

CRIMVOL: The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network

Seventh CRIMVOL virtual working paper
session: September 9, 2021

Paper Presenter: Dr. Annette Olesen, Associate Professor,
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Denmark.



CRIMVOL
CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

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About CRIMVOL: The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network

CRIMVOL is an international, multidisciplinary criminal justice voluntary sector research network for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The network fills an important gap in scholarship and infrastructure: the criminal justice voluntary sector is more topical than ever before but has not received academic attention commensurate with its importance anywhere in the world. The network is chaired by [Dr Philippa Tomczak](#) (Senior Research Fellow, University of Nottingham, Author of The Penal Voluntary Sector) and [Dr Gill Buck](#) (Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Chester). CRIMVOL was established with the generous support of the British Academy (Rising Star Engagement Award) and the Socio-Legal Studies Association (Seminar Competition). A core focus is the development of specialist early career researchers and scholar-activist work.

CRIMVOL hosted their seventh virtual event on Thursday 9th September 2021 with a presentation from [Annette Olesen](#), Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University, Denmark.



Screen shot of CRIMVOL Teams meeting. Annette Olsen, presenter, appears in upper left.

Seventh virtual working paper session

Annette has recently published two articles about the role of voluntary sector organizations in the criminal justice system in Denmark in Danish. In this presentation Annette presented an overview of her research in English for the CRIMVOL audience.

Annette began the presentation by providing important context about incarceration and prisons in Denmark. While incarceration rates and the prison population may seem low by international comparison, from a Danish perspective there is overcrowding and alarming conditions within prisons. 56% of prison sentences are less than 4 months. There is a lack of prison staff which means that prisoners are made to stay in their cells for longer. There is not a range of professions (e.g., social workers, art therapists) completing work in the prison system which results in prison staff taking on a wide range of roles. There is limited programming and educational opportunities and preference for a “self-sufficiency” model.

Denmark is rather reluctant when it comes to policy developments aiming to increase the role of Voluntary Sector Organisations (VSOs) in the criminal justice system through service delivery contracts. VSOs are not, however, absent from prison and probation but their collaboration with the Danish Prison and Probation Service (DPPS) is not formalised or included in any strategic documents. As such, little is known about how VSOs work in prisons and their contribution to rehabilitation programmes for criminalised people. Annette’s research mapped VSOs’ rehabilitative work in/post-prison in Denmark from interviews with DPPS staff and VSO staff.

The informal collaboration between the DPPS and VSOs results in the DPPS playing the role of ‘host’ and ‘gatekeeper’ and VSO activity being seen as an ‘add-on’. While prison staff appreciated the “rehabilitative skills” that VSOs provided, they sometimes felt that the presence of VSOs take up valuable resources like time. Volunteers are seen as independent from prisons, can give prison staff ‘a break’ and bridge the gap to society. Despite the goodwill, VSOs were not considered formal collaborators, and their presence is understood as being something extra or in the words of an interviewee, VSO activity is ‘the whipped cream on top’. There is a general lack of coordination and communication since VSO’s rehabilitative service delivery is not formalized and VSOs are not included in the DPPS strategy. VSO’s activities in prisons are often understood as resource demanding, rather than a resource saving solution and VSOs compete for limited resources.

As a service provider in a total institution those from VSOs describe a strong sense of “non-belonging” in prisons. There is an inherent power imbalance in this arrangement because to get access to prisons and prisoners, VSOs must be approved and must collaborate with prison staff. DPSS perform the role of gatekeeper. In a 2015 reorganization, there was a push for efficiency, organizational cohesion, and standardized programs. A tension exists between these efforts and the ability of the DPPS to evaluate VSO programs. Instead of formalized evaluations, DPPS rely on

“casual remarks” from prisoners and staff about VSO utility. There is not a lot of new organizations in the field and few organizations are developing new programs.

VSOs are not funded by the DPPS. They are funded nationally through private grant funding. Lobbying for such funding can limit VSOs’ critical voice. The VSOs working in the DPPS are not facing competitive commissioning and contracting. Their (potential) critical voice, independence and dynamic approach is nevertheless challenged.

It is possible that VSO work is moving from the shadows to the light. A workshop held in June 2021 signaled a change in the current situation of VSOs targeting criminalised people in Denmark. This workshop saw VSOs and the DPPS convening to discuss operational and development targets. Annette’s presentation ended with an excellent discussion about the contested terrain of voluntary sector presence in prisons.

The next two CRIMVOL virtual network sessions will take place on:

- **Thursday 13th January 2022, 15.00-16.30 GMT** – Teaching the PVS Workshop: This session invites CRIMVOL members to reflect on and discuss how they (could) include the penal voluntary sector in university curricula.
- **Thursday 19th May 2022, 15.00-16.30 GMT** – Working paper from [Dr Gemma Morgan](#), Lecturer in Criminology, Swansea University, Wales: *The ‘My Journey’ app: Digital technology, co-production, and desistance.*