

COVID-19: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN EUROPEAN PRISONS?

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EUROPEAN
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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 **Italy** has been collected in the last few weeks thanks to the work of EPO's member **ASSOCIAZIONE ANTIGONE** and is updated to 12 October 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?

After the Covid-19 emergency decrees expired on 30 June, decarceration measures ended and the suspension of prison visits and activities was lifted. Now, each prison institute has the possibility to decide frequency and modalities of prison visits, calls, prisoners' work and activities to avoid outbreaks of Covid-19 in prisons.

Since these measures have not been implemented homogeneously, Antigone carried out a [survey](#) of 30 prison institutes scattered throughout Italy. In this way, it was possible to answer the questions in this publication. The sample was not representative in a technical sense, but was significant, given that it included many of the largest institutions in the country and that these prisons alone host 23,601 inmates, 44% of the entire Italian prison population. In this sense, the sample identified was significant. The information was collected between 20 July and the first days of August. The 30 institutes monitored are located in Lombardy (6), Sicily (5), Lazio (5), Campania (5), Puglia (2), Tuscany (2), Piedmont (2), Umbria (2), and Calabria (1).



HAVE IN PERSON FAMILY VISITS RESUMED?

Family visits were resumed everywhere and only in six of the institutions monitored, mostly in Lazio and Umbria, the number of family visits granted is the minimum prescribed by the law: one.

In 60% of the cases, family visits were resumed in the number of two per month. Family visits are carried out by adopting various preventive measures (plexiglass separations, masks, temperature control, etc.) but the number of people admitted to interviews varies significantly. Very often only one family member is allowed but in some institutions the family members can be two, one adult and one minor (e.g. in Lecce, Caltagirone or Regina Coeli) or 3 as in Viterbo.

HAVE ACTIVITIES PREVIOUSLY CARRIED OUT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCING RESUMED IN PERSON?

As far as it is known, court hearings have resumed in person. Some prisons had organized activities to be carried out via videoconference that now are resuming in person with all the necessary safeguards, but in many cases this is not taking place because of the fear of Covid outbreaks.

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

In most of the monitored institutions the suspension of activities that require the entry of people from outside was lifted, but in 7 (23%) no one has entered since March or if someone enters the prison, as in Prato, Monza or Syracuse, it is only to supply clothing for prisoners in need, there is still no contact with the prisoners. Where volunteers enter, however, the numbers are often (but not always) limited and in any case all the necessary measures for the prevention of contagion are implemented.



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

Despite the lift of the suspension of family visits, in 19 institutes, 63% of the sample, telephone calls continue to be granted beyond the limits in force before the pandemic.

As far as video calls are concerned, they are still essentially made in all the institutions monitored (86,7%). In most of them, however, they have in fact become alternatives to family visits, which can be summed with them and counted within the maximum number of family visits allowed. In practice, it is now up to the inmates and their families to decide whether they prefer to have the in-person family visit or a video call. It would be desirable that, given the success of the measure and the few security problems encountered, video calls should be added to in person visits and not be an alternative to them. These are, moreover, modes of communication that often reach different people. The long commute for family visits is often excessively tiring for elderly parents or young children, who may in this case prefer video calls without influencing the count of the maximum number of visits that a prisoner can have with other family members.

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?

There are some worrying signs regarding the use of video calls after the end of the emergency. In most of the institutions monitored, it is not clear whether this tool, which has proved to be valuable in ensuring contact with the outside world, will be maintained in the future to facilitate those activities that it is not possible, or reasonable, to carry out in presence. Only one institute expressly answered no to this question (Trapani) but most of the others were unable to provide clear indications. In many cases, however, video calls in recent months have only been used for family visits and not (for example) for distant learning. However, there are exceptions. For example, in Caltagirone, 9 classrooms have been equipped with an internet access and the plan is, as well as in other institutes (Bergamo, Catanzaro), to keep going some distant learning activities, enriching the training offer available to prisoners.

In some cases the institutions, on this as on other issues, have declared that they are waiting for indications from the Department of the Penitentiary Administration (DAP). It is hoped that, as it has already happened in the past for family visits, and especially after so many recent positive experiences, the DAP will urge the institutions to extend the use of video calls as much as possible to support treatment activities.



CURRENTLY ARE THERE INMATES POSITIVE TO COVID-19?

On 30 September, there were 20 detainees positive to Covid-19; 1 of them was hospitalized. Among the personnel 57 people were found positive: 55 of them are in isolation at home while 2 of them in police barracks.

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

It was not possible to find a precise number, but a close estimate suggests around 300 detainees were positive to Covid-19 in Italian prisons. The number of deaths amounts to 4 in the case of detainees and 4 in the case of the prison personnel.

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

The prison system has not so much gone back to a real normality and the "new normality" unfortunately looks like a closed system that is allowing only few people from the outside. The reason for this high attention is clearly the prevention of Covid-19, but more efforts should be made to find ways to keep in touch with the outside world.





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