

Efficiency at Swedish Prison and Probation Service prisons

Summary and recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office has audited efficiency at the prisons of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The audit shows that efficiency could be improved in several areas. The majority of the prisons are of a size that does not provide conditions for achieving the lowest possible cost per prison place. Resource efficiency also varies between prisons, where there is an average improvement potential of up to twenty per cent. In addition, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service could improve its way of working with dissemination of knowledge and also standardise its statistics to make comparisons between prisons easier.

The improvement potential varies between prisons

An analysis of prisons in 2015–2018 shows an average potential improvement in resource efficiency of 15–22 per cent. However, there is great variation between prisons. Some of them have far greater potential to become more effective.

As always, quantitative models are based on assumptions where the result should be seen as a guiding pattern for improvement. Therefore, it is not the exact figures that are most important, but how the prisons relate to each other.

Prevention of re-offending is a central task of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. When re-offending is included in a model, the average improvement potential is slightly lower. However, the variation in efficiency between prisons remains.

The resource efficiency measure in the review is calculated using the Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) method, which is a relative measure where the improvement potential of a prison is defined based on comparisons with similar prisons.

Structural factors important for efficiency

Structural factors that the prisons cannot deal with themselves may explain a large part of their improvement potential. Results from interviews show that prisons

with a lower resource allocation adapted to working with fewer resources without this having particularly affected performance.

The Prison and Probation Service premises are a structural factor that affects the efficiency of the prisons. Rental contracts are often long, which makes it difficult for individual prisons to change their situation. For a prison with premises that are too large or hard to use, it is difficult or impossible to remedy the problem. Investments are sometimes also made in premises that are not suitable for institutional activities, while maintenance of the premises is often neglected. It is important for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to analyse the structural factors in order to improve efficiency.

Larger prisons may mean lower costs

The Swedish prisons could be more effective if they were larger. Research from the USA and the United Kingdom shows that there are economies of scale for their prisons. There are also economy of scale advantages at Swedish prisons. This may also have a positive effect on the prevention of re-offending, as it frees up resources for a more personalised operation.

In order to give an indication in a Swedish context about which prison size is optimal, we have analysed the prisons' unit costs. However, it is important to emphasise that the analysis can only be used to describe approximately where the unit costs are lowest. Our analysis indicates that a prison with approximately 300 places has the lowest cost per place. According to this calculation, a reorganisation of the country's prisons shows that the saving potential could be approximately SEK 580 million. This means that most prisons would probably be more cost-effective if they were larger.

Improve the work of establishing and spreading good working methods

Exchange of experience between prisons is mainly at local and possibly regional level. Nor is central governance sufficiently balanced with impulses from below. The spread of knowledge is therefore at risk of becoming person-dependent. This can lead to institutions and regions working differently and failing to achieve the alignment of operations sought by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

Improve the Prison and Probation Service's ability to monitor its efficiency

Standardisation and centralisation of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service statistics should be able to significantly increase efficiency. In order for governance towards increased resource and cost efficiency to have an impact, the results of operations need to be continuously monitored. This requires the right information being available and access to standardised data collection systems.

Since the Swedish Prison and Probation Service sometimes needs to put extensive effort into various studies and research projects based on different data, this takes up a lot of resources.

Recommendations

Based on the audit findings, the Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service:

- Intensify the work of reducing the number and increasing the size of prisons, taking into account the findings of the Swedish NAO's audit concerning the improvement potential of the prisons.
- Develop procedures for systematic data collection that make it possible to systematically monitor the efficiency of the prisons.