

# Brits in prison in Europe – a recent snapshot

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Writing this the day after our Supreme Court has underlined the rule of law in the UK and we remain in a situation of confusion as to our future relationship with Europe, focusing on British citizens in prison there reveals what is for the majority of my countrymen, a completely unknown part of our interaction with Europe.

The stark bareness of the numbers below rarely portrays the emotional upset and suffering that any criminal act can create not just for the victim but the wider circle of family and friends of both sides. However, what we do see from the figures is a reflection of some of the momentous changes that have taken place across the world in recent years.

## **Prisoners:**

Using the data we have gathered from British Citizens who are our service users (not all British nationals) and detained in countries across Europe the picture we see is as follows:

The total number of prisoner cases in Europe we had during the year (2018-19) was 526 (we work with 1,700 worldwide) which was a 9% increase over the previous year, but this belies some significant changes country by country. 8% of these cases are female, 92% male – a gender breakdown we also see in our worldwide figure too.

The top 5 countries in Europe where most British Citizens are held are:

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>% Change</i> |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Spain          | 157           | - 1%            |
| France         | 155           | +32%            |
| Germany        | 45            | - 4%            |
| Belgium        | 21            | + 40%           |
| Ireland        | 20            | +5              |

It seems sensible that these are the top 5 countries – they are all except Germany, amongst our nearest neighbours. There have been significant numbers of Britons living in Spain for many years – a trend that started back in the 1960's/70's and consequently it has become a multi-generational population. Numbers of Britons living in France too have increased especially in the 1980's/90's but far fewer than the numbers that moved to Spain.

The reasons why our service users find themselves in prison are as varied as in any prison population, but over half of them are on remand and we know that foreign nationals around the world are always far more likely to be remanded because they are considered a flight risk. The offences of those who were either charged or sentenced last year were:

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Drugs          | 36% |
| Murder         | 15% |
| Sex offences   | 10% |
| Violence       | 10% |
| Smuggling      | 7%  |
| Property/theft | 5%  |
| Other          | 8%  |
| Unknown        | 2%  |

These offence percentages for Europe are not particularly different from those we see worldwide.

But the significant increase over last year that we see in prisoner numbers in France and Belgium are a direct reflection of the mass movement of people across Europe over the last few years – and the ‘easy money’ to be made from people-smuggling that has enticed people from a wide variety of backgrounds not just the lorry drivers that have traditionally smuggled drugs, alcohol and tobacco across borders. In the current year, so far 17% of our new cases are charged with smuggling which mainly relate to the increases in France and Belgium.

As you can see above, over a third of our service users in Europe either have or are accused of committing serious offences – this is slightly less than the 42% which is our worldwide figure. The serious offences result in longer sentences that will be served although in comparison to some countries outside Europe, these are shorter than found elsewhere. In Europe the largest sentence lengths we see are:

|                           |            |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Spain                     | 432 months |
| France, Ireland and Italy | 360 months |
| Portugal and Malta        | 300 months |
| Albania                   | 288 months |
| Greece                    | 240 months |
| Belgium and Bulgaria      | 216 months |

The age range of our prisoner cases is older than you would expect to find in British prisons:

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| 18 – 24 | 6%  |
| 25 – 34 | 25% |
| 35 – 44 | 24% |
| 45 – 54 | 26% |
| 55 – 64 | 12% |
| 65 – 74 | 6%  |
| 75+     | 1%  |

We categorise our prisoner cases according to their level of vulnerability to ensure that those that need our help most will get it. The vulnerability might be because of ill health either physical or mental, sexuality or age, etc. Spain has 48% of our most vulnerable clients in Europe, France 15%, Germany 11% and Portugal 2% and five other countries with only 1 vulnerable person in each. But compared to our worldwide figure, the European total only accounts for 20% of the total.

Being older, they are encountering more health issues but there is a lower percentage in Europe compared to the worldwide figure. Within the European prisoner cases 26% of them report physical ill health and 14% mental ill health. The percentage declaring substance misuse issues is at 9% identical to our worldwide figure. We rely on our service users to self-report and so we estimate that the real figures for health and addition issues are much higher.

**Families:**

Knowing the importance of keeping prisoners and families in touch throughout the sentence, we recognise family members and friends as our service users too. With European countries being far closer than other parts of the world, it is not surprising that more of our prisoner cases in Europe are in closer, more regular contact with their families than in other parts of the world. 77% are in touch with their families – 67% of whom are in the UK and 11% are living in Europe.

### **Returns:**

At the end of the sentence, those with family connections are most likely to return to their loved ones but 18 cases used our resettlement services last year. Half of those used our London resettlement unit and the others accessed the service remotely by phone having returned to other parts of the UK. They had committed a range of offences including drugs, murder, sexual offences, manslaughter, smuggling, fraud and property/theft. Those using the resettlement services came from:

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| France  | 33% |
| Spain   | 16% |
| Belgium | 11% |
| Greece  | 11% |
| Germany | 11% |

With the remainder coming from Finland, Netherlands and Portugal.

Despite prison systems across the world doing their best to reduce their prisoner populations, we don't see any particular signs that numbers will reduce markedly in Europe. We see no reduction in demand for the services Prisoners Abroad provides. The continued uncertainty over our relationship with Europe means we also have no clarity over the potential impact of Brexit on British citizens imprisoned abroad.

### ***Prisoners Abroad***

*Pauline Crowe, OBE is Chief Executive of Prisoners Abroad- a British registered and independent charity with a non-judgmental approach to the people it works with – services are provided based on need. It receives two-thirds of its funding from charitable sources, one-third from government and it has a service-delivery partnership with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.*

*For our prisoner service users in Europe, we offer information on foreign criminal justice systems, prisoners' rights, prison conditions, parole, remission and transfer to the UK. We build long-term relationships with prisoners and provide reassurance and emotional support along with tailored practical support to help maintain their well-being. We provide books and language materials so that people are able to communicate with other prisoners and prison staff when faced with an otherwise impenetrable language barrier. These help with emotional and mental well-being. We use free-post envelopes to help them stay in touch with their families. Sustaining positive relationships can help people to deal better with their imprisonment and manage the dark loneliness of a prison sentence in another country a long way from home.*

*For our family service users, we provide information and also provide long-term emotional support through a country-wide network of support groups and information days.*