

Prison staff perspectives, an EPSU survey of the impact of the economic crisis on prisons

(June 2016) Executive summary : The report is based primarily on responses to an EPSU questionnaire received from 14 unions representing prison staff in 12 countries, supplemented by material from the Council of Europe's SPACE surveys and national sources. Initial findings were presented to a meeting of the EPSU prison union network in February 2015.

There are substantial variations across Europe in the number of people in prison, relative to the population, ranging 18.9 per 100,000 in Liechtenstein to 314.6 per 100,000 in Lithuania. In general, the proportion of people in prison is highest in the states in Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004 or 2007, although the country with the largest number of people in prison is the UK, with almost 94,000.

The number of people in prison in the European Economic Area (EEA) rose slightly between 2008, the start of the crisis and 2014, the latest date for which figures are available for most countries. However, there were major differences between states with prisoner numbers falling in some, including Germany and the Netherlands, but rising in others, including France and Romania.

Despite this slight rise in prisoner numbers, most countries have experienced a fall in the number of staff working inside prisons in the past five years, and in some countries, such as Latvia and the UK, this has been dramatic.

The result has been that in 19 countries the ratio of prisoners to prison staff worsened in the five years from 2008 to 2013.

Those working in prisons also have fewer financial resources than in the past. Unions in seven of the 12 countries that responded to the survey said that the money available for prisons had decreased in the last five years. This is confirmed by the Council of Europe's survey of 2013 that finds that spending per inmate has decreased during the economic crisis.

Only four unions out of 14 thought that prisoners' conditions had improved in the last five years, and none thought that the conditions of those working in prisons had improved in the same period. One (FP CGIL in Italy) referred to "the impoverishment of prison staff and their families".

Health and safety was a concern with eight out of 14 unions saying that the situation had deteriorated. Nine said that the number of violent attacks on staff had increased, often providing details of the extent of the assaults. ACAIP-USO in Spain has collected figures – there are no official ones – which show a violent attack every two days, while, in the UK, the number of serious assaults has doubled in two years to more than 10 a week.

Prison staff also suffer from stress. All but one of the unions reported that stress had increased, with austerity cited as one of the key reasons.

Despite these difficult conditions, only a minority of unions thought that levels of sickness absence had increased.

Most unions indicated that there were structures and/or policies in place intended to maintain and improve the health and safety of those working in prisons, although there is often little health and safety training. In most countries unions are able to have a positive influence on health and safety standards, although there are specific problems in Spain and Italy.

In four countries, pay was set by collective bargaining; in five they were the result of a unilateral government decision, and in the remaining three either by a mixture, or by a process in which the union has a role, but which falls short of collective bargaining. However, in half of the countries surveyed, key prison staff do not have the right to strike.

Employee representation structures in prisons generally reflect those in the country as a whole, and in all countries unions play a crucial role.

The UK is the only country among those responding where currently some prisons are privately run. However, the private sector is involved in prisons other ways in other countries and there are plans to extend this further.

Union concerns reflect the problems that prisons currently face. The threat of privatisation, cost savings, pay levels, job security and an ageing workforce were all referred to by unions in more than one country. They demand better terms and conditions but in some cases the first step towards this would be to restore the conditions and rights that they had before but have now lost.

The overall picture is of a prison service under pressure and staff struggling to cope. In this situation the unions have a key role to play in defending and improving the terms and conditions of their members and seeking to provide a decent service to prisoners and the wider society.

a report by Lionel Fulton, Labour Research Department, for EPSU, June 2016

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