

# Giving up Crime: an inspiring method

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## Introduction

Major challenges to prison systems throughout Europe are (1) to prepare prisoners for release, (2) to foster the communication between prison and outside rehabilitative agencies, and (3) to provide released prisoners with the human and social capital to settle down as law-abiding citizens. Problems that obstruct the progress being made in these three areas are multiple. Besides the lack of resources, a major problem is the fact that the length of imprisonment (average length in EU comprises 8 months) is often too short to even initiate a process of adequate preparation for release and resettlement.

The price we pay for this practice of not being able to provide the bulk of our prison populations throughout Europe with sufficient means to improve themselves as much as possible during a short prison term seems to be considerable. The costs of this practice refer to two important findings in the criminological literature:

In the first place, becoming incarcerated can be a turning point that produces increased motivation for change of offenders. This turning point may offer an important opportunity to enhance prisoners' readiness for change (*Strike while the iron is hot*).

Second, engaging prisoners from day one of their incarceration in constructive activities can be a powerful tool to counteract the negative effects of a (mostly foreseeable) short prison term on criminal motivation and the human and social capital of the prisoner. Counteracting these negative effects is also beneficial for reducing the risk of reoffending.

A major assumption of the method of Giving up Crime is that we can ameliorate the cost of this practice by viewing the prisoner him- of herself as the major agent or owner of his change process. The method enables the prisoner to take responsibility for his current and future life, starting from day one of his imprisonment ([www.givingupcrime.com](http://www.givingupcrime.com)).

The method of Giving up Crime has been implemented in all Dutch prisons as part of the Modernization Programme launched by the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency in 2008. This programme aims at a more person oriented approach of prisoners, a more constructive prison climate and a better cooperation with outside rehabilitative agencies. The method of Giving up Crime is a major a tool of the Modernization Programme.

From evaluation results it became clear that the method has a positive impact on prisoners, prison officers and the prison climate.

In our presentation we will discuss three main topics:

1. The method of Giving Up Crime: what is it; how does it work?
2. How is the method implemented in the Netherlands (pilot phase and implementation phase) and what is the impact on prisoners and prison climate?

3. Why is this method also useful for other European countries? Possible implementation steps will be presented taking into account prison realities of overcrowding, poor resources and lacking activities for detainees.

## **1. What is the method Giving up Crime and how does it work?**

Sooner or later, virtually all people who commit crime will desist from crime and stop with offending. By the time they reach the age of 28 most offenders seem to stop with offending, often without receiving formal intervention. This suggests that a larger process of recovery is at work in desistance from crime. Professionally driven rehabilitation, re-entry or reintegration is part of or an adjunct of this larger process of intentional self-change which includes self-restorative forces. So the important question is: How can we speed up the onset and further development of this natural process of desistance?

To speed up the natural process of desistance, the method of Giving up Crime addresses three key factors of the natural desistance process:

1. A genuine will to change (autonomous motivation);
2. Improved self-efficacy beliefs related to overcoming obstacles to a better, crime-free life as a desired end-state;
3. A changed appraisal of opportunities for positive relationships with others and society.

### **Motivation enhancing strategies of the workbook**

The aim of the method is to prepare detainees for release, and supporting them in the natural process of recovery, resettlement and desistance from crime. Promoting self-activity, self-directed learning and taking responsibility are major means to achieve the aim of autonomous self-motivation and effective self-change. As a matter of fact, these means reflect the effective *educational* elements of the method referring to the principles of promoting people's motivation to learn: *setting* goals that have subjective value, *actively* working towards them and experiencing more personal control and *success*. These are main elements of how adults can be motivated to take responsibility for their own learning and engage in the pursuit of change. These elements are very important as most detainees suffer from desistance pessimism and many of them had negative experiences during their educational career.

### **Benefits of the method of Giving up Crime**

The method:

- Refers to a rehabilitation theory or framework model that is explicitly based on the *dynamics* of motivational self-regulation in offenders' pathways into and out of crime.
- Helps offenders to engage as soon and as much as possible in *self-determination* and self-activity directed at the movement away from crime and toward stable commitment to conformist identity and behavior.
- Embeds the possibility of living a better life into prisoner's everyday lives (real time) and natural setting (real world).
- Makes therefore the implementation of the rehabilitation structure in prisons more ecologically valid.
- Can be perfectly combined with other activities or intervention programs

- Offers an easy accessible tool for the (mentoring) prison-officer or other workers to become an active and collaborative supporter/trainer of self-change.
- Counteracts the pains of imprisonment that can seriously disable the prisoner. It is a well-documented fact that pains of imprisonment may impede the development of prisoners, undermine their overall well-being, negatively affect their potential for post-prison adjustment and make the factors associated with reoffending worse. Because of its strong emphasis on the role of life meaning, sense of purpose for the future and ecological validity, the method of Giving Up Crime contributes to counteracting the destructive effects of people's experiential responses to confinement.

### **The structure of the workbook**

The workbook is divided in three parts.

The *first* introductory part of the book invites the detainee to determine for him/herself the costs and benefits of two possible courses of action: abandoning or continuing a life in crime. After being invited to reflect on these costs and benefits the detainee is asked to consider these options of abandoning or continuing a life in crime. If preferred, one can decide instantaneously on one of these options. If one decides to stop with offending one may continue with reading the book. If the person decides to continue a life in crime the message is that it is better to put the book aside because most likely, it will not work. The message is further that the person in question is probably not yet ready for change but the reality is that sooner or later, he/she, like all offenders, will eventually become more open to change.

To get involved in the process of change, the detainee engages in reflecting on personal values and goals referring to both the present and the past marked by periods of engaging in criminal activities. It is explained that the underlying needs related to criminal involvement were probably positive but the means to satisfy these needs and the produced outcomes were certainly not. Understanding that the same personal needs can be addressed in a non-criminal way is the next important step. In addition, detainees are introduced to the concept of identity and the 'real me' or 'true self' which refers to the part of the self that conflicts with or puts in doubt one's orientation on criminality.

Next, the detainee is encouraged to discover his/her own good reasons to change one's life and to think about the inner and outer obstacles and strengths that may either block or promote personal reform.

This part leads to a personal life plan with goals to achieve a more fulfilling life and a desired end state sustained by positive contributions to self, others and society.

Goals always directly or indirectly refer to the life-domains of accommodation, relationships with (significant) others, physical and mental health, education/employment, financial matters and balance in life.

The focus of the workbook on these life domains is based on their relationship with:

1) problems in living and the experience of adversity that foster criminal coping and 2) the possible presence of strengths or exceptions in terms of more quiet life episodes marked by positive contributions to self, others and society, less criminal activity and conformist behavior.

The next, *second* part of the workbook concerns working on the various life domains. The order of working through these life domains depends on the priorities derived from the

personal goals. If housing is for example the main issue, the detainee should start with the chapter 'find a place to live', and so on. Detainees learn to formulate goals that comply with Berg & Miller's (1992) *seven characteristics of well-formed goals* such as being small, realistic within the present context of life, specific, behavioural, emphasizing presence rather than absence and having beginnings rather than endings. This strategy facilitates the experience and expectancy of success with conventional, productive actions. Experiences of success, in their turn, help uncover the value of enhanced commitment to a desired end-state and the power of personal agency, inner resources and self-initiative. Experiencing initial success also feeds into a further process of reflection on why pro social goals are relevant, important or challenging and why transformative actions are difficult or easy. Once desisting offenders successfully engage in transformative actions, their appraisal of opportunities for reform shifts towards an interpretation in terms of their value and contribution to desirable outcomes. In addition, changed appraisals draw the attention away from (anticipated) undesirable outcomes and negative thoughts.

The *third* part of the workbook learns detainees how to cope with difficulties and prepare for setbacks. In this part the main problems and difficulties detainees would normally encounter after release are tackled. With the aid of a list of most common high risk situations and how these risks can be handled in an effective way, detainees are prepared for setbacks, temptations and provocations. To think about one's own expected problems and how these can be solved in cooperation with significant others is the focus of this important chapter.

### **The role of the mentoring prison-officer**

While the detainee is working with the book, the role of the mentor prison officer is of crucial importance. He/she supports the detainee in making progress while working through the book. Support involves expressing empathy, discussing important topics, guiding the detainee, praising for his/her positive and self-directed attitude, listening, posing questions to clarify issues, stimulating etc. This is important in the reinforcement of the desired behaviour towards positive changes.

## **2. Giving up Crime: implementation in the Netherlands**

Giving up Crime is part of the Prison Modernization Programme that has been launched by the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency in 2008. This programme aims at a more person oriented approach of prisoners and a more constructive prison climate. The method of Giving up Crime was introduced as a tool to strengthen the self-responsibility of detainees to prepare for prison release, even after a short sentence.

The method was first introduced in 4 prisons during a pilot period. The process of introduction of the method and promoting the use of the workbook by both detainees and mentoring officers was rather easy. Handing out the workbook to all detainees on a prison-wing was preceded by (1) brief information meetings for all the staff members involved and (2) training sessions for prison officers/ mentors to prepare them for their new role of guiding prisoners with the use of the workbook.

Several weeks after the book was handed out by prison officers to prisoners, results were surprising. We found detainees, mentors and managers who showed great enthusiasm and tangible results produced by simply introducing the workbook on a prison wing.

After the evaluation of this pilot period showing positive results, the method was implemented nationwide. Now Giving up Crime is mandatory for all detainees and the workbook is supported by small-group training sessions guided by professional trainers recruited from the own prison organisation and from probation services.

Now, let us take a closer look at what various independent evaluation reports show.

#### *Effect on the detainees:*

The detainees reported that the workbook functioned as an eye-opener. They remarked that the workbook encouraged them to reflect on experiences in a way they never did before.

Detainees experienced success and feelings of pride while they worked through all the exercises in the book.

Detainees discovered themselves how to proceed in a positive way with their current and future life. Discovering one's own good reasons for reform empowered them. They prepared concrete life-plans with prioritized first step activities.

Detainees spontaneously wrote letters and notes referring to their enthusiasm about newly gained insights from the workbook. They felt *being noticed* and treated more humanely by simply inviting them to reflect on their life.

Detainees reported to feel more self-confident to stay away from criminal activities.

A quasi-experimental study (forthcoming) shows a significant effect of the method in terms of reduction in criminal motivation and an increase in readiness for change. In addition, the method seems to have a positive impact on the daily experiences of prisoners. These experiences in their turn motivate and enable them to take more responsibility for their current and future life and make them less susceptible for prisonisation-effects.

#### *Effect on the mentor-prison officer*

The mentoring prison-officers reported that the workbook helped to facilitate and deepen the contact with detainees. These result also contributed to a more constructive and positive climate on the wing.

Of course there were also bottlenecks: prisons differ in how well they emphasized and implemented the mentoring role of prison staff. Also, prison officers reported time and work constraints related to this new role.

#### *Organisational factors*

Implementation of the method becomes easier by a more supporting attitude of prison management and supervising staff.

Drop out of detainees of the training sessions was minimal, and was only due to relocation of prisoners.

Some problems occurred: the mentor was not always available, for example during the weekends. Collaboration with other relevant disciplines within and outside the prison organization was lacking (for example education department, department of social work, mental health services).

From these experiences the method of Giving up Crime emerges as a promising, innovative and effective method. With only limited resources (money and staff) and rather independent from prevailing prison conditions or period of stay, the method creates opportunities to *reach* prisoners and empower them to achieve significant increases in self-responsibility, self-insight and concrete planning of activities that better prepare them for release.

A major feature of effectively implementing the method in a prison is embedding its use in the daily activities and daily setting of both prisoners and prison personnel. Adequate information to all staff members about the background of the method, its surplus value for their role as professionals and a supportive role of both supervising staff and management are pivotal to a successful implementation.

The method seems to inspire detainees as well as prison staff and management.

### **3. Usefulness for other European countries**

If you are interested in the implementation of the workbook Giving up Crime in your country, what steps do you have to take?

- Identify members of your organization who are open for innovative approaches and committed to ameliorate urgent problems such as the lack of a proper programme of purposeful and constructive regime activities for (remand) prisoners, lack of staff training, problems related to overcrowding, lack of education and pre-release activities.
- Involve them in the implementation process of the method.
- Invite them for an information meeting about the method and discuss how it can be implemented and what staff members and prison officers can gain from this method.
- Start on a small scale with a pilot group in a few prisons, with a group of motivated prison officers (or other prison personnel) and detainees. Create spaces outside the cell where small groups of prisoners and prison personnel can work with the method.
- One member of the supervising staff should take the role of coordinator and solve problems if necessary.
- Evaluate the experiences throughout the process.

#### **What can we offer to help you with the implementation:**

- Provide a workbook translated in your language and tuned to local circumstances as much as possible.
- Visit your organization and inform all the staff members involved about the method Giving up Crime and how it works.
- Train prison officers who start with the pilot.
- Provide a “train the trainer- meeting” for staff members.
- Provide evaluation instruments.
- Consultation and guidance by e-mail or skype contact.

#### **What will be the result?**

More detainees will be better prepared for release.

By simply inviting prisoners to read a book that helps them to reflect on what they really want with their life they feel treated in a more humane way.

The method creates enhanced opportunities for detainees to experience positive emotional experiences which is crucial to initiate and support behaviour change.

The method is supportive for a constructive, less harmful detention climate with more cooperative interpersonal relationships.

The method enables prison staff to enhance their professionalism in terms of the role of 'the caring officer' .

The method reduces criminal motivation and enhances motivation for change.