

# Chapter on Covid-19 (2022)

In 2022, the EuroPris Children of Prisoners Expert Group worked on an additional *Covid Chapter* as an annex to the already existing *Implementation Guidance Report* which was already published in 2021. Every expert of this group described national actions in regard to Covid-19, which affected children and their families. The experts shared their experiences, practices and conclusions which they gained during the Covid-19-Pandemic in prisons.

The questions around this chapter to reflect on were: Normalisation of the exceptional - What influenced children positively and negatively? What implementations has been retained and were found to be useful and good innovations in prisons? What negative implementations were introduced and what adverse effects did they have on the children? What are the Lessons Learned and how can prisons safeguard the rights and needs of prisoners, the families and the children of prisoners?

The expert reports per country are listed separately and consecutively below.

## 1 Belgium

Belgium experienced several episodes of total lockdown. For several months, visits were interrupted in prisons. It took almost three months from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic to set up virtual visits.

At the beginning, resources were relatively scarce (few computers for all prisons). Little by little, we were able to have more computers. It was very difficult to implement. Each prison decided on the frequency of virtual visits and the duration. Then at certain times, only one adult was allowed for face-to-face visits, then only one child (which was very problematic for prisoners who have several children). At certain periods, it was only one child under 12 years old, at other periods under 16 years old. When visits resumed after the first wave, physical contact was prohibited. Subsequently, only brief contact at the beginning and end of the visit was authorised. For many months, masks remained compulsory. Plexiglas was used to separate the prisoner from their family. Families could no longer eat or drink during visits. Sharing food together is an emotional experience that strengthens family bonds. Group activities organised by the NGO Relais Enfant Parent (REP) were suspended for several months; the psychologists no longer even went to the prison. Activities later resumed, but on an individual basis. It was very complicated for large families. The children could not play with the board games. When supervised collective visits resumed, there were many restrictions.

Since 8 March 2022, the situation has been normalised in Belgian prisons. Normal visits are now authorised without Plexiglas, masks are no longer mandatory, there is the possibility of eating and drinking and playing with children. Children and their rights and needs were seriously neglected during this crisis. They were given very little consideration. The detainees suffered greatly from the separation and lack of contact with their children. Fortunately, each prisoner has a phone in the cell. The administration provided €10 in phone credit per week to each detainee when visits were suspended. The real bonus of this crisis is the continued option of video calls as “virtual visits” for those who live in another country or who cannot travel; to help work through complicated situations; to

maintain contact when children cannot be brought to the prison (e.g., because of the distance). Some services (certain religious groups or associations) have set up free telephone lines so that prisoners can call and feel less isolated.

## 2 Norway

As of 21 February 2022, all infection control measures have been abolished in Norwegian prisons, i.e., removal of all statutory measures against Covid-19, including requirements for masks, one meter distance and a duty to isolate in the event of illness. During periods of infection control measures, visits from children to their imprisoned parents were a priority. This also applied to extended telephone hours and the use of iPads. It has been decided that the use of iPads shall be a permanent option for prisoners and their children to supplement ordinary visiting hours. A physical meeting cannot be replaced in its entirety by contact via iPad.

## 3 Ireland

Ireland is emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic and is slowly unwinding the various restrictions imposed to protect prisoners and staff from infection.

The use of Quarantine for Committal is still maintained, and testing is advised on day five. This is welcomed as a security benefit in terms of drugs being smuggled into the prison. The Irish Prison Service (IPS) is examining a more structured seven-day committal process. It acknowledges the security benefits of slower integration to the main population and notes the benefit of a structured induction plan.

Visits were suspended and then reintroduced under strictly screened conditions during the pandemic. This achieved two things. It made the physical visit less attractive as not only were there more stringent infection control measures with screening and PPE, and there was also a reduction on the number of visitors from three to one and children were not allowed. The second consequence was to make video calls, "virtual visits" more acceptable. The prisoners opted for video calls where they could see in to their homes and "meet" their loved ones in that environment. As the restrictions eased, children were allowed to visit the prison again, accompanied by an adult. The IPS are applying a blended approach to visits, acknowledging the importance of physical visits while maintain the virtual option of video calls. This will enable an expansion of the use of video technology in promoting the various family initiatives envisaged.

Education was also severely impacted by lack of access at the start of the pandemic. The Education Centre rallied and began outreach to prisoners' cells. Offering mindfulness and educational packages to cells was a new and innovative approach. This led to Closed Circuit Broadcasting of recorded and live classes direct to prisoners' televisions in the cell. This was successful and continues to have its place in the Prisons Education offering post-pandemic.

Telephony was an accommodation unit level task pre-Covid. Now, almost all cells have connectivity, enabling the prisoner to make his/her call at a time suitable for his/her family and not dictated by the prison day. A pilot of incoming phone calls was also successful and is being considered for further roll out.

Inward Letters from family were also quarantined and delayed because of Covid. There was also a security concern regarding impregnating the paper with "Spice". Prisons began photocopying all incoming mail as a safety measure. Post-Covid it is now possible to email a prisoner and the letters are still being photocopied prior to issue.

Prisoners' incoming Cash was taken in by a staff member as part of the visits process. This task was moved to an electronic process which has worked well and is being maintained post-Covid. Prisons are now cash free.

The above is a flavour of the various changes that will be maintained in the Irish Prison Service. It is important that practitioners continue to champion the needs access for children and the importance of actual human contact over the expediency of virtual arrangements.

## 4 Sweden

During the period from March 2020 to 1 October 2020, it was decided that no physical visits were allowed in Swedish prisons and detention centres. The reasons behind the decision were to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus and to protect the prisoners from becoming sick with Covid-19. During autumn 2020, some visits were allowed, adapted to limit the risk of coronavirus infection. As of 9 February 2022, the restrictions on visits and leave aiming to reduce the risk of Covid-19 contagion were lifted. When the SPPS were forced to impose restrictions, the interest of children of imprisoned parents were taken into account and compensatory measures were taken. Measures related to children during the pandemic: The SPPS almost immediately authorised free domestic calls and introduced reduced costs for international calls. Currently, when restrictions have been lifted, the rates for domestic calls have been re-established but rates for international calls will be the same as those for domestic calls, in consideration of children with imprisoned parents abroad. Before the pandemic the international calls had a much higher rate than domestic calls. Calls from remand prisons are still free of charge, but efforts to explore reintroducing earlier rates are ongoing.

Before the pandemic, the SPPS did not offer video calls. Security concerns and technical system challenges were obstacles to the development of this kind of digital communication. On the 12th of May 2020, the SPPS decided to offer prisoners video calls with children. The purpose of the decision was, primarily from a children's perspective, to mitigate the consequences of the temporary limitation that existed concerning visits and leave. Those eligible for video calls include prisoners who are granted permission to call children, and prisoners under the age of 18 who are granted permission to call close relatives. Based on the positive outcome of this temporary measure, in March 2021 the SPPS authorised the permanent use of video calls with children for remand prisons and prisons, taking into consideration children's perspectives. The video calls are very much appreciated by both prisoners and their families.

During autumn 2020, visits resumed, adapted to limit the risk of coronavirus infection. Visiting activities concerning children during Covid-19 can be summarised as follows: The actual visit took place in a room or space adapted to limit the risk of infection. In most visits rooms or spaces, there were protective transparent plastic screens between the prisoner and their relatives. There was no physical contact, they sat on either side of the plastic screen and spoke through it. During the first waves of the pandemic, the Swedish Public Health Agency claimed that children, especially younger children, did not spread the virus to the same degree as older children and adults did. Therefore, an exception was made for children aged 12 or under and screens were not mandatory, enabling younger children to go around the plastic screen and sit close to their relative. During spring and summer of 2021, as greater numbers of people were vaccinated, prisoners considered to have adequate protection against Covid-19 were eligible for normal visits.

As of 9th of February 2022, all restrictions on visits and leaves associated with Covid-19 have been eliminated. During the time when restrictions were in place, both prisoners and relatives demonstrated great understanding and there have been only a few mild complaints, despite the difficult situation this created for children with imprisoned parents. Since the decisions concerning restrictions on visits and leaves not only affected the daily lives for the prisoners, but also for families, and especially children, the SPPS produced targeted information about the situation for the children and their parents. The webpage (the Inside) that SPPS directs to children with imprisoned parents was supplemented with information concerning Covid-19 and focused on the need of information adapted for children. Special information was provided for children and their parents concerning visits. It seemed important to prepare the children, since visits were very different from normal visits. Normally visits are private in a visiting room unless they require the presence of prison officers, usually because of security issues. Although during the pandemic several visits took place at the same time and correctional staff had to be present at the visit.

In the information to parents, both the prisoner and the relative were urged to be sensitive to the child's needs and wishes, as the visiting set-up—with the adults sitting on either side of a plastic screen— could be uncomfortable for children. The information for children explained that visiting was voluntary and that other options existed, such as video calls. The information also identified NGOs which could support children of imprisoned parents. The pandemic had a severe impact on children with imprisoned parents and it became clear how important it is to analyse the repercussions on children of any major decisions taken by the SPPS. Some measures however have benefited children, such as the introduction of video calls as well as the targeted information for children.

## 5 Romania

Between March 2020 and March 2022, Romania implemented a number of measures aimed at preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus infection. A state of emergency and then a state of alert were adopted at national level, which each introduced specific measures. In this difficult context, the prison system took action accordingly, showing a continuing concern for the security and physical integrity of the prisoners as well as the staff. These involved a number of restrictions and limitations, which were vital to minimising the risk of spreading SARS-CoV-2 virus infection. There was, therefore, a change in everyone's daily schedule, which required stepping out of their comfort zone and constant adaptation, which impacted both social interaction and the day-to-day activities of prisons.

Initially, during the state of emergency, a number of activities were suspended, such as visits between prisoners and their relatives, social reintegration programmes and activities, work activities, and all activities that involved interaction in large groups. Subsequently, the government adopted more permissive measures, which required the adaptation of the penitentiary system, which found quick and creative solutions in their implementation, using the existing infrastructure and resources. Thus, prisoners were provided the opportunity to benefit from online communications with family or other relatives, instead of physical visits that were still suspended or restricted (due to city travel restrictions). This possibility gave the prisoners the feeling of belonging to a safe and familiar environment, and so being able to see their family or friends in their natural living environment and also offered comfort, through the virtual closeness to the family. Also, in this way, they had the opportunity to interact, play and even do homework with their children, using the virtual environment, which led to improved family relationships. At the same time, they had the opportunity to keep in touch with their families and children permanently, through letters

and phone calls, as they had permanent access to the telephones installed in each detention room (within a number of calls allowed daily).

Another important resource, at this difficult time, was the multidisciplinary team of social reintegration, consisting of social workers, psychologists, and educators who, through individual activities and in compliance with measures in force (mask, social distancing, sanitation of spaces, etc.), provided specialised interventions, in accordance with prisoners' needs. The social worker acted as a link between the prisoner and the community and family, an issue of great importance, especially when people did not have the financial means to contact their family by phone or whose family did not have the opportunity to communicate online. In these cases, the social worker obtained information about the family's health and informed the prisoner.

The group social reintegration activities have also undergone changes, but the staff have shown openness and creativity, approaching them in a new way. Thus, activities such as school training, programmes carried out by external collaborators, religious activities, were carried out in online format or by distributing study materials to prisoners. Another way used, in order to access information and education, was to broadcast informative materials through closed circuit television or by decorating the detention centres with messages and images, developed within penitentiary system campaigns (awareness campaign of persons deprived of their liberty for the recovery of their own resources; information campaign to prevent the spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus).

Currently, due to the low rate of infection as well as the lifting of restrictive measures at a national level, the penitentiary system has had to adapt to the current reality, while maintaining a minimum number of measures.

Thus, at the level of penitentiary units, wearing a medical mask is mandatory, in carrying out direct activities with prisoners that are in medical isolation, measures such as testing prisoners with rapid tests or RT-PCR for detecting SARS-CoV-2 are still carried out, if they are transferred to another penitentiary or present specific suggestive symptoms.

The pandemic period required the maximum use of human resources and the permanent adaptation of all, to a series of measures and periodic changes, but it also outlined a new perspective of the activity, the interaction in the online environment being used successfully. However, although online interaction has been considered, the penitentiary system recognises the value of physical interaction, and prisoners are encouraged to interact with their relatives in the visiting sector as well as with their children through physical visits organised in friendly spaces designed for such interactions. Social reintegration specialists also aid prisoners in the development of parenting skills, as well as those necessary for quality social interactions, through specific programmes.

## 6 Hungary

As a first preventive measure after the emergence of the new pandemic, the Hungarian prison institutions suspended prison leave from 07 March 2020. Protective equipment was distributed in all prison institutions and continuous disinfection carried out. For newly admitted detainees, 14 days of isolation were imposed. Restrictions were also introduced on visits to prisoners, with a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 60 minutes per visit once a month, with no physical contact. A recommendation was made to detainees and their visitors to avoid the visits of elderly or children. At the same time, the possibility of using Skype instead of face-to-face visits was introduced, as well as the opportunity of using the telephone for a uniformly increased period.

In this context, a high priority was given to keep prisoners and their relatives informed about the current protection measures and restrictions to prevent the virus from entering the institutions. The outbreak also had an impact on correspondence through mail; quarantine of mail was imposed. The number of parcels that can be ordered via the web interface has been increased. With the suspension of face-to-face visits, the electronic communication became even more important. For all prisoners, regardless of regime category, electronic communication is available for at least 30 minutes once a week. During the epidemic, prison pastoral care became more involved in the treatment of prisoners. Pastors who were unable to enter the institute due to the total closure were regularly provided material which was continuously shown on the internal closed-circuit television network. Catalogue-based use of the library was introduced, and a TV set is provided for all cells.

Currently, restrictions are being eased and phased out as the coronavirus epidemic eases. For newly admitted detainees, the isolation period is reduced to 10 days, and detainees can have visitors without a vaccination certificate. In certain individual circumstances, prison leave may be allowed again. The Hungarian Prison Service also excelled in managing the epidemic at a national level. At the beginning of the epidemic, on 16 March 2020, the construction of a mobile epidemic hospital in Kiskunhalas at the site of the prison institute began, which can accommodate up to 150 civilian patients. Furthermore, limited companies of the prison service produced protective masks and information materials.