

# COVID-19: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN EUROPEAN PRISONS?

**UPDATE #14**

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EUROPEAN  
PRISON  
OBSERVATORY

## WHAT DOES THE "NEW NORMALITY" LOOK LIKE IN PRISON?

During the Covid-19 emergency, the European Prison Observatory has released [weekly updates](#) on the situation of prisons around Europe. Most European prison systems took several actions to face the virus, such as the introduction of restrictions to the entrance of family members, staff, and volunteers, decarceration measures to facilitate social distancing hence lowering the chances to spread the virus in prisons, or more phone and video calls to favour contacts with family members who were not allowed anymore to visit their detained relatives.

After the first emergency phase, restrictions started to be lifted. However, the situation is not back to a complete normality because the risk of contracting the virus is still very real; therefore, the partners of the European Prison Observatory have decided to publish new issues of the series [Covid-19: what is happening in European prisons?](#) to try to depict the "new normality" in prison systems around Europe.

The following information on prisons in **Hungary** has been collected in the last few weeks thanks to the work of EPO's member **HUNGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE** and is updated to 22 September 2020. The information published here and the upcoming updates will be available on the [European Prison Observatory website](#).

Other information can be found on the following websites.

The **Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT)** has launched an [information hub](#) of news and resources, including on how different actors in the criminal justice, penitentiary, healthcare and oversight spaces are responding to the COVID-19 situation around the world.

The **European Organization of Prison and Correctional Services (EUOPRIS)** has set up a [webpage](#) where it gathers and shares all regulations/protocols/approaches European Prison Services or related organisations have drafted or taken in order to deal with the Covid-19 virus.

**Prison Insider** collected in a [webpage](#) the measures that countries around the world are taking to guarantee the safety of all prisoners and prison staff and the consequences of the pandemic on the living conditions in prisons.

**World Prison Brief** is compiling a [list](#) of news articles from around the world on COVID-19 and prisons which will be updated regularly.

**Fair Trials** has launched the [COVID-19 Justice project](#) to monitor how criminal justice systems are being affected by the pandemic and their response.

## **WHICH COVID-19 RULES STILL CURRENTLY APPLY TO PRISONS?**

Risk assessment procedures prescribed by a Government Decree passed on 05/04/2020 still apply, (including tighter measures, 14-day quarantine after new-entries and further risk assessment processes in case of emerging symptoms). HHC submitted a FOI request for current data from the Hungarian Prison Service that contains questions regarding the current rules and internal protocols that are not public. The HHC is waiting for the answers.

## **HAVE IN PERSON FAMILY VISITS RESUMED?**

A Governmental Decree ( 90/2020. (IV. 5.) ; (7) b.) gives the right to the prison governors to restrict personal visits in prisons. According to the HHC's information, as a general practice, family visits have been suspended in all prisons since March 27, 2020, and have not been resumed. This is a source of significant tension in Hungarian prisons.





## **HAVE ACTIVITIES PREVIOUSLY CARRIED OUT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCING RESUMED IN PERSON?**

Family visits and remote hearings are still carried out via videoconferencing. Informal sources reported problems regarding the availability and quality of Skype calls in prison institutions. Inmates and their relatives are not always properly informed about the schedule of video calls, and there is no unified practice regarding the length and frequency of video calls. Some prisons lack technical conditions (number of rooms, number of computers), thereby inmates can not utilize the opportunity for video calls provided by law. Access for Skype calls is not uniformly available, but people reported about long waiting lists in some institutions.

## **ARE VOLUNTEERS AND/OR OTHER PERSONNEL (NOT BELONGING TO PRISON STAFF) ALLOWED TO ENTER IN PRISONS?**

According to HHC's information, personnel not belonging to prison staff can not enter prison facilities since March 27, 2020.

Except the lawyers, whose right to visit was not suspended as part of the restrictions. Lawyer visits are still kept, under certain regulations. Regulations include risk assessment by entry, covering temperature measuring, wearing a mask, using sanitizers and filling a questionnaire that asks about COVID 19 -related encounters and personal symptoms.

## **IS TECHNOLOGY (E.G. PHONE CALLS, VIDEO CALLS, EMAILS) STILL USED TO MAINTAIN CONTACTS WITH THE FAMILY AND/OR FOR OTHER ACTIVITIES? WHICH ONES?**

Principally besides the Skype calls that replaced personal family visits, inmates were provided free, extra telephone calls. According to informal sources, information given to inmates about this opportunity by the Hungarian Prison Service was not comprehensive. Some inmates were not properly informed and could not use that opportunity.

## **DO PRISON ADMINISTRATIONS INTEND TO KEEP USING THESE TECHNOLOGIES OR WILL THE PRISON SYSTEM STOP USING THEM AS SOON AS THEY ARE NOT NEEDED ANYMORE?**

No information. Lack of proper and comprehensive information on the measures and the extent of measures is a crucial problem regarding the COVID- policy of the Hungarian Prison Service that intensifies tension among the inmates.



## **CURRENTLY ARE THERE INMATES POSITIVE TO COVID-19?**

Based on informal sources of information there have been Covid-19 positive cases identified in more than one prison institution.

The Hungarian Prison Service confirmed 19 positive cases in a Strict and Medium Regime prison.

We do not have official information regarding further positive cases. HHC's FOI request covered that question as well.

## **HOW MANY INMATES HAVE BEEN POSITIVE TO COVID-19 SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC?**

The previously mentioned 19 positive inmates are the first officially confirmed statistics about positive cases in Hungarian prisons.

## **WHAT DOES THE "NEW NORMAL" LOOK LIKE IN PRISON?**

Most activities including educational, recreational and reintegration programs have been suspended in all prison institutions.

Based on the information provided by external sources in some prisons even the one hour long daily walk in the prison yard - generally available for all inmates, regardless of regime - have not been provided on a daily basis. Inmates who are close to release and are under less strict regime conditions can not leave the prison and are not able to request home leaves and temporary release that are provided by law. Besides the prison staff, only lawyers can enter prisons under strictly regulated circumstances.





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