58; Finland: 55; Sweden: 53; Iceland: 44, Faroe Islands: 19; and then we have Greenland. In Greenland the prison population is 226 inmates per 100.000 citizens. More than 10 times higher than the Faroe Islands. When we use the official figure for the Greenlandic prison population, it is important to note that it is only inmates in the Greenlandic institutions for delinquents. A very large group of the Greenlandic inmates are sent to safe custody for an indeterminate period in a Danish prison. This group is not included. If we include the Greenlandic convicted inmates in the Danish Herstedvester-prison, the Greenlandic prison population jumps to a total of 270 inmates.

Greenland has no prisons – but a very huge prison population. In 2018 Greenland will get its first prison where inmates who today are sent to a Danish prison in the future will be incarcerated.

Today there are six institutions for delinquents in Greenland with rooms for a total of 154 inmates. In the fall of 2015 there were a total of 122 inmates corresponding to about 80 percent of the total prison capacity.

In addition we have the group of convicted inmates sent to prison in Denmark. In the Danish Herstedvester Prison a total of 28 Greenlandic males are serving their sentences. They are judged by a Greenlandic Court and sent approximately four thousand km away from their home to serve their sentences in Denmark. To get a true picture of the Greenlandic prison population we also need to include them.

To get a detailed image of the Greenlandic Prison population, this author recently reviewed records of all the inmates (autumn 2015 and spring 2016). Of those serving in Greenland including those who had been sent to Denmark. A small part of the study will be provided here below to show a few social characteristics of Greenlandic inmates.

If we take a look at the gender ratio; in the Danish prison the group of Greenlandic inmates are only men. But in the Greenlandic institutions a total of 15 percent of the inmates are women. In a Nordic perspective the female inmates in Greenland are relatively many. All of the women were convicted for homicide, attempted murder or violence.

Even though they represent a significantly higher percentage than in Scandinavia, we are talking about a few women among many men. And that means that some women are forced to serve as the only woman among many men. In the capital, Nuuk, the institution has a section only for women. But in the smaller institutions around the country, women are forced to serve as the only woman or with a few other women together with many men.

In Greenland we have to take geographical distances into account. And it creates also challenges for the Greenlandic Prison and Probation System. The question is, what will be best for the female inmates; to serve their sentences near their home and family, although they will be the only woman in the institution – or will it be better for them to be placed in an institution only for women, but far away from home?

When we take a look at the crime type, we see that a total of 76 percent of the Greenlandic prison population are convicted of offenses against the person: Homicide, sexual crimes or violence.

To understand the Greenlandic crime picture, it is important to find information about the victims. Who are the victims of these 76 percent of the Greenlandic inmates? And what is the relation between offenders and their victims?

For homicide and attempted homicide in the most cases the victim is the spouse or partner. And for sexual crimes against children under 15

years the victim in most cases is the offenders own children. Overall the picture shows that we will find the victim in intimate relationships. When the records of the inmates were reviewed my intention was to find information about how the inmates were raised in their childhood, and how their life was before they were convicted. And very soon a kind of depressing pattern emerged where a large proportion of inmates had suffered from problems related to poverty.

Before the imprisonment at least 45 percent of inmates were unemployed. At least 47 percent have in periods of their life been homeless. And at least 43 percent had not even graduated from primary school. Almost one-fifth of the Greenlandic prison population has family relations to former or current inmates. And more than half have previously been serving in an institution for delinquents. A total of 56 percent are registered as having substance abuse problems with drug or alcohol. At the beginning of the year, the National Institute of Public Health (SIFs Grønlandsskrifter 2016) published a report entitled; *“The population in Greenland – living conditions, lifestyle and health”*.

A part of this study focused on upbringing. The study shows, that more than 70 percent of the Greenlandic population born in the mid-1960s or later had grown up in a home with alcohol problems, violence or sexual assaults. For the group of young people between 18 and 29 years the study shows that 33 percent have been sexually abused before the age of 18 years.

Several studies have shown the same pattern. It is well-documented, that for many people it has been a hard time to grow up in Greenland. And childhood has also been a difficult time for a large number of the prison population.

More than 40 percent of the Greenlandic prison population had grown up in a home with violence and alcohol or drug problems. More than 30 percent of the Greenlandic prison population have been in care away from their home. At least 41 percent of the 18 to 24 years-olds have been in a residential institution. At least 23 percent of the inmates have been sexually abused before the age of 18 years. And for the female inmates at least half have been sexually abused in their childhood. For inmates convicted for sexual crimes against children we see that at least 51 percent themselves have been sexually abused during their childhood.

Greenland is a polarized society with a limited welfare system. There is a lack of treatment staff. There is a lack of halfway houses for children grown up in residential institutions. And there is a lack of rehab institutions.

A huge part of the Greenlandic prison population grew up in violent families. During their childhood they have suffered great trauma without finding any help to get through this. The question is if they react in conflict from known and learned patterns. In absence of other solutions, they resort to actions they know from their childhood when it comes to solving conflicts which is violence.

The majority of serious crimes in Greenland have been committed while the offender was intoxicated. And as we see more than half of the prison population have substance abuse problems with drugs or alcohol. Their life situation of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment and as an outcast of the population makes it reasonable to assume that frustrations pile up. In combination with alcohol and without knowing alternatives to how to solve conflicts they often will react with violence.

But for a huge part of the Greenlandic prison population it is not only other people they hurt. Many of them have hurt themselves, and they have several suicide attempts behind them. And many of them have lost close relatives to suicide. Unfortunately this is not unusual in Greenland. The incident of suicide is among the highest in the world.

Maybe we should see the actions from the prison population as a reaction of powerlessness. They react with known solutions to their problems. Solutions where they harm themselves and people close to them. Maybe their reactions and crimes should be seen as an answer to the life situation they are facing. From a bleak place in society with no perspective for the future, the only one they really hurt is themselves and their close family. And in that way their reaction can be seen as a kind of expanded suicide.

## **Conclusion**

Greenland is known for its humane criminal code and rejection of prisons. The intention of the Greenlandic institutions of delinquents was to avoid harmful effects known from prisons. And people who had broken the law should be helped rather than punished. But as we see the institutions today resemble closed institutions where the inmates find no help to their life problems.

A huge part of the Greenlandic inmates are suffering for the trauma they are inflicted during their childhood. Trauma related to a childhood where they have been raised in poverty with no help from the Greenlandic welfare system. They react from well-known patterns and repeat actions in ways to solve conflicts, which often are characterized by violence.

The open institutions of delinquents are an illusion. And combined with a betrayal from the Greenlandic welfare system the outcast of the society will still be suffering for problems related to poverty. With this it seems like the institutions of delinquents only fulfil a single purpose: Storing of marginalized sections of the population.

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