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The Penal Voluntary Sector's Role in the Nordic Countries: A Shadow State?

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Introduction

Neoliberalism, which can broadly be defined as 'political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasise market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility' (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2), has affected the Nordic welfare states in various ways. It has been argued that the Nordic countries went through several neoliberal reforms that undermined the cornerstones of the Nordic welfare state model—universality, solidarity, and market independence—at the end of the twentieth century (Cox, 2004; Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Practical examples of neoliberalism in the Nordic countries include, among other things, the adaptation of the New Public Management (NPM) reforms in relation to public services, which have been used, for example, to cut costs related to the provision of services (Knutsson et al., 2016).

Neoliberal reforms have also influenced the Nordic Prison and Probation Services (PPS) and resulted in a strong focus on economic efficiency during

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the past couple of decades, which has led to budget cuts and reductions in PPS staff (Bruhn et al., 2017a; Korhonen, 2020; Kamp & Hansen, 2019). The consequences of workforce reduction and other pressures faced by the prison staff have been a source of concern for some time. For example, the opportunities for prison staff to engage in rehabilitative interaction with prisoners and offer them activities have declined (Bruhn & Nylander, 2018; CPT, 2019, 2020; Damsa, 2023). Moreover, the increased security focus in prisons and—especially in the case of Denmark—the more punitive prison policies (Damsa, 2023) have impacted prison staff's ability to engage in rehabilitative work even further (Bruhn et al., 2017a, b; Olesen & Rosenholm, 2021). These changes have made it less appealing to work in the PPS, and the Nordic prisons are struggling to recruit and retain well-trained staff (Karis & Karlsson, 2022; Kujala, 2020; Parhiala & Palmén, 2022; Fængselsforbundet, 2022). Another NPM-connected transformation in the Nordic PPS has been the adoption of the standardised rehabilitation programmes at the turn of the millennium (Kolind et al., 2013; Sutton et al., 2021; Tyni, 2015), which has reduced some of the flexibility of the helping work (Harrikari & Westerholm, 2015; Svensson, 2004). Particularly influential programmes have been, for example, those based on cognitive behavioural therapy (Bruhn et al., 2017b; Tyni et al., 2014) and those based on the so-called risk-need-responsivity model (Clausen, 2013; Berger, 2017). It has been argued that the adoption of these programmes has shifted the focus of the rehabilitative work from solving everyday structural problems, such as lack of housing and unemployment, to thinking and social problem-solving skills of the 'clients' (Harrikari & Westerholm, 2015; Smith, 2015; Svensson, 2004).

It is well known that many prisoners and released prisoners have significantly poorer living conditions compared to the general population (Nilsson, 2002; Friestad & Skog Hansen, 2004; Clausen, 2013; Olesen, 2013, 2018; Padfield, 2019), and many need help to access the services they are entitled to (Friestad & Skog Hansen, 2004; Swedish NAO, 2015; Pruin, 2019). Regardless of the critical situation in the Nordic PPS, it is vital to run rehabilitative programmes to improve prisoners' and released prisoners' job opportunities, education, finances, and mental health and to help them with substance abuse problems, as well as other legal and social problems, to reduce the risk of recidivism. Moreover, penal confinement must still reflect the principle of normalisation—which means, among other things, that the prisoners should be prepared for successful reintegration after imprisonment (van de Rijt et al., 2022)—in compliance with both European regulations and national legislation (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Rec [2006]2; the Imprisonment Acts in Denmark, 2001, Finland, 2006, and

Sweden, 2010), despite the current challenges faced by the PPS. Thus, the PPS should co-operate with local authorities and other organisations in relation to preparatory release measures and enable prisoners to maintain relationships with the world outside of prison as much as possible. In order to ease the transition from prison to society, release preparations should start as soon as possible and be connected to a network of aftercare services, which are provided, for example, by the local authorities and voluntary sector agencies. However, research has repeatedly shown deficiencies in the coordination of the support measures for released prisoners, who frequently become sidelined in relation to municipal welfare services and often require extra help to access the services they are entitled to (Friestad & Skog Hansen, 2004; Swedish NAO, 2015; Lappi-Seppälä, 2019; Pruin, 2019).

Prisoner reintegration involves a number of more or less visible actors, not only from the criminal justice and welfare sectors but also from the so-called penal voluntary sector organisations (PVSOs), which refer to '...charitable and self-defined voluntary agencies working with prisoners, (ex-)offenders, their families and their victims through prison, community and policy advocacy programmes' (Tomczak, 2017, p. 3). PVSOs are not a new phenomenon either in a Nordic context or internationally; however, in a Nordic context their importance as a source of support for prisoners and released prisoners has increased due to the above-mentioned transformations in the Nordic PPS, coupled with the already well-known problems of collaboration between prisons and local authorities in assisting released prisoners (Jäntti, 2022; Olesen, 2013; Storgaard et al., 2013, pp. 15–25; Storgaard, 2019).

Regardless of the significant role played by PVSOs, knowledge about these organisations and their position in the Nordic countries is sparse, and the previous research has been dominated by Anglophone scholars. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated to answer the following research questions: What are the key challenges encountered by the Nordic PVSOs? What commonalities and differences can be identified in these challenges between the Nordic countries? How do these challenges relate to the findings of previous studies on the penal voluntary sector (PVS) in Anglophone countries? While it would also be important to investigate the potential of PVSOs' work in a Nordic context, such examination is beyond the scope of this chapter. The text proceeds as follows. First, we outline the current state of knowledge within the PVS literature. Second, we describe the data and methodological approach applied in this study, followed by a brief description of the Nordic PVSOs referred to in this chapter. Third, we analyse challenges related to funding and co-operation that PVSOs face performing in the Nordic penal fields of Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Fourth, we draw on international

literature on PVSOs to discuss some of the similarities and differences that we have identified in relation to the Nordic PVSOs. We conclude by highlighting our most important findings and their relevance for prisoners' and released prisoners' access to rehabilitation and reintegration.

State of the Art

Despite the fact that the PVS has a long history both internationally and in the Nordic countries, it has become a subject of research only recently. The onset of the scholarly interest towards PVSOs is connected to the rise of a neoliberal policy environment in Anglophone countries such as the UK and the US in the 1980s and its implications for PVSOs. It has been argued that the neoliberal policies in these countries have created a mixed economy, where PVSOs and the private sector have been encouraged to operate as service providers alongside the public sector (Lacey, 1994; Maguire, 2012; Corcoran, 2009, 2011). This marketisation has, according to several scholars, transformed the role of some PVSOs both in the UK and in the US, as they are no longer supplementing statutory services but undertaking traditional welfare and penal state services and conducting official welfare and penal programmes (Kaufman, 2015; Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016). In the political climate of such shadow state relationships (Geiger & Wolch, 1986; Wolch, 1990), the state is still defining the agendas for service provision and plays an important role in regulating and coordinating this area (Trudeau, 2008). The PVSOs must therefore demonstrate that they are flexible, adaptable, willing to work within prescribed limits, and document and report their service performance outcomes to be able to receive funding. In this regard, Corcoran et al. (2018) found that at least part of the PVS has begun to imitate working methods from the public and private sectors in order to survive in the commercialised and competitive funding environment.

The previous research has evidenced that PVSOs must not show flexibility and adaptability only towards their funders, but also towards the PPS, which is their partner in everyday work. For example, Mills et al. (2012) found that despite the fact that PVSOs were largely considered to be important partners for prisons in the UK, they were rarely treated as equals and rather as 'guests in a host environment', meaning that the possibilities of the PVSOs to perform were always subsidiary to the needs of the prison. For example, in the case of security concerns or when the prison staff were under a heavy workload, the importance of co-operation with the PVSOs could easily become forgotten or was found to be burdensome. Furthermore,

the previous research has noted that while co-operating with the criminal justice authorities, PVSOs face a risk of becoming co-opted into the execution of punishments and possibly becoming an extension of the criminal justice system. At worst, this can even undermine the many positive effects of the PVSOs' work (Tomczak & Thompson, 2019; see also Armstrong, 2002).

Indeed, PVSOs have been found to have different potentials in comparison with the PPS. One is that PVSOs can provide the PPS with expertise that they are lacking (Mills et al., 2012). PVSOs have also been found to be better at forming positive relationships with prisoners in comparison with PPS staff (Dominey, 2019; Mills & Meek, 2016; Tomczak & Albertson, 2016), build prisoners' self-confidence, bridge prison to society, create feelings of belonging, hope and patience, and offer prisoners a temporary breakaway from the prisoner identity (Abrams et al., 2019; Tomczak & Albertson, 2016; Tomczak & Thompson, 2019).

Based on the previous literature, we know quite a bit about the challenges and potentials of PVSOs' work in the Anglophone countries. However, PVSOs have been far less studied in the Nordic context (however, see Bäcklin, 2022a, b; Helminen, 2016; Helminen & Mills, 2019; Olesen, 2022; Olesen & Rosenholm, 2021; Persson & Svensson, 2019). As the PVS mirrors the specific legal, political, economic, and cultural context, findings from a specific country should not be extrapolated to different countries without caution (Tomczak, 2017). Undeniably, the Nordic context differs from the Anglophone countries, where the mixed economy of criminal justice is obvious as private companies and PVSOs have been contracted to run essential criminal justice services. While the neoliberal transformations in the penal field have highlighted the role of PVSOs as a source of support for prisoners and released prisoners also in the Nordic countries, service-delivery contracts between PVSOs and the PPS are rare in a Nordic context.

Data and Method

Our Nordic perspective applied in this study is based on data from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden which comes from a number of different sources that the authors have collected during years of involvement in PVS research. The different data sources cover similar themes regarding PVSOs, and the three countries were selected for investigation on the basis of the most similar method (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Data from Denmark consists mainly of interviews with 16 employees/volunteers from PVSOs, 7 for-profit organisations working with prisoner reintegration, 15 employees from the Danish

PPS, and 24 prisoners and newly released prisoners; two focus group interviews with volunteers; observation of 18 prisoner-volunteer meetings and several mandatory introductory courses and follow-up courses for volunteers; and a survey conducted with the Danish PPS staff coordinating prisoner reintegration. The data was collected by Olesen between 2019 and 2021. Data from Finland consists mainly of thematic interviews conducted by Helminen with 21 employees/volunteers from 14 PVSOs involved in prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration and 12 employees from the Finnish PPS in 2021. Background information about the co-operation between the Finnish PPS and PVSOs has also been drawn from a survey sent to all prison and probation offices in Finland in 2021, which was targeted at directors, assistant directors, and senior criminal sanctions officials.¹ Data from Sweden consists of documents and reports from the Swedish PPS and the PVSOs that received state funding from the Swedish PPS between 2017 and 2022. This includes the Swedish PPS' strategies for collaboration with civil society (2018, p. 7), PVSOs' final activity reports to the Swedish PPS from 2017 to 2021 (no = 67), and semi-annual activity reports for 2022 (no = 16). The data was collected by Bäcklin between 2022 and 2023.

This study was conducted within a research network for Nordic penal voluntary sector research, formed by the authors in a research group funded by the Nordic Research Council for Criminology. The data was discussed and compared during a two-day working meeting in Turku in August 2022 and ten online meetings between September 2022 and March 2023. The chapter was written in a shared document which allowed for an interactive writing and analysing process.

The PVSOs in the Three Nordic Countries

To examine the PVSOs in the Nordic countries and the challenges they face, we need to be explicit about what they do and how they work. We therefore initially compared our data to map out the PVSOs' most general services targeted at prisoners and released prisoners in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. The exact number of PVSOs is unknown because many are small and local and because some work with prisoners and released prisoners only occasionally or during certain projects. In each country, few PVSOs have targeted their support only at prisoners and released prisoners (Helminen, 2016; Olesen & Rosenholm, 2021). The mapping shows that while some

¹ The survey research was conducted together with university teacher Mia Kilpeläinen from the University of Eastern Finland.

PVSOs are specialised in meeting specific needs or contributing to solving certain problems such as substance abuse, violent behaviour, or debt, others are specialised in helping specific groups such as incarcerated women, foreign nationals, or children with incarcerated parents. A wide range of activities and support is offered by the PVSOs, such as psychological help, parental support, legal aid, art activities, value-based activities, social interaction and mentoring, educational and vocational support, and religious support. Some PVSOs educate and give advice to PPS staff, for example, in relation to children's rights issues, assessment issues, practical client work, or in relation to matters concerning certain groups of prisoners. Others offer a wide range of activities and services. One of the key issues that many PVSOs work with is helping prisoners to find accommodation, and many PVSOs also offer supportive housing services. Often, they also prepare prisoners for accessing the education system and finding work, as well as helping released prisoners to navigate the welfare system and informing them about their obligations and social rights. Additionally, civilians (who are not necessarily part of a PVSO) support released prisoners as voluntary 'assistant supervisors' (Persson & Svensson, 2019). The working styles of the PVSOs also differ. Some work on the basis of peer support, and some emphasise more help provided by professionals (Helminen, 2016). The Nordic PVSOs may also perform campaigning and advocacy work in addition to providing services and help.

The Challenges of PVSOs Operating in the Nordic Penal Field

In this section, we will present our findings regarding the challenges faced by PVSOs operating in the Nordic penal fields. We will focus on two main challenges that we identified in our data from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.² These are funding structures and disorganised co-operation.

Precarious Funding

The strong welfare state favours a significant state role in welfare provision; however, the Nordic countries have restructured their public social welfare services and offloaded significant responsibility for service delivery

² The findings from individual countries are discussed in full in previous (Olesen, 2022; Olesen & Rosenholm, 2021) and up-coming articles.

to private companies and voluntary sector organisations in recent decades (Szebehely & Meagher, 2013; Matthies, 2006). Still, in the penal field, this has only occasionally taken place via contractual relationships between the state and PVSOs. Instead, PVSOs have begun to fill the gaps in public services unprompted (Helminen, 2019). Our data shows that the growing importance of the PVSOs is weighted differently in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. It is perhaps most notable in the strategies of the Finnish PPS, which began to emphasise networking with the PVSOs and other relevant actors in its strategies from the 2010s onwards (Korhonen, 2020). Lately, it has also developed so-called project partnerships and introduced guidelines to coordinate the co-operation with the PVSOs, which are described as ‘vital’ for the Finnish PPS (Rikosseuraamuslaitos, 2022, p. 58). Nevertheless, the Finnish PPS does not regularly allocate funding to PVSOs.³ In Sweden, the importance of PVSOs for supporting prisoners and released prisoners was acknowledged even earlier than in Finland. This was stated, for example, in the Swedish PPS’ strategies for co-operation with civil society (Kriminalvården, 2006:2, 2018:7), and since 2003, the Swedish PPS has awarded grants to PVSOs (Ordinance 2002:954). The Danish PPS, on the other hand, only recently publicly acknowledged the value of PVSOs’ contribution to prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration, when it planned issuing grant funding to PVSOs and drew up a strategy to strengthen the co-operation with civil society (Justitsministeriet, 2021, p. 28). However, the pool of money for the PVSOs and the strategy have not (yet) been actualised.

Through our data, we identify an obvious paradox. Local authorities and PPS (silently) pass on significant responsibility to the PVSOs because their services do not burden public budgets significantly. At the same time, PVSOs are far from always encouraged by politicians to take on rehabilitative responsibility or included in service provision planning, as the public sector is still officially responsible for prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration. Hence, PVSOs are rarely part of funding structures that ensure sufficient resources are allocated to close the service gap that has serious implications for released prisoners’ living conditions and welfare. In this ‘no man’s land’, PVSOs become ‘the masters of their own fate’, as they cannot rely on contractual or semi-contractual arrangements but must attract external money from different funding sources and simultaneously justify their legitimacy as service providers who are closing a gap in the public sector’s rehabilitative service delivery.

³ However, the Finnish PPS does occasionally buy rehabilitative services from PVSOs.

Our data shows that competition for sparse funding is a present-day reality for most Nordic PVSOs in the penal field, and this makes the continuity of their services constantly uncertain. Most PVSOs rely on various funding sources to arrange their services, including for example government and municipality grants, European Social Fund grants, and membership fees and donations. Some work solely on the basis of volunteers. Securing funding is time-consuming and so is ensuring that the project monitoring and reporting requirements are met. Small-scale PVSOs face challenges in terms of the resources required to provide, for example, statistical data in relation to reporting requirements. In addition, many PVSOs receive short-term, project-based funding that places them in a competitive and less predictable position. This also means that they have difficulties in covering operating costs to run their organisations and to train and supervise their volunteers. The precarious financial situation that defines most PVSOs is creating uncertainty and instability within the sector; it limits their ability to plan and develop projects with long-term outcomes and objectives that include and recognise rehabilitative and social reintegrative work as a slow process. Our data further indicates that PVSOs' funding structure is destabilising their cooperation with the PPS. This ultimately filters down to the prisoners and released prisoners who need help from reliable service providers to navigate the welfare system and to access welfare rights.

Especially in the case of Denmark, we noticed that the precarious financial situation furthermore makes many PVSOs reticent about participating in advocacy work for fear of losing support from significant grant givers. Despite having clear mission statements, public and private grant givers often pull PVSOs in different directions that may not align directly with their identity and purposes and, at worst, lead to goal distortion (see Kendall & Knapp, 1996). PVSOs are therefore performing a difficult balancing act, trying to please their grant givers and at the same time trying to stay true to their mission.

Regarding the time-consuming funding processes and reporting requirements mentioned above, PVSOs which are awarded grants from the Swedish PPS are not exempt from these demands, which include an application, two reporting processes annually and, in case of remaining funds, an application to be allowed to use them (Kriminalvården, n.d.; SFS, 2002:954; KVFS, 2006:12). Our data from Sweden further suggests that the PVSOs have to describe their planned activities in detail in their applications, which is limiting their ability to be flexible in meeting prisoners' needs. The agreement between the Swedish PPS and PVSOs, however, emphasises how different funding structures have a different impact on the PVSOs' position in the

criminal justice system and on their ‘arrangements of power’ (see Trudeau, 2008, p. 685). The PVSOs which are awarded grants from the Swedish PPS become more visible and less marginalised in the PPS. Firstly, they must comply with the application and reporting requirements and become incorporated into the PPS system and assigned to their control standards. Secondly, they also gain legitimacy and recognition for their work, as the process clarifies their roles and activities for the PPS staff. Thirdly, the PVSOs are encouraged to give feedback regarding the Swedish PPS grant process as well as to make suggestions for improvements—an opportunity some PVSOs use to make further suggestions to improve their co-operation with the PPS in general. This case from Sweden underlines how funding agreements are closely connected to visibility and legitimacy, which are vital for the PVSOs whose service delivery relies on co-operation with the PPS.

Disorganised Co-operation

In addition to the challenges related to funding, another source of challenges for the Nordic PVSOs’ work that emerged from our data was disorganised co-operation and issues related to it. Based on our interpretation, one reason for the disorganised co-operation is the lack of sufficient efforts to coordinate co-operation between the PPS and the PVSOs at the local level. In all three countries, general level guidelines exist that have aimed to improve co-operation between the PPS, local authorities as well as other organisations such as PVSOs, especially concerning the release of prisoners back into society (SOU, 2021:49; Oikeusministeriö, 2021; Servicestyrelsen, n.d.). However, neither the PPS nor other agencies involved in prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration are obligated to comply with the guidelines. Therefore, we noticed that the organisation of co-operation between the PPS and the PVSOs varies a lot in different prisons, and when PVSOs are trying to fill the gaps in the welfare system, they are often caught up in the same dysfunctional cross-agency coordination identified between the PPS and the local authorities (Lappi-Seppälä, 2019; Abrams et al., 2019; Ramsbøl & Rasmussen, 2009; Swedish NAO, 2015).

The disorganised co-operation leads to various challenges for the PVSOs in their efforts to help prisoners and released prisoners. For example, the prisons often have an unsystematised practice for knowledge exchange with the PVSOs. Our data reveals that the PPS from all three countries has a haphazard approach to referring prisoners and released prisoners to PVSOs’ services. Instead, the PPS’ referral systems heavily rely on certain PPS coordinators engaging with PVSOs in relation to rehabilitative and reintegrative

work. A collaboration method that relies on individual connections can have consequences for prisoners who do not always get information about the PVSOs' support services. The haphazard co-operation also surfaced in the case of prisoners' sentence plans,⁴ where the involvement of the PVSOs in the rehabilitation and reintegration work of prisoners is not systematically mentioned. This is also the case in Sweden, where it is an explicit aim of the Swedish government to involve civil society and PVSOs in the co-operation regarding prisoner reintegration (Ju 2016:E). This in turn can contribute to the fact that the scale of PVSOs' involvement in the Nordic penal fields is not sufficiently recognised. Furthermore, we discovered that the PPS do not always take care of informing the PVSOs about the release of prisoners, which would be important for successful voluntary-based through-the-gate programmes that rely on volunteers gaining timely access to prisoners.

Based on our research, the lack of sufficient commitment to co-operation with the PVSOs at the local level—in individual prisons—enables the PPS to treat PVSOs as 'guests in a host environment' (Mills et al., 2012, p. 398) rather than as partners despite the fact that the PPS across the three Nordic countries acknowledge the PVSOs' services and appreciate that they are releasing PPS resources by taking on rehabilitative and social reintegrative responsibility. Similarly to the research by Mills et al. (2012, pp. 398–399), the tendency to treat PVSOs as guests emerged in our data from the way in which PVSOs were seen as 'institutional inconveniences' by the prison staff at times when the prisons prioritised other duties over co-operating with the PVSOs. The PVSOs are therefore considered not only to release resources but to be resource demanding because their presence in high-security facilities requires extra control and logistical planning: security tasks that are already difficult to carry out due to prison overcrowding and staff shortages. Consequently, the PPS occasionally forget to notify PVSOs about transfers or releases of prisoners participating in PVSO programmes or forget that the PVSOs are visiting their facility and therefore have not informed or referred any prisoners or released prisoners to the PVSOs that day. Sometimes the PPS have cleared their visitors log so that the PVSOs cannot be admitted or sometimes forget to inform PVSOs about cancelled visits, which is only discovered when the PVSOs arrive at the PPS facility.

⁴ A sentence plan is a structured plan for measures to be taken during incarceration or probation.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have argued that neoliberal reforms in the area of prison and probation have influenced the response of the Nordic welfare state to prisoners and released prisoners in need, which has increased the importance of PVSOs as service providers. Based on data from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, we examined challenges that Nordic PVSOs encounter while operating in the Nordic penal fields. Our data indicates that the main challenges across the three countries relate to *precarious funding structures* and *disorganised co-operation* with the Nordic PPS. Next, we will discuss our findings further and contemplate their relationship to the previous PVS research, which has been predominantly conducted in Anglophone countries.

In comparison with PVSOs in Anglophone countries, neoliberalism has had a different effect on the relationships between the PPS and PVSOs in a Nordic context. Unlike many Anglophone countries, where the provision of criminal justice services has been opened to various agencies across the public, private, and voluntary sectors, provision of criminal justice services is still largely considered to be a responsibility of the public sector in the Nordic countries. In reality, however, the public sector has silently imposed responsibility for rehabilitative service delivery on PVSOs during the last decades. Consequently, due to the official recognition of criminal justice work as a responsibility of the public sector, co-operative structures to facilitate efficient performance of PVSOs' work have not been established.

There are, however, some differences between the Nordic countries in this regard. Finland and, notably, Sweden with their annual grant funding to PVSOs, have made more efforts to engage the sector in a way that has not yet been identified in Denmark.

Despite the differences between the funding structures of the PVSOs in the Nordic countries and in the Anglophone countries, we find that the Nordic PVSOs are also placed in a position of a 'shadow state' (see Geiger & Wolch, 1986; Wolch, 1990) because they take rehabilitative and reintegrative responsibility and carry out work that the state officially should undertake. However, as mentioned, in a Nordic context this does not typically take place via tight contracts between the PPS and the PVSOs, but the PVSOs mainly rely on other funding sources to perform their work. The low number of service-delivery contracts between the Nordic PPS and PVSOs may contribute to the low visibility of the Nordic PVSOs' work, and hence, the contributions of the Nordic PVSOs in the provision of penal services may appear minor in comparison with Anglophone PVSOs, while in reality their investments are significant.

In a way, the Nordic PVSOs may seem more independent in relation to Anglophone PVSOs because the political attention and funding structures in the Nordic countries are different. Our data nevertheless indicates that whether performing in Anglophone countries where the partnerships between the PPS and the PVSOs have been high on the political agenda since the turn of the millennium (Corcoran, 2011) or in the Nordic countries where the role of the PVSOs has not attracted similar political interest, PVSOs are still not treated as 'partners' but as 'guests' who—on behalf of the state—perform inside a 'host environment' (Mills et al., 2012).

Our findings suggest that Nordic PVSOs are also affected by other constraints identified among Anglophone PVSOs if they want to help prisoners and released prisoners in need. For example, Nordic PVSOs also 'market' themselves and demonstrate great understanding, flexibility, and willingness to conform to PPS' terms and rules to encourage PPS staff to logistically support their services. Another example is that PVSOs in Anglophone countries might compromise their campaigning and advocacy roles to avoid getting into conflict with their contractual obligations (Corcoran et al., 2018), and even though Nordic PVSOs are not subject to the same contractual restrictions, our data shows that their detachment to the PPS has a price, as they, in favour of getting access to their target groups and to maintain and support a seamless co-operation with the PPS, may also end up compromising their campaigning and advocacy roles. Therefore, even though the Nordic PVSOs rarely engage in service-delivery contracts with the PPS, our findings support that they too face challenges that have been commonly associated with PVSOs in shadow state relationships in Anglophone contexts: threats to independence, ethos, distinctiveness, and critical voice (Mills et al., 2011; Maguire, 2012; Corcoran, 2011).

The fact that the PVSOs' funding situation is unstable and that the relationship between the PPS and the PVSOs supporting prisoners' safe community reintegration is too weak is ultimately filtering down to the prisoners and released prisoners who need help from reliable service providers to navigate the welfare system, to access welfare rights, and to advocate for their rights.

Concluding Remarks

Neoliberal transformations in the penal field have increased the importance of PVSOs around the world, which is also evident in the Nordic countries. Our data nevertheless shows that the importance of PVSOs is weighted differently in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, and even though it might be going too far to claim that Finland and Sweden are ‘mainstreaming’ the PVSOs in the public policy agenda (Kendall, 2000), we have identified that the two countries are slowly making a stronger commitment to engage the sector in a way that has not yet been identified in Denmark. A fundamental characteristic of the Nordic PVSOs is still however that their position in the penal fields is influenced by the ideology of the strong Nordic welfare states that to some extent place them in a tight corner, as the public sector in practice struggles to meet prisoners’ and released prisoners’ needs but is officially responsible for prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration. Therefore, we have argued that the Nordic PVSOs are in a sense in position of a shadow state (see Geiger & Wolch, 1986; Wolch, 1990), as they carry out work that the state officially should carry out. We use the expression ‘in a sense’ because the shadow state relationships identified in the Nordic countries differ significantly from those in the Anglophone countries as criminal justice work is rarely outsourced to Nordic PVSOs. Our findings reveal how Nordic PVSOs are challenged in this shadow state position by precarious funding structures and disorganised co-operation with the PPS. While one could assume that the Nordic PVSOs’ disengagement from contractual or semi-contractual arrangements and structural detachment from the PPS would place them in a more independent position compared to PVSOs in Anglophone countries, our data revealed that the Nordic PVSOs are subjected to many similar constraints in relation to their independence and critical voice as noted in previous Anglophone research on PVS. Ultimately, the challenges we found in the Nordic PVSOs’ work hinder and jeopardise prisoners’ and released prisoners’ access to welfare rights and their possibilities for successful reintegration.

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