



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

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Overview of European prison services' responses to the COVID-19 crisis

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Sources:

Webpage set up by EuroPris on 23 March <https://www.europris.org/covid-19-prevention-measures-in-european-prisons/> collecting regulations/protocols measures taken by 28 European Prison Services (to date 22 April European jurisdictions) .

KMS response to French questions on measures taken in response to COVID-19 in prisons of 27 February.

Responses from a mailing group of 84 European prison practitioners managed by EuroPris sharing pressing questions.

Information from Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) network and European Prisoner Education Association (EPEA)

Note: this overview is based entirely on information that was provided by prison services. EuroPris did not do any independent verification.

General observation

Prison Services are under continued huge pressure to manage the impact of COVID-19 in the prisons and to keep prisoners and staff safe. The measures they had to take require large investments in order to provide for appropriate protective clothing, for compensation of the suspended visits (mobile phone and video equipment purchase; increased call budgets) and of suspended work (compensation for loss of income). Both, staff and prisoners are concerned about their health, prisoners suffer from the lack of activities and visits, which makes it a challenge to keep staff motivated and prevent riots by prisoners. Clear and detailed communication to staff and prisoners has been essential in addressing their concerns and in their acceptance of the measures and restrictions.

This crisis has shown the pressing need of prison professionals to being able to share and question each other on a variety of issues. EuroPris facilitated this networking and exchange role.

Statistics

Out of the 21 prison services from EU jurisdictions that provide data on infected and quarantined prisoners and staff, 6 have reported that no prisoners or staff members have been infected or quarantined. The highest reported numbers are obviously from the countries that have been hit hardest by the COVID-19 virus, being Spain (46 prisoners, 238 staff infected as per 22/4) and Italy (37 prisoners, 163 staff infected as per 8/4).



Visits

All EuroPris members responded that all physical visits to prisoners had ceased. This includes visits by probation, mediation and religious services which are sometimes replaced by phone conversations. Exceptions are made for legal counsel, religious counselors and consular officers, but they have to be conducted taking the necessary safety precautions, such as body temperature check on entry, meeting on a one-to-one basis with sufficient distance or using glass screens. Courts and judges are advised to use video conference as much as possible.

Children of Prisoners

As the suspension of visits continues, the negative impact – psychological distress, stigma, widespread disruption - on children of prisoners who cannot see their parents increases. It is important to support families with a parent in prison. There are several initiatives, such as support groups for children impacted by parental imprisonment, packs for mothers in prison to send to their children and Family Video Visits.

Activities

Most EuroPris members reported that many of the activities had been suspended. This involves all social and educational activities, sports, workshop and vocational trainings. In some countries activities are organized in small groups. Where there is sufficient staff and possibilities for distancing, workshops continue to function in some countries. Many prison workshops have taken up production of protective masks and clothing. In some cases, one-on-one activities or distance learning can still continue.

Daily showers are mostly still possible also for those who do not have a shower in their cell. Most countries still have some open airtime, often in smaller groups. Some prisoners can still cook. Laundry, cleaning and kitchen services continue in most prisons to allow for the necessary hygiene and well-functioning of the prison.

Food and purchases are delivered to cells by prison staff. Religious services have been cancelled.

The European Prison Education Association sent a letter to Ministers of Justice in Europe to plea for support to deliver education activity from a safe distance in penitentiary facilities.

Communication

Limitations are generally quite well perceived by detainees as it corresponds to a consequence of nationwide confinement and as it is based on sanitary measures. Providing comprehensive and clear information to prisoners about the reason for the restrictions they are facing results generally in a better understanding and acceptance of the measures taken.

Some countries have introduced a helpline through which family members and relatives of prisoner can receive information and support.

Compensation

In most cases, compensation is being offered in the form of extra phone time and options for video conferencing. Provision of video conferencing is a challenge for many countries as it was not yet available or in use for family contact in their Service. Some prison services provide additional or unlimited phone credits to prisoners and some have purchased additional equipment such as mobile phones and video conferencing equipment. There have also been negotiations with telecommunication providers by some prison services to reduce the costs of the calls, not all being successful.

In some countries, prisoners get a financial compensation for no longer being able to earn money in prison workshops. Some prison services provide free televisions in prison cells or extra food.

Staff

In most member jurisdictions, prison staff who show any symptoms, who have chronic illnesses, who are 60+ or who are pregnant are asked to stay at home. Prison staff is considered key personnel (persons of special importance for the system). Some members reported the establishment of a group system. Within the groups, small units are formed to work together as constantly as possible. This allows a separation of the guards from each other. In some countries, prison staff are no longer allowed to take vacation days. Some countries report that staff numbers have been reduced in prisons. Most countries report that staff training had been suspended.

Some prison services have, next to the normal psychological support offered to prison staff, opened an extra helpline for staff members to receive professional psychological help.

International prisoner transfers

Transfer of prisoners between countries, for example based on Council Framework Decision 2008/909/JHA, has been suspended indefinitely throughout Europe.

Transfers within the country, and prison leave

Most transfers of prisoners between different prisons have been suspended or are conducted in exceptional cases for security reasons only.

Most members also reported that all prison-leave had been cancelled, including leaves for visits with prisoner's children or visiting funerals and other life events within the family.

New arrivals and alternatives to detention

In cooperation with police and prosecutors, most prison services try to prevent new arrivals as much as possible, for example the intake of short-term sentences and pre-trial detainees has stopped or is temporary postponed. As alternatives house arrest / electronic monitoring are used instead of prison. Many countries reported that newly admitted prisoners are checked medically for temperature and other potential Corona symptoms. In some countries, all new arrivals have to go into quarantine for their first 14 days.

To reduce the inflow of new inmates, the conversion of sentences into alternative measures such as home arrest, fines and electronic monitoring are called for in case of lower short-term prison sentences and for administrative, non-violent crimes. Some countries have taken specific penal instructions to

face the crisis by creating specific mechanisms to enhance the number of alternatives to detention (already a reduction of prison population is observed in some countries).

Early release

Some countries consider early release for prisoners with a remaining short sentence and for specific types of crimes.

Use of multi-person cells

Most of the prison services have not limited the use of multi-person cells, often related to capacity issues. With the exception of infected prisoners that are placed in special wings in single-person cells.

Quarantine units

Most EuroPris members reported that their prisons are equipped with quarantine units with medical services for prisoners with clinical signs of infection, where the prisoner has to be housed and/or treated for 14 days or until the infection risk has passed.

Protective clothing (masks and suits)

Most countries reported that prisoners are producing masks and protective clothing. While some countries give masks to all prisoners, most hand it only out in case of prisoners' transfer, to prisoners with special tasks or infected prisoners. In most of the countries prison staff are required to wear protective masks and clothing if they are in direct contact with prisoners.

Medical facilities

Members reported that they had sufficient medical staff and access to ambulances and hospitals in case of infection. Tests are conducted when prisoners or staff show symptoms. Such tests are partly done by national health authorities, and partly by the medical staff of the prisons. So far, no country has mentioned an impact on the other usual priorities. Cooperation between penitentiary and medical staffs is generally strong to cope with the very quickly changing situation.

Planning for after the crisis

On the question if countries have started to make plans for the recovery period the response was mainly negative. Basically, all prison services are using their staff capacity to deal with the daily challenges and concentrate on the preventive measures. Most of them wait for instructions from their government before starting to make a planning for the follow-up period. Those already preparing the "after lockdown" are concerned about how to organize a progressive restart of the activities and the family visits without creating a weakness in the protective measures to prevent the virus from spreading in detention (as the first steps to reestablish contacts with the outside will be a sensitive period). Any future steps will closely be connected to measures for citizens in the community. Some have started the planning process for a de-confinement strategy and the planning of a step-by-step approach. Countries have indicated large interest in sharing such strategies.

Denmark is the first country reporting that it started from 17 April receiving new (remand) prisoners while observing strict guidelines of health authorities.