

COVID-19: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN EUROPEAN PRISONS?

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EUROPEAN
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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 **Greek** prisons has been collected in the last few weeks thanks to the work of EPO's member **SPECIAL ACCOUNT OF DEMOCRITUS UNIVERSITY OF THRACE – DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL POLICY** and is updated to 4 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.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The last two COVID-19 related official [press releases](#) of the General Secretariat for Crime Policy, competent authority for the prison system in Greece since July 2019, have been published on 25 June 2020 and on 1 October 2020. The first was about the negative results of 198 tests conducted after a suspect COVID-19 prisoner was detected but, finally not confirmed. Since then, and until 1 October, one could find information on the issue in the press (sometimes quoting declarations of government officials or publishing their interviews), the social media and in announcements of prison staff unions. On 1 October, after the first two COVID-19 positive incidents among prison staff were confirmed, a new [press release](#) assured the public that all necessary steps are taken to prevent the expansion of the disease (see also below, page 6).

WHICH COVID-19 RULES STILL CURRENTLY APPLY TO PRISONS?

A second phase of restrictive measures, regarding prisoners' contacts with the outside world and mobility within the prison system has been put in place since 13 August 2020. It is almost a "copy-paste" policy, compared with the restrictions imposed at the initial stage of measures to keep the virus out of the prison system (prohibition of prison leaves, family and children open visits, decrease of closed social visits to the minimum, prohibition of transfers to hospitals with the exception of emergencies). People entering prisons (staff members, lawyers, visitors) are temperature controlled and are obliged to cover their mouth and nose with a mask.

The [Prison Officers Union characterised](#) the new set of measures contradictory because prisoners are still transferred to courts and other authorities and return to prison, which means that they are not isolated from the outside world.

The [Prison Perimeter Security Staff Union refer](#) that COVID19 testing protocols and guidelines are not observed due to lack of sufficient tests and staff training.



HAVE IN PERSON FAMILY VISITS RESUMED?

Yes, in June and July, between the first and the second period of the restrictive measures. Since 13 August new restrictions, including prohibition of open family and children visits apply (see above).

HAVE ACTIVITIES PREVIOUSLY CARRIED OUT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCING RESUMED IN PERSON?

When the implementation of the restrictive measures started again (13 August 2020), prison directors were instructed to facilitate prisoners' e-contacts with their relatives. No other information exists on the issue, it is known, though, that the equipment which is needed to implement this instruction is available only in some prisons.

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

"Imported" programmes seem to continue, at least as regards therapeutic and educational activities, organised by structures that are subject to the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. According to informal information is available as regards other initiative, cultural programmes and religious services offered by volunteers have been suspended.

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

Phone calls and to some extent (in some prisons) e-contacts are used to facilitate prisoners' communication with their relatives. Teleconferencing is also used to facilitate prisoners' educational activities (i.e. university courses attendance and participation in exams).



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?

E-contacts were used in some prisons before the pandemic and there is guidance to expand them during the current sanitary crisis. There is no ground to consider that this kind of prisoners' communication will be abandoned at the end of the restrictions period.

CURRENTLY ARE THERE INMATES POSITIVE TO COVID-19?

There is a total lack of information on this issue.

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

According to the [Prison Officers Union](#), up to 8 September 2020 there was only one confirmed COVID-19 positive incident, in Komotini Custodial Institution. The same source, refers that not all contacts of the detected incident (prisoners and staff) were tested.

With regard to prison staff, three prison employees (from three different custodial institutions) have been [reported](#) as confirmed COVID-19 positive, two on September 26th and 27th, one more on October 4th.

This development obliged the competent authorities to recognize the first two, [announcing](#) on 1st October that all the formal sanitary protocols are observed, while on 2nd October the [Prison Staff Union doubted](#) the implementation of the necessary measures and asked the Ministries of Health and Citizens' Protection to provide all prisons with rapid tests and organize regular visits of special test units.

It has to be noted that the [guidelines](#) of the National Organization for Public Health for the management of COVID-19 infections in prisons have been issued on 7 May 2020.

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

In a nutshell, the COVID-19 era prisons are social spaces of segregation in additional quarantine. They look more like the closed, total institutions of the past and less like the normalised places of the European and international standards of the 21st century.





WWW.PRISONOBSERVATORY.ORG/

info@prisonobservatory.org