

Fighting COVID-19 in prisons and detention centres in Europe



(19 March 2020) Call for exchange of information on government measures and trade union responses

EPSU invites its affiliates organising prison staff to keep each other informed of health developments in prisons and measures taken by and with your respective government.

There are 1,229,385 inmates in the penal institutions of the 44 Council of Europe member states, in the European Union, this includes about 600 000 inmates and 300 000 prison staff.

The prison population, with its often disproportionate disease burden, and the workers who are charged with their care must not be forgotten at times of pandemics such as the corona virus.

It is vital to prioritise the continuity of the service, the health and safety of prison staff and inmates by distributing personal protective equipment, the continuity of

prison staff wage payment including sick pay, and regular dialogue between trade unions and prison and health authorities.

The general state of health monitoring and surveillance systems in prisons is notoriously poor, it is worse in migration detention centres and refugee camps.

The scarce data available indicates an enormous difference in the general health of people in prisons compared to those in the outside world. In some prisons, it is likely that the availability of soap for inmates or family visitors, hand sanitiser and tissues, or clean places to wash hands is limited.

In many prisons, the spread of corona virus comes on top of the double challenge of prison overcrowding and understaffing, not only of prison officers but also of healthcare staff. At the last meeting of the EPSU prison network, many affiliates from countries including Belgium, Spain, and the UK reiterated the sharp increase of violence against staff or inmates due to years of austerity.

It is crucial that governments develop contingency plans in close cooperation with the unions to contain, prevent and deal with the spread of covid19 in prisons.

At the same time, confined places such as prisons have the possibility to quickly adopt efficient preventive measures and ensure that no one is left behind.

In overcrowded prisons, to reduce the risk of the coronavirus spreading it is crucial to anticipate a need for more staffing and compensation to cope with shortages. It is also necessary to consider having discussions with governments about possible plans for the early release of prisoners on short term sentences who are not deemed dangerous for the rest of the population. This is planned in Ireland and in Italy it is one of the demands of some unions.

With regard to migration or refugees detention centres, we have very little information from the trade unions, partly because such centres are not unionised and have very little public scrutiny. There are however reliable sources of information from human rights campaigners, lawyers and anti-racism groups. Do not hesitate to share whatever information you might come across with.

Collecting this data is essential for the integration of prison health policies into the broader emergency public health agenda and into measures which benefit the whole of society.

EPSU can facilitate the exchange of information by email and share it with relevant public authorities at EU and international levels. We can also share it with the ETUC which has set up a dedicated website for the fight against covid-19 [here](#).

We will also be organising remote exchanges, about which the EPSU prison network will be informed.

Lastly, it is reported that in Belgium, Spain and Italy, groups of prisoners will produce protective masks. So far we have no details about the working conditions of production, but in Belgium we know it would be the initiative of inmates. Given the extreme vulnerability of inmates it is of the utmost importance that this valuable contribution be duly compensated and carried out in safety and in dignity.

For further information please contact Nadja Salson at nsalson@epsu.org

WHO has a special (small) unit on health in prisons but for now there is no covid-19 virus related information, please see [here](#).

EUROPRIS, a European organisation of prison and correctional services administrations has a dedicated webpage [here](#).

Recent developments and trade union responses so far:

Italy

Italian prisons are amongst the most overcrowded in Western Europe.

On 9 March, the day before the country's total lockdown, riots broke out in a number of prisons in reaction to restrictions on visits and the postponing of hearings at tribunals. Italy's prisoner rights ombudsman, Mauro Delma blamed the riots on prison overcrowding and fears about the rapidly spreading disease.

On 11 March, 12 deaths of inmates were reported, allegedly most deaths are attributable to overdoses of substances taken from the prison health stations. In total about 70 inmates escaped, most of whom are now back in prisons. About 40 prison penitentiary staff were wounded. Serious damage was reported in various

prisons, especially in the prison of Modena, one of Italy's red zones under quarantine, where 9 people died. During that period, it was reported that 4 inmates and 7 prison officers tested positive to corona virus.

Criticism was raised against the penitentiary administration for delays in providing protective masks and taking decisions.

EPSU's affiliate FP-CGIL has put forward three main demands: more personal protective equipment; reducing the prison population on short term sentencing for minor non violent crimes via home detention or by early acquittal for those whose sentence is imminent; and an immediate extraordinary recruitment plan of prison officers in the same way as is being done for other public administrations. As of 18 March, the government agreed to the demand of the union as well as civil society organisations and the prisoners' rights ombudsman to ease access to home detention for prisoners on less than an 18 month imprisonment sentence.

The union welcomed the government's decision to easing access to remote communication as alternatives to restrictions to family/friends/lawyers visits but the problem is that several prisons have very limited access to computers or even telephones.

The union calls for dialogue and clear lines of responsibility with the health authorities managing the fallout of the health emergency. Specific protocols must be guaranteed to protect all those in prisons, putting health and safety at the center.

The UK

The UK has the highest number of people incarcerated in absolute numbers compared to EU member states, and many prisons are overcrowded.

The government's plans involve communicating regularly with inmates, and making sure they can contact their families. Inmates who have had contact with a known coronavirus patient should be isolated in single accommodation. It is unclear whether vulnerable prisoners (age, sickness) may be released because of the particular health risks they face if they contract the coronavirus.

EPSU's affiliated union POA has expressed its commitment to working with government and employers to keep prisons and the criminal justice system as stable as possible. A constructive meeting took place on 10 March with the Director

General of the Prison Service to discuss Contingency Plans. More meetings are likely in the coming days and weeks.

The Guardian reported that bonuses would be paid to staff covering for shortages

POA publishes guidance to its members on working conditions and pay including sick pay [here](#).

Migration detention centres

It is reported that there are between 1,500 and 2,000 people detained in the UK's seven immigration removal centres, and two short-term holding centres.

In a letter signed by 10 human rights organisations and lawyers to the home secretary, strong concerns are expressed about the risk of an unchecked outbreak in migrant detention centres. The letter calls for hundreds immigration centres detainees to be released because of fears they will contract coronavirus while locked up, more [here](#).

Ireland

The prison system is currently overcrowded. The prison service says an outbreak of Covid-19 in the prisons would pose significant challenges for staff and vulnerable inmates in terms of controlling the spread among inmates and staff.

It is reported that the prison service is seeking to release more than 200 prisoners on a temporary basis to reduce the risk of the coronavirus spreading to the country's prisons. All those eligible are serving sentences of less than twelve months for non violent offences. Murderers, sex offenders, terrorists, gangsters, violent offenders or anyone who is deemed to pose a threat to public safety will not be considered. Anyone granted temporary release can also be recalled if they misbehave. The prison authorities are in discussions with the Department of Justice and seeking the approval of the Minister for the special measure.

The prison service is also introducing visiting restrictions but does not want to cancel visits because of their importance for inmates and their families. Instead, the prison service hopes to implement better and safer controls.

Spain

In a joint letter to the home minister, EPSU affiliates, CCOO and acaip-UGT, expressed their deep concern that thousands of prison staff are without protective equipment, and insisted that all must be done to prevent the coronavirus from spreading in prisons.

The unions state that the prison services are the last public administration to take organisational measures to reduce to a minimum the risk of exposure. Whereas all other administrations are closed to the public and will continue only to provide minimum services, organisational measures are yet to be taken to reduce the number of prison workers exposed to COVID-19 and to protect inmates.

The unions report that prison staff have had to work without specific instructions, which were provided on 15 March, and also without individual protection equipment (masks, gloves, gowns etc.), which is kept under lock until there are clear symptoms of the covid-19.

Since the introduction of the lockdown, visits in prisons have continued without restrictions and possibilities to ensure social distancing, see more [here](#).

France

The prison population reached a record number of 70 651 last January, with 30000 prison staff. Overcrowding is a problem especially in remand prisons.

The unions are very concerned about an outbreak of covid19 in the prison services which they see as unavoidable.

Millions of protective masks were ordered by the Ministry of Justice but as of 13 March they have yet to reach all places of detention. 350 prison officers have been put in quarantine

The unions consider that in overcrowded prisons, either more masks must be distributed to inmates or visits from friends and family need to be curtailed.

On 15 March, the government suspended all educational, social and cultural activities in prisons, visits from young or elderly people and pregnant women and visits to inmates in the same risk groups, and to a large extent the transfer of prisoners. Vocational training for staff is also suspended.

Outside Europe

In Iran, the Guardian reported that [70,000 prisoners have been released to](#) combat the spread of coronavirus in prisons, as hundreds of new infections and dozens more deaths across the country were reported after testing negative for Covid-19 and posting bail.

In Brazil, hundreds of prisoners have escaped from four semi-open prisons in São Paulo state in the south-east of Brazil after Easter prison holidays were cancelled and restrictions on visitors tightened because of coronavirus. Prison riots and breakouts are common in Brazil's overcrowded prisons, many of which are controlled by drug gangs, however coronavirus posed a new threat. In 2017 a third of Brazil's prisoners, 234,000 people, did not have a health station in their prisons and nearly 9,000 prisoners were over 60.

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