

Victim Impact Training for perpetrators of domestic violence in Czech prisons

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Over the past decade, the Prison Service of the Czech Republic has developed several therapeutic programs for working with offenders who have committed a violent crime: from a short-term anti-aggressive training to an 18-month program focused on comprehensive work with motivation, cognitions and emotions. A new program based on the principles of the Good-Lives Model is currently being piloted in 6 prisons. All of these programs work with the perpetrator's self-insight and empathy intensively - but they hardly deal with the victim's character. They do not particularly highlight domestic violence. At the same time, working with the impact on the victim is extremely important in treatment of domestic violence offenders.

That is why the Victim Impact Training (VIT) program was created. The program was developed as part of a broader parole project, which has been implemented since 2016 in cooperation of two organisations: the Probation and Mediation Service of the Czech Republic and the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, both under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. VIT is intended for convicts who have committed domestic violence or other violent crime. The main emphasis is on accepting responsibility for the actions of criminals by confronting them with the consequences of crime in relation to victims. It aims to reduce the risk of re-offending.

Inspiration

The VIT program was inspired by several programs across Europe and overseas. The Victim Empathy Training program (Opferempathietraining) from Germany has long been provided to violent offenders to confront them with the effects of crime to the victim's life. Another source of inspiration was the Victim impact program by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) of the US Department of Justice in Washington. As a key tool, it contains the personal story and direct involvement of victims and victim service providers who share their experiences with offenders. Another important inspiration was the Building Bridges program, which was successfully implemented in several Czech prisons, too. It focused on building understanding between the perpetrator and the victim, and includes a direct meeting of the perpetrators with the so called indirect victims in prison. The Building Bridges program is a variation of the International Prison Community's Sycamore Tree Project, which was inspired by a biblical story to encourage offenders to take responsibility. Last but not least, the German "Victim in Focus" and the English "SORI" (Supporting Offenders through Restoration Inside) served as a stimulating source of ideas.

Principles of restorative justice

VIT adheres to the principles of restorative justice. The response to crime is intended to reduce the damage and threat posed by crime. The main purpose of the social response to a crime is not only to punish the offender, but to create such conditions that the consequences of the crime can be eliminated. The offender is to take an active part in compensating for the damage caused or eliminating the harmful consequences of the crime. Restorative justice focuses on the harm caused by crime and seeks to take into account the needs of victims, promotes the perpetrator's responsibility for resolving the situation and involves the victim, the perpetrator and the community in the resolution process of eliminating of harmful consequences.

Basic characteristics

VIT is a group program with educational and psychotherapeutic elements. The group of 8 – 10 inmates works mainly on managing emotions, developing empathy, understanding oneself and other people. Group dynamics can accelerate a change in behavior, bring new insights more easily, and enable the regeneration of relationships. In a group, it is possible to better understand conflicts and gain a corrective emotional experience.

The group is led by two trained lecturers. Originally, there was one lecturer from the Probation and Mediation Service and one from the Prison Service. After the end of the pilot phase, all lecturers will be employees of the Prison Service. They are not externals, which is important for the program implementation within the rehabilitation system, and also for information transfer and sustainability.

Personal approach and video recordings

The program is based on the power of the perpetrators' personal stories and experiences. The presence of victims is replaced by video recordings of victims' statements about the impact of crime on their lives. For convicts, confrontation with victims' testimonies in the form of video recordings can be a prelude to meeting their direct victims in the future. The video recordings were created on the basis of real stories and testimonies of the victims as captured by the staff of the Probation and Mediation Service. However, with regard to the safety of victims, they are completely anonymized and mediated by professional, yet not well-known actors.

Program structure

VIT takes place in 13 sessions with a total volume of 39 hours (or 52 therapeutic hours). The program is divided into two parts. The main topics in the first half of the program (meetings 1 - 6) are awareness, understanding and managing emotions. The 7th lesson is dedicated to the reflection of the topics discussed so far and their mutual sharing. Reflecting on one's own identity then plays a role in trying to strengthen empathy, increase interest in conflict-free coexistence with others and strengthen the sense of social responsibility (sessions 8 -13). At the end, the participants should be able to clarify their vision of their future and present it in plenary to the group.

Evaluation

In April 2020, the pilot phase in 13 prisons was successfully completed. The program is currently being accredited.

For the time being, the evaluation so far only verifies whether the program meets the process and content requirements. However, it has already been shown that the program is more sensitive to perpetrators of domestic violence than other programs, and that VIT is also suitable for perpetrators who will be imprisoned for several years after its completion.

Therefore, it can be a good start and motivation for a long-term rehabilitation.