The ethnography of the prisoner's transition
Roma population inclusion projects

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University of Bucharest
www.reentry.eu
Programme RO14 - “Research within Priority Sectors”

Project summary

- Project Promoter: University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work
- Project Partners: University of Oslo
- Budget: 799,727,81 Euro (3,515,683,43 lei)
- Duration 3 years
Project overview

- **AIM**: advanced understanding of the reentry process from the subjective perspective of prisoners themselves, with a special focus on the Roma population.

- **Research methods**
  - In-depth interview
  - questionnaire
  - observation
  - scale (to measure problems, hope, citizenship)
  - photography

- **Settings** – Bucharest and Oslo

- **Research participants**: 59 participants (30 Romanians, 25 Romas, 4 foreign nationals)
Target groups and objectives

- 4 distinct groups of inmates targeted:
  - 20 Romanian inmates in Romanian prisons (Jilava Prison)
  - 20 Roma inmates in Romanian prisons (Jilava Prison)
  - 10 Romanian inmates in Norwegian prisons (Oslo Prison and/or Kongsvinger Prison)
  - 5 Roma inmates in Norwegian prisons (Oslo Prison and/or Kongsvinger Prison)

- Objectives
  - Main objective – improvement of inmates’ life conditions and standards
  - Understand the reentry process from the prisoners’ perspectives
  - Understand the reentry process from the Roma prisoners’ perspectives
  - Contribute to the National Strategy for Inclusion (NPA)
**Romania** – 59 participants (30 Romanians, 25 Romas, 4 foreign nationals)
All three-months interviews conducted
Preliminary findings for first month of freedom
Comparison between Romanians’ and Romas’ release

**Norway** – empirical research phase started: 15 willing participants:
1 transfer to Romanian prison; 2 expelled upon release; 2 likely to be transferred to the Netherlands.

Shared fieldwork journal; shared access to data.
Pre-release

- **Prison experience**
  - Loss (of family – especially for Romanians, time, money, health)
  - Pains of imprisonment (being away from the family, family supporting the costs of detention, having to obey orders, disease, lacking capital)
  - Learning experience (responsibility, maturity, social skills). For Romas, it’s more likely to mention talking to a therapist (psychologist or social worker), citizenship, “seeing like a citizen.”

- **Imagining release before it happens**
  - great happiness
  - rebirth and new beginning
  - family reunion
  - rest and recovery
  - uncertainty and anxiety.
• **Identity**
  - second class man, I am nobody (especially in relation to their status as provider for the family)
  - normal guy, average, modest, simple
  - convict, offender, ex-con

• **Plans and expectations**
  - fuzzy plans, lack clarity
  - family reunion
  - recovery after prison
  - finding work, regaining respect
  - emigrate

• **Optimism**
  - super-optimism!
  - very few anticipate problems
  - some leave room for reoffending by mistake
The day of the release
Welcome-home rituals
(from observations and fieldnotes)

Romanians
- Usually waited by 1-3 people, members of the family;
- Release is a nuclear family affair (mother waiting, or siblings, or wife and children);
- Not many comments about the area where they live;
- Preoccupation about the nuclear family or its functional substituents, spouse-related problems, underlying family issues.

Romas
- Expected at home by a big party (more than 10);
- Not only family welcoming them, but a community of friends and neighbors that activates upon return – denser social networks;
- Parties (barbecues, drinks, music, lots of people);
- Release is an extended family affair.
- Researchers always made comments about the neighborhood in terms such as: underworld, looks abandoned, bad, not safe, no electricity, shady, house with a contested ownership etc.
Heroes, family men, and lone crusaders
First month journey

Recovery (week 1 and 2)

Activation (after week 2)

What next? Reintegration? Or relapse?
Recovery phase
- first two weeks -

- Prolongation of the prison behaviors (prison syndrome) – waking up for morning call, prison language, hiding forbidden goods.
- Confusion and disorientation – mental adaptation, dizziness, cars and crowded places
- Centrality of the family
- Limited mobility
- Rejoining social networks
- Avoiding trouble
- Dealing with social isolation
- Fear of failure
- Still super-optimists!
**Activation phase - after the second week -**

- Institutional behaviors fade away
- Main concern – getting a job, money
- Other concerns – face work, problem solving, God-related activities, new routines
- Obstacles and problems – anxiety, disorientation, building good relationships with the children, dealing with former spouses, lack of emotional or affective support, dealing with temptations, fighting bureaucracy, criminal record, absence of the state.
- Plans – find a job, move from area

**How do ex-prisoners find jobs?**
- wider family and friends
- former places of employment
- systematic searches
- state institutions (rarely)

**Where?**
- Constructions
- Maintenance service
- Self-employment (Romas)

*Usually undocumented, without employment agreements!*
Observations on Roma participants

• Reentry is a collective project, active stance from the family.
• Wider family plays an important role; guardian wives.
• Some Roma participants were welcomed as heroes.
• Reasons to start a new life are the same as for Romanians (fear of going back to prison, stay close to families, experience of age).
• When age and ethnicity intersect, the nuclear family becomes problematic (many young Roma families separate).
• Dealing with children – authority is displaced to the grandmother or other caregivers during detention.
• Social reproduction: low educational levels, low work qualifications, temporary employment, no employment agreements, no social security, no health insurance.
• Many Romas are self-employed.
Conclusions so far

- Family – the best context for the reintegration process, moral and practical support, moral pressure to become productive, context for a new identity.
- Window of opportunity for a new life within 2-3 weeks from release (super-optimism, fear of prison, ambition, hope, family support)
- Employment interventions should be intensified/finalized as soon as possible after week 2 – timing
- Main impediments: mental adaptation, guilty feelings, jobs, fear of failure, temptation, social isolation, stigma, dealing with children, absence of state, bureaucratic nightmare.
- After one month – no work, no new identity, social pressure, temptation, romanticized prison life – RE-OFFENDING
Policy implications

- Support the family while offender in prison and after.
- Pre-release programs involving partners and children – outside.
- Personalized employment interventions – depending on individual features of the offender – pay attention to social /cultural characteristics (Roma – mobilize extended family).
- Prepare employment while in prison (esp. for those with low social capital) – not too much time available after release.
- Focus of adaptation and family in the first 2 weeks – proximity services.
- Focus on work and new identity after week 2.
- ‘Respectability package’ – family, work and identity (after Giordano et al, 2002)
Dissemination and publicity

- www.reentry.eu
- Interview series “Post-prison dialogues” Youtube
- Interview broadcasted on Speranța TV
- “Reintegration, a problem” with Cristina Teoroc and Ionuț Stanca.
- Durnescu, Ioan (2015) *Which strategies and concepts can be seen as good practices and why?* (How is "success" defined? Research approaches and results). Greifswald, Germany.
- Pitiu, Elena (2015) *The perception of time passing in detention and after conditional release*. Colocviul Internațional de Științe Sociale și ale Comunicării ACUM 2015, Conferința Națională a Societății Sociologilor din România.
Events

- April 2015, Jilava Prison – round table on release and reentry – participants: stakeholders in the reentry process: NGOs, state agencies, educators and teachers, private companies, prison staff.

- Interfest 2015, Jilava Prison – Moderators for two workshops on release and reentry. Participants: stakeholders in the reentry process: NGOs, state agencies, educators and teachers, prison staff, former prisoners (participants in our project), prisoner from various prisons in Romania.

- November 2015. TV talk-show.
Reflections on partnership

- RO-NO comparison that can shed light on the effects of welfare state policies, effects of imprisonment, effects of the detention system for release.
- Great collaboration and communication between the two institutions and research teams (work visit, monthly Skype meetings, frequent email exchange)!
Future steps

- Insights for future research to include variables such as gender, or post-prison mobility.
- Institutional development:
  - international mobility; joint doctoral degrees; external evaluators.
Thank you for your attention!

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