



EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

EuroPris
PO Box 13635
2501 EP The Hague
Netherlands

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

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 European Prison Services (to date 23 European jurisdictions) .

KMS response to French questions on measures taken in response to COVID-19 in prisons of 27 February.
Contents of responses from a Europe-wide mailing list set up by EuroPris to answer pressing questions of prison professionals.

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 huge pressure to limit the impact of COVID-19 and keep it out of the closed prison environment. 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.

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.

Visits

All EuroPris members responded that visits to prisoners had been severely restricted, and the majority suspended visits indefinitely, in particular when confinement exists for the general population This includes visits by probation and mediation services which are sometimes replaced by phone interviews for a follow-up. Exceptions are made for legal counsel, religious counselors and consular officers, but they have to be conducted 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.

Activities

Most EuroPris members reported that all activities had been suspended. This involves all social and educational activities, sports, workshop and vocational trainings. 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 air time, 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. 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.

Compensation

In most cases, compensation is being offered in the form of extra phone time, phone credit 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.

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, free mobile phones, 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.

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 by postponing the execution of the prison sentence or by imposing house arrest / electronic monitoring instead of prison.

All EuroPris members 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 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).

International prisoner transfers

Transfer of prisoners between countries, for example based on FD909, has been suspended indefinitely throughout Europe.

Early release

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

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 clothing and that prison staff are required to wear protective masks and clothing and that such clothing is available.

Medical facilities

Members reported that they had sufficient medical staff and access to ambulances and hospitals in case of infection. From the responses, it was not clear if prisons had access to corona-tests, since they mostly spoke about clinical symptoms. 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.