



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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The information shared in this overview is based on information from the EuroPris network, largely provided by responses to a mailing group of 84 European prison practitioners managed by EuroPris sharing pressing questions. This is the third overview since the beginning of the pandemic. The earlier overviews as well as fact sheets on specific topics can be accessed on our website.¹ EuroPris did not do any independent verification, nor is the information necessarily representative for the entire European Union or Council of Europe area, as not all countries responded to the questions that were raised.

General observation

Since March 2020, prison services in Europe have been under continued huge pressure to manage the impact of COVID-19 in the prisons and to keep prisoners and staff safe. In most countries, restrictions are being eased, but both staff and prisoners continue to be concerned about their health and prisoners still suffer from the lack of activities and visits. There is also much concern about a second wave and being forced to returning to stricter conditions. The longer the pandemic lasts, the more challenging it is to keep staff motivated and prevent dissatisfactions and 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.

Restoring family visits

A negative impact of the pandemic that has been reported is that pilot projects and special events with the specific aim of improving family relations for prisoners have been postponed or put on hold. A positive development since our last overview is that in-person short term family visits are being restored in most jurisdictions. The restrictions as reported in our May 2020 factsheet on prison visits² (pre-visit health checks for visitors; adaptations to meeting rooms; hygiene and protective equipment; distancing regulations; and limits to the number and duration of visits) generally still apply. Most prison services give priority to direct family members of the prisoner as well as school for juvenile prisoners. Prisoners with underage children are usually granted more visits, exceeding the normal limit to visits. In countries where only one visitor is allowed per visit, an exception is made for underage children, who can come with an adult companion. Long term family visits have not yet resumed in most countries.

¹ <https://www.europris.org/covid-19-prevention-measures-in-european-prisons/>

² For further details, see our factsheet on prison visits: <https://www.europris.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Factsheet-prison-visits-May-final.pdf>



Family visits by means of videoconferencing

At the same time, prison services report that the possibility for video conferencing proved successful, in particular for communication between imprisoned parents and their children. For example, prisoners were able to read bedtime stories to their children. Several prison services report that they would like to continue with video visits, as a possibility besides – not as a replacement for - in person visits. One reported benefit of video conferencing is that the prisoner can meet with the entire family because, contrary to in-person visits, there is no limit to the number of people. In some countries, prisoners are offered a choice between a video visit or an in-person visit, and it turns out that in particular prisoners with young children sometimes prefer the video visits. It is not clear however if this is because of the benefits of video-conferencing or because of the difficult circumstances surrounding in-person visits for children. Positive reports about videoconferencing as a replacement for physical visits should be evaluated with caution, because not having (child) visits is simplifying the everyday job for security staff and this could inadvertently influence their assessment.

Face masks

There is remarkable variation in regulations regarding the wearing of face masks by prisoners. In some countries, face masks are not prescribed at all, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, some jurisdictions provide prisoners with a new face mask every day and prescribe that prisoners have to wear a mask as a general rule unless an exception applies. A number of countries indicate that prisoners have to wear a face mask when being outside of their cell or in case of having symptoms of an infection. There are also many countries where masks only have to be worn under specific circumstances, such as when working, or when in transit, or when in contact with someone coming from outside of the prisons.

Testing policies

In most countries, possibilities for testing are now widely available. Prison staff is generally considered a priority sector, so in case there is insufficient testing capacity, prison officers are given priority for testing, especially if they have symptoms. Similarly, in most countries, all prisoners as well as staff who have symptoms – even if very mild - are tested, either at a public health care testing point or in the prison health care facility. In case a COVID-19 test returns positive, all other staff members and prisoners who have been in contact with the infected person, will also be tested, and re-tested when necessary. In some countries, random tests on prisoners and staff are conducted and in other countries, all staff are tested.

Remote health consultation

Some countries already had next to normal medical care remote health consultation service in use before the Covid-19 crisis. Often those were used for special consultations and not for general practice. Most countries reporting were relying on the medical departments within the prisons. Only three countries reported that they introduced remote health consultations during the pandemic, which have not been used often. But there is an interest to explore this further.

Reducing overcrowding

To help protect prisoners and staff against outbreaks amongst the prison population, most jurisdictions attempted to reduce the occupancy rate in prisons. This served two goals: on the one hand, more space was created among prisoners within a prison wing or unit. At the same time, space was created to reserve and adapt certain wings for medical isolation. Measures included early release, postponement and suspension of sentences; increased use of non-custodial measures; capacity increase; increased use of single person cells.³

Which approaches are considered most successful?

When asked which approaches are considered most and least successful in managing Covid-19 in prisons, some jurisdictions report that it is early to evaluate the effect of individual measures and to select the most effective ones.

No visits and no leaves, combined with strict checks upon entry into prison seemed to be most important for limiting the spread of Covid-19 in prisons.

In terms of supporting staff, having access to Covid-19 testing and personal protective equipment were considered essential.

Putting in place clear, strict and adequate health and safety measures was important.

In terms of supporting prisoners, compensation measures for the lack of activities (f.e. distant education) and visits (f.e. video calling) were most valued.

Overall, continuous information and communication about the measures taken and why they were taken was considered key.

³ For further details, see our factsheet on overcrowding: <https://www.europris.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Factsheet-overcrowding-July-2020.pdf>