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Editor's choice

Drugs and discretionary power in prisons: The officer's perspective

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Highlights

- â€¢ Some Danish prison officers tend to turn a blind eye towards inmates' drug use.
- â€¢ Being lenient towards inmates' drug use (mainly cannabis) is part of prison officers' everyday discretionary power.
- â€¢ Discretion continues to play an important role in the prison officers' everyday work.
- â€¢ Officers' discretion depends on changes in the institutional arrangement of the prison.

Abstract

Background

Drugs play an increasing role in contemporary prison life. Prisoners' drug use, drug smuggling and drug selling have also had a growing impact on the work routines and practices of prison officers. This has led to critiques that prison staff have become "too lenient" regarding drug use.

Methods

Based on observational data, qualitative interviews and survey data, this study examines the role of drugs in the way Danish prison officers exercise power.

Results

Two forms of power are analysed: institutional power, by which the officers can sanction or reward inmates in everyday prison life, and personal power, by which the officers' personal authority and skills can reduce the more intrusive aspects of prison control. These forms of power are applied by officers' use of discretion in order to maintain what they consider to be adequate levels of peace and order in the prison wings. It is shown that officers are highly ambivalent towards the presence of drugs in prisons. On the one hand, they support the stricter drug policies implemented over the past two decades. On the other hand, they are aware that drug use can have a positive function in the everyday running of the prison. Officers' acceptance of inmates' drug use (mainly cannabis), therefore, is not necessarily a sign of leniency but one way in which prison officers exercise their power in prison settings.

Conclusions

It is concluded that discretionary power is still very central to the officers' work. This conclusion contradicts recent arguments that prison officers' agency is being threatened or restricted by "neoliberal" management reforms. The prison officers' discretion and informal power is the key to understanding their acceptance of inmates' drug use.



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Keywords

Prison officers; Discretion; Drugs; Cannabis; Power; Denmark

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