

"Young adult inmates and alternative judicial measures"

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Aims and methods

The 'Young adult inmates and alternative judicial measures' research project compares the use of three penal measures, i.e., imprisonment, mediation, and community service, in the Brussels judicial district .

1) The first strand of the research (UCL) focused on the mechanisms of selection and production of the populations who benefit from mediation, with emphasis on the selection processes and criteria that lead the judges to choose this type of alternative measure. It also concerned the socio-criminal characteristics that were likely to characterise these populations in 1995 and 1996, within the limits set by the mediation counsellors' data base covering this period.

2) The second strand (ULB) was built upon a two-track approach. The first track drew upon two statistical matrices that were constructed for the purpose of this research to analyse the social and criminal careers of young adult offenders who were sentenced to community service in the context of mediation and probation in the Brussels judicial district in 1995 and 1996. The second track consisted of interviewing all of the players involved in community service (sitting judges, public prosecutor's office, lawyers, mediation counsellors, and mediation and probation assistants) in order to reveal their practices in this area, notably the factors likely to hamper effective enforcement of community service. Linking these two tracks then made it possible to compare the alternative sentencing with the political aims that were assigned to it.

3) The third strand (FUSL) involved two methodological axes, one quantitative, the other qualitative. The quantitative approach to prison population statistics proposed a cursory description of the penal structure and changes in the population of incarcerated young adults over the past ten years. Given the above-mentioned obstacles, this description was obtained by crossing the only demographic and criminal statistics available (age, gender, nationality, legal status, and offences), which had to be treated as static variables rather than fluxes, excluding variables likely to inform us about the social characteristics of the above-mentioned corpus. The qualitative approach, on the other hand, was based on biographical interviews of young adult inmates in Saint-Gilles Penitentiary. These interviews provided substantial information about both the socialisation and marginalisation processes that culminate in imprisonment and the experience of incarceration itself and its effects on the offenders' subsequent law-abiding or criminal careers.

Results and recommendations

This research reveals that alternative measures are under-utilised. Organizational factors (position of the accelerated procedure, geographical location of the Brussels Judicial District's penal mediation office) are decisive in explaining people's ignorance of these measures and the restricted and inappropriate use that is currently made of them.

The demographic research reveals the high proportion of 18- to 25-year-olds among inmates. This study, which analyses this population's demographic and penal characteristics, confirms the failure of incarceration to rehabilitate offenders and enable them to reintegrate society. Based on this research, we plead for the introduction of specific detention programmes for young adults that include intensive vocational training and physical and intellectual development components; call for a rapid overhauling of the rules governing incarceration; and can only encourage, as so many others have done before us, the opening-up of prisons to the outside world.

