



Survey report « *More volunteers for less violence... !* »

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1 Introduction

« Prison visitors » (as they are called in England, Belgium and France) and « volunteer helpers in prisons (in Germany) are part of a long tradition in Europe. Expectations towards these volunteers keep evolving, and question their own conception of their role with the citizens they meet. Sensitive to this questioning, three associations -the National Association of Prison Visitors (ANVP) in France, the Europäisches Forum für Angewandte Kriminalpolitik (EFK) in Germany, and the National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV) in England- decided to launch a survey on the field, both among their members and with other partner associations (in other European countries) in which unpaid volunteers are committed to accompanying citizens who have been sentenced or are awaiting trial.

This project, supported by the Franco-German Institute of Ludwigsburg and by the Robert Bosch Foundation, follows upon some studies, few and rather recent, concerning the intervention of volunteers in the penal field (ex: Becquart, Valleray, Schwarz, Sahrawi and Peyraut, in 2009; Goossensen, Kuis and Schuhmann, in 2015; Matt, William, Gardham and Price, in 2015). While these previous studies were essentially related to legal, political and social sciences, the investigation presented here adopts a more psychosocial perspective. This approach considers that our behaviour is affected by our diverse group memberships (demographic, professional, cultural...), by the relations we have with others and by our positions in social structures (Moscovici, 1984). By binding these three terms -« self », « others », « context »- social psychology is often defined as the discipline of social links, studied in particular through perceptions and social representations.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

In total, 476 persons participated in this survey, of whom 399 answered all the questions. The average age of the prison visitors (PVs) in this survey is 65, the youngest being 23 and the oldest 84. The average time as a PV is 8 years, some having just begun and one having already 42 years of volunteering. There is an equivalent number of men (n=217) and women (n=185), but 74 persons did not answer this question. Most of the participants have a post-senior-high-school academic level (n=335). Three out of four are retired.

The respondents are mainly people who live in France (n=333), then in Belgium (n=84), in Germany (n=52) and in the Netherlands (n=7). They are members of diverse associations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Association membership of the participants

Associations	Number
ANPV	339
NAOPV	1
AVFPB	50
BANJO	3
EFK	18
OTHER	65

2.2 Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by a workgroup composed of researchers and representatives of PVs' associations. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of several parts: the first one aimed at collecting information of a demographic order, the others aimed at collecting information on the motivations of PVs, their activities and their collaborations, and finally on their perceptions of the representations of a PV.

An electronic version of the questionnaire was drawn up to allow a distribution by e-mail to the PVs listed by the workgroup. The questionnaire was proposed in French, German and Dutch. The survey was held between October 2016 and January 2017.

2.3 Method of analysis

The survey was composed of closed questions (yes/no), multiple choice and open questions (allowing more elaborate answers). For the latter, we carried out a lexicographic analysis (which identifies automatically the lexicon of the words most frequently used) by using the

IRAMUTEQ software (Ratinaud). We also used the « Reinert methodology » which makes it possible to identify « speech registers » automatically (for a more thorough description, see Reinert, 1983). This method also permits to identify with hindsight possible links between these « speech registers » and variables such as the country and the gender in the case of this survey.

3 Results

3.1 Motivations to become a PV

For the question on motivations to become a PV, 2 categories of answers stood out in the analysis : one refers to such objectives as helping, listening and being a support to the inmates. This is found essentially in the answers of the French participants. Another group refers to the desire to engage in a social activity when retired, and to the interest of the participants in this activity. This was found essentially in the answers of the German respondents.

3.2 Activities of the PV

3.2.1 Organisation of visits

3.2.1.1 How do the prisoners hear about PVs ?

Knowledge of the existence of PVs for the inmates comes orally and/or in writing -mainly during the meeting of the newcomers, either from the prison « department of insertion and probation », or by word of mouth between inmates.

3.2.1.2 General information about the visits

The transmission of the requests for visits is essentially made by the prison « department of insertion and probation », the social services or the local delegate of the PVs' association. The frequency of the visits is once a week or every other week. A PV meets on average 1 to 3 inmates a month, but some people declared they met more than 10. The visits are mostly held individually, but some PVs meet inmates in group sessions.

3.2.1.3 The end of the relationship between an inmate and a visitor

It is rare for a relation to end at the request of the prison authorities. When that is the case, some mention it is because other people are waiting for a visit, or because the inmate has been released, or transferred to another prison. Mainly, visits may come to an end at the request of the inmate; the reasons are very diverse: some prisoners expected something else (like material help for example), some mention unsatisfactory interpersonal chemistry. The request to put an end to visits can sometimes be made by the PV, also for reasons of personality incompatibility, or because the inmate does not turn up several times in a row.

3.2.1.4 *Breaking the confidentiality clause*

Only 11% of the participants said that they had already broken the confidentiality clause, in order to prevent harm to other inmates or self harm (ex : suicide).

3.2.2 General activities

We asked the PVs to list their activities. Let us note that for this question, we observed a misunderstanding: indeed, some PVs listed their hobbies with no relation to their activity as a PV. Overall, the answers on activities can be divided into three categories. The first concerns weekly visits, support during temporary release or upon final release ; some refer to help for transport. This « speech register » can be found in the answers of the French people. The second category of answers mentions the frequency of visits, and the exchanges during the meetings of the association. This is particularly found in the answers of the Belgians. Finally the third category of answers concerns the implementation of individual visits, and the management of conversation groups. This category of speech is found in the answers of the Germans and the Dutch.

3.2.3 Other activities requested by the administration

We asked the PVs if the prison authorities had approached them for other activities. More than 76% answered they had not. Among those who said they had, it was essentially to accompany inmates, during a temporary release, or within the establishment (for example at a workshop or at the library).

3.2.4 Evolution of the activities of a PV

When, we asked if PVs had perceived an evolution of their activity over the last 5 years, more than half said they had not. The same type of answers was given regarding how they saw the evolution of their activities in the next 5 years. For those who answered yes, we asked them to specify their answers. The lexicographic analysis of the answers did not reveal anything meaningful ; it would therefore be necessary to carry out a more classical thematic analysis. In the meantime, skimming over the answers enables us to observe that this question on the perception of the evolution of activities over the last 5 years was interpreted by PVs in diverse ways.

Some reported their feeling on their own activity: for example, one respondent expressed a "climate of confidence allowing more exchanges" ; another reported he had "fewer requests for visits" ; yet another said there was "more distrust and fear". The answers on the perception of the evolution of activities in the next 5 years show that a large number foresees the creation of new activities (workshops, gardens, cultural activities...), more support to prepare for the outside after the prisoners' release. On another note, some specify that they are going to stop their activity because of their advanced age. We find the same pattern of answers for the question on the wish to see these activities evolve.

3.2.5 The collaboration of the PV

We also asked PVs who they turned to for advice or in difficult situations. Some respondents -especially the Dutch- mentioned the psychologist or other visitors during meetings of PVs. The prison « department of insertion and probation », or the local delegate of the National Association of Prison Visitors (ANVP) were especially mentioned by French PVs. Finally in the last part on collaborations, we learn that there are direct links between PVs and prison officers for 54 % of the respondents; social services, chaplaincy and prison governors come next. The relations with the prison management are essentially of an administrative nature, but 19 % of PVs declared they had rich exchanges with the management. Finally, 61 % of the respondents wish to develop collaborations. Among other things, they wish for more exchanges and collaboration with the various contributors (especially social services), more information on everyone's missions, especially on the role of PVs, and more acknowledgement of their usefulness.

3.3 Self-representations of the PV

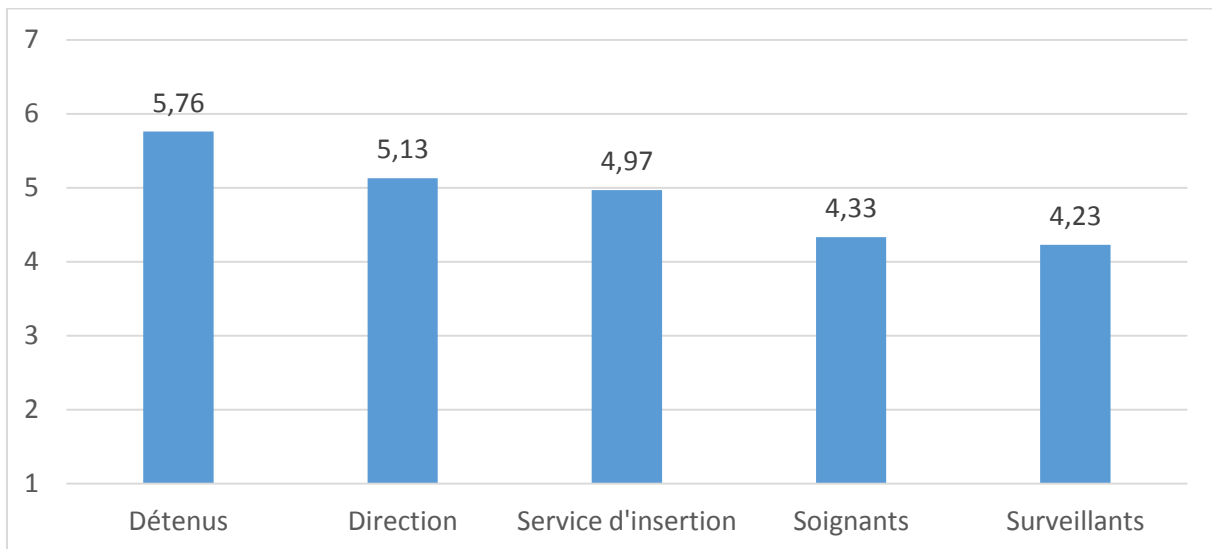
3.3.1 The definition

When we asked for a definition of a PV, 3 categories of answers stood out. One set directly refers to the description of the PV as the « volunteer » who accompanies an inmate. Another category refers to listening, benevolent and non-judgmental attitudes. Finally, the last category refers to the encounter, the human being, the trust. We note expressions such as « the meeting of another person », « a dialogue with another human being », " « restore trust ». This last set particularly includes answers from Germans and men. We find here the classic structuring of the social representations studied in psychology with a *cognitive* dimension concerning the description and the knowledge about a VP, an *affective* dimension and a « *conative* » dimension which refers to actions.

3.3.2 How prison visitors feel they are perceived

We also assessed with PVs their perception of how they are perceived by various protagonists: the inmates, the prison officers, the management, the social department and the medical staff. The respondents had to answer on a 7-point scale (1 = "not at all well perceived" to 7 = "very well perceived". They were also invited to specify their answers. The quantitative results show on average that the prison visitors feel they are best perceived by the inmates; then come the management, the prison department of insertion, the medical service and the prison officers. Comparative analyses showed that the differences in the evaluations are statistically significant, except for the evaluations of the medical department (4,33) and the prison officers (4,23).

Table 2. How PVs feel they are perceived



To understand better these differences in evaluations, let us now look at the results of the qualitative analyses of the precisions given by the respondents.

3.3.2.1 *By the inmates*

81 PVs did not answer the question about how they think they are perceived by inmates. The others felt they were well perceived. A first « speech register » confirms the good perception of the prison visitors, their visits being appreciated. We find expressions like : "appreciate our work", "appreciate the exchanges", "appreciate the visitor", "their volunteer work is appreciated". The second « speech register » concerns essentially the fact that it is the inmates who ask for these visits. The third « speech register » refers to a relationship of trust : the prisoners can speak about their problems, they express their gratitude, they look forward to the visits. Finally the fourth « speech register » specifies that the visitors are " a contact " with the outside, sometimes the only contact, and also that the visits are an opportunity for the prisoner to leave his cell and its routine ; visits are a moment of freedom. This is found particularly in the answers of Belgians and women.

3.3.2.2 *By the management*

95 persons did not answer the question about how they felt PVs were perceived by the management. Those who did felt they were rather well perceived. A first group referred to contacts with the management, either by mentioning that there is little or even no contact, or that there are some contacts. However, the overall perception is positive. The second group enables us to understand in what way this perception is positive. We noted the notion of calm, with expressions such as « contribute to calm in the prison » , « the visited inmates will be quieter », « a factor of peace and quiet ».

3.3.2.3 *By the social department*

Concerning the representation of VPs as to how they are seen by the prison social department, some mention rather positive or even excellent relations. On the other hand, others specify that they have no contact with the department. Finally, some prison visitors feel that they are negatively perceived because they generate extra work, or because they encroach on the work of the department, or even "steal" their work.

3.3.2.4 *By the nurses*

95 VPs did not answer the question regarding how they think they are perceived by the medical department ; the other answers show that the VPs' representation in this respect is average. The explanation for this reserved evaluation is that for the most part they have no contact or meeting with the medical staff, and it is therefore difficult to express an opinion.

3.3.2.5 *By the prison officers*

Finally, 79 VPs did not answer the question about how they feel they are perceived by the prison officers ; the other answers show this representation as average. A first « speech register » enables us to understand that the perceptions vary a lot depending on the officers, but that overall the PV is accepted (although it is necessary to make oneself accepted at the beginning) and there is general goodwill. Two other « speech registers » specify how this variability can be accounted for. It is mentioned that some officers do not understand the meaning of the approach of the PV, that they sometimes perceive the PV " as an ally of the inmates ". PVs can also be seen as annoying because they increase the workload of the officers. This « speech register » is mostly that of the French respondents and the women respondents.

4 Discussion

The results of this survey confirm those of the previous studies as to the multiplicity of the motivations and contributions of volunteers (ex : Matt, William, Gardham and Price, 2005). The latter indeed underline that they wish to accompany prisoners and to contribute to the reduction of re-offending. Some put forward their faith, their beliefs and their personal values. Others speak of an interesting and even exceptional personal experience. It is also important to mention that some of these volunteers intervene not only with law-breakers, but also with victims and with their families. As they intervene in various places (courts, probation departments, prisons), their contribution may actually concern every stage of the legal proceedings.

Some volunteers evoke the climate of distrust in detention and the sometimes complicated relationships with the prison staff. It must be said that the sources of discontent of the officers are multiple : demanding working conditions (time and space constraints), prisoners' attacks, social depreciation of their function, etc. As they frequently feel misunderstood and rejected, the officers can « harden themselves », withdraw into themselves and be wary of others (Boudoukha, Przygodzki-Lionet and Hautekeete, 2016).

To confirm these results, it would be interesting to complement this survey by questionnaire with a survey by interviews of various volunteers (ex : prison visitors, students). It would also be instructive to question professionals of the Justice system (ex : magistrates, prison governors, prison staff) to compare their social perceptions with those of prison visitors. It would make it possible to highlight the convergences and the differences between the representations, and hence to propose adequate awareness-raising activities and training to improve communication between professionals and volunteers.

With the current development of « restorative justice » (Braithwaite, 2002) -a form of justice emanating from the civil society which tries to restore the social link impaired by the offense- volunteering should be considered today as an integral part of the process of rehabilitation. To value and strengthen this citizen commitment, one might consider, in parallel with scientific communications, large-scale communication actions, in particular *via* the media.

5 References

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