

COVID-19: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN EUROPEAN PRISONS?

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The following information on prisons in different European countries has been collected in the last few weeks thanks to the work of the European Prison Observatory members. Please note that the situation is constantly changing and that this information might already be out of date.

The information published here and the upcoming updates will be available on the [European Prison Observatory website](#).

WHO/Europe has published an interim guidance on how to deal with the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in prisons and other places of detention, entitled "Preparedness, prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention". The guidance can be found on the WHO page: [Preventing COVID-19 outbreak in prisons: a challenging but essential task for authorities](#)

The CPT has [published a statement](#) of principles relating to the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

Penal Reform International has issued a briefing note on the situation of the outbreak of a novel form of Coronavirus (COVID-19) and prevention measures in prisons and wider impacts of responses to

governments on people in criminal justice systems: Coronavirus:

Healthcare and human rights of people in prison

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.

AUSTRIA

Update: 28/04/20

Visits permitted again from 11 May 2020 & new initiative of the Minister of Justice to increase staff

Until today, only two inmates of Austrian prisons tested positive for COVID-19. Therefore, the Ministry of Justice plans to return to normality as quickly as possible. In a [press conference](#) on 27 April, the Minister of Justice Alma Zadić stated, that she is aware of how deeply the measures taken interfere with the rights of the inmates. For weeks, inmates could not receive visits and were not allowed to leave the prison at all. Nevertheless, Zadić stated that the mood remains positive according to a survey and eleven inspection visits carried out by the General Directorate, which sought talks with inmates and employees. Not only did they feel well informed about the measures but also the situation outside the prisons. However, she admits that therapeutic sessions and other counselling was hindered in the last week, especially for mentally ill offenders held under the special security measure.

Friedrich Alexander Koenig, Director General of the Prison Service, drew a positive balance of the current situation:

- Only two inmates tested positive for COVID-19 in Austrian penal institutions. They were professionally cared for in newly established, isolated access departments until their recovery.
- Seven staff members got infected outside of prisons, but thanks to their responsible behavior, the virus did not spread.
- All 28 penal institutions have isolated access departments where new detainees have to stay for the first 14 days after their arrival.
- In order to prevent a chain of infections of staff, all members of staff (prison officers, social workers, psychologists ...) were separated into groups.
- The Austrian Ombudsman Board was continuously informed about the situation and a possibility for the National Preventive Mechanism to communicate via video is about to be established.



- The newly installed 24-hour hotline of the Psychological Service Department of the Penitentiary Academy was well received by staff.
- By postponing the enforcement of prison sentences, the number of inmates was reduced by about 500 prisoners.

Next steps:

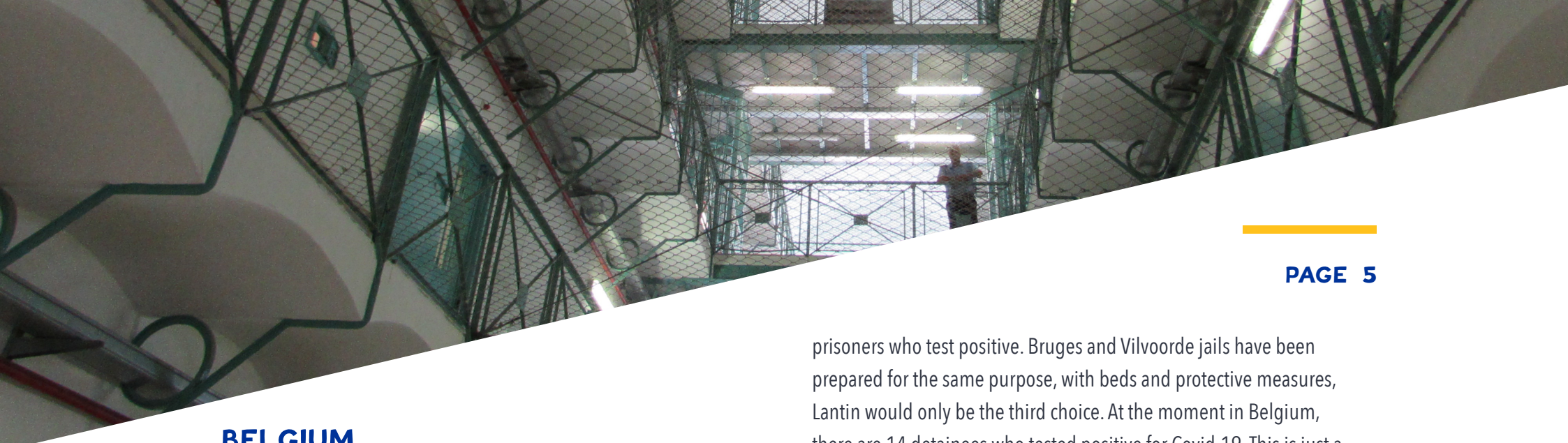
- From 11th May onwards, the Ministry of Justice plans to gradual ease the rules, particularly those with regard to visits.
- Separate release departments will be created for those inmates who will be released in the near future, in order to allow preparations for release such as day leaves, but at the same time prevent infections of the general prison population.

The staffing situation of prison officers has been tense for years. To provide relief, the Minister of Justice used the public attention at the above mentions press conference to present a new employment initiative. 176 positions are to be filled (110 prison officers and 66 administrative staff (clerks and lawyers). In order to increase the proportion of women, which

currently stands at 18% among the prison officers, women are specifically encouraged to apply.

Despite the positive statement by the Ministry of Justice, the questions whether enough is done in order to compensate for the measures taken and if the rights of inmates, especially those in insolation departments, are respected duly, cannot be answered from the outside.

Considering the situation in Austrian prisons before the COVID-19 crisis, the restrictions are definitely hitting hard on the already limited rights of many inmates. Furthermore, it remains to be seen which measures will be taken to improve the situation regarding the right to receive visits.



BELGIUM

Update: 23/04/20

A spokeswoman for the National Penitentiary Administration (DGEP) has **stated** that, as of April 23, ten inmates from different Belgian prisons as well as 47 prison officers and administrative employees have tested positive for Covid-19. Five of these prisoners are jailed in Turnhout, one comes from Forest, two from Namur, one from Marneffe and one from Tournai. One detainee has been hospitalized, while 8 of the 47 infected prison employees have already recovered. Unfortunately several warders couldn't come to work for the whole past week since they had been under quarantine at home because they showed Coronavirus symptoms.

The Lantin prison, in Walloon, has a 25-bed unit dedicated to **coronavirus specific cases**. If the situation worsens, Lantin would be the only prison in the south of the country to accept Walloon

prisoners who test positive. Bruges and Vilvoorde jails have been prepared for the same purpose, with beds and protective measures, Lantin would only be the third choice. At the moment in Belgium, there are 14 detainees who tested positive for Covid-19. This is just a precautionary measure if ever the cases of Covid-19 were to increase.



GERMANY

Update: 22/04/20

Current Figures

In total, 14 staff members and four prisoners tested positive for COVID-19. However, these figures are not reliable, as they come from different sources (i.e. official press releases of the ministries of justice and newspaper reports) and are published at different times. The number of suspected cases and persons in quarantine are considerably higher. For example, in a prison in Thuringia alone, five employees and two prisoners have been quarantined. 59 more prisoners were quarantined in their cells. Corona tests were able to give the all-clear for about 50 prisoners and some staff members, but the prison's doctor tested positive. However, this only **became known** after his weekly visit. In a prison in Saxony, 42 prisoners were under quarantine in mid-April. The **suspicious cases** at the ward for older prisoners are particularly worrying.

Preventive Measures

Measures have been taken to inform the prisons and especially their staff about COVID-19 and infection routes and prevention. Generally accepted standards of hygiene, set by the Robert Koch-Institute, were applied, as well as the obligation to report cases to the responsible health authorities. Furthermore, in some federal states (e.g. Bavaria and Thuringia), the prisons were supplied with protective masks and other protective equipment for staff and key personnel. However, prisoners report that prisoners who are working as trustees in close contact with other prisoners are not provided with masks.

The Ministries of Justice point out that the minimum distance is respected wherever possible. However, not only the structural conditions (e.g. shared showers and cells) but also specific processes in the organization make a minimum distance of 1.5 meters impossible. Especially in waiting areas, and most remarkable the medical ward, where prisoners gather, there is often not enough space to keep distance.

The majority of the German federal states have introduced a 14-day quarantine for newly arrived prisoners.

Measures in response to corona cases

Generally, the first step is to isolate infected prisoners and suspected cases. The management of these cases is coordinated with the responsible health authority. Prisoners remain in their cells and are supervised and treated by the staff. This also includes medical care.

If considered necessary, prisoners are transferred to a prison hospital. However, the Prisoners' Union (GG/BO) doubts whether the few prison hospitals can guarantee enough places for the treatment of infected prisoners. In case of lacking capacities prisoners have to be transferred to outside hospitals regularly requiring six officers per prisoners for observation. It is unclear how this is supposed to be handled in the current situation and in case of a massive outbreak in a prison.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, group isolation will be applied in the event of an accumulation of cases. This means that the infected prisoners are accommodated in shared rooms.

Measures to reduce the number of prisoners

The postponement of sentences, especially subsidiary penalties for failure to pay fines as well as short term prison sentences (sentence length varies from months to years) has resulted in free capacities in German prisons, but, the execution of the sentences will presumably be resulting in higher numbers of prisoners later.

In addition, many federal states temporarily released persons with subsidiary penalties, shorter prison sentences and thus interrupt the execution of the sentences. The criteria for the interruption of the prison sentences can range from the necessity of accommodation outside of prison, secure health care to no disciplinary measures and planned measures regarding foreign nationals' status (such as deportation) (e.g.

Hamburg). Furthermore, the execution of juvenile detention is frequently suspended, and juvenile detention centres are even closed.

On the other hand, Prisons have – as far as it is known – stopped leaves, accompanied leaves and transition management measures.

Visitation

Visits are prohibited in the majority of the federal states. Exceptions will be decided on a case-by-case basis. Visits by lawyers are excluded from this measure. Some federal states, such as Berlin, have installed divider screens for the visits.

Many federal states, such as Baden-Wuerttemberg, Berlin and Lower Saxony, report that telephone hours are to be extended and, if necessary, financially supported (e.g. in Bavaria and Rhineland-Palatinate). In Thuringia, Saarland, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Berlin and Saxony, the possibility of video calls is supposed to be established. Other federal states introduced the possibility of making phone calls in the cell/ detention rooms.

Visits by external professionals, associations and volunteers are suspended or restricted to specific groups, such as therapists. Religious services and Friday prayers were suspended (e.g. Berlin) or restricted (e.g. Rhineland-Palatinate).

Work/ Education/ Activities

Employment opportunities and school/vocational training options are restricted but not completely prohibited. Federal states either pay the remuneration, a compensation or neither of the two options. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Lower Saxony, the workplaces in individual institutions have been converted to allow the production of protective masks by prisoners.

IRELAND

Update: 03/04/20

As of April 3 four prison staff had **tested positive** for Coronavirus, including two officers from the Cork Prison, one from the Mountjoy Prison and one from the Portlaoise Prison. So far, no prisoners across the 13 Irish jails have been infected. However, it has been confirmed that 142 detainees have been isolated since then. Sources have stated that isolated inmates have their cells opened just twice a day, for breakfast and at lunchtime. Video and phone calls have been allowed to prisoners in order to let them speak to their relatives, replacing physical visits. Between March 11 and April 3, IPS has reported to have released 292 inmates with the aim to reduce the prison population and improve infection control.

NETHERLANDS

Update: 23/04/20

At the end of March a prison staff doctor had been infected by the virus. Since then, six inmates have as well tested positive for Covid-19 at the Schiphol Judicial Complex while three prisoners from different departments of the institution claimed that most guards still do not keep the security distance from detainees and don't wear PPEs. Detainees are

complaining because security measures are not respected considering that they still get outdoor time dozens at a time. Despite calls from lawyers to take more measures and release prisoners more quickly, the Ministry of Justice and Security still believes that it is sufficient to isolate infected detainees and to restrict movements in and out of the institution and banning any kind of visit.

Due to the current Covid-19 crisis, prisons have run out of electronic monitoring, that the government use as a condition to release some prisoners. As a result of the new security measure, that prescribes the early release of a certain number of inmates, many more electronic monitoring devices than usual are in use: roughly 700. This means that suspects or convicted criminals that would otherwise be temporarily released, remain imprisoned. Some suspects who have been in custody for 13 months have asked the court to be released under certain conditions, but the prosecutor has rejected the request, also because there are no devices available to satisfy the conditions for a temporary "suspension" of their pre-trial detention. Justice spokesmen however has stated that several agreements are being made with some organizations to prevent detainees from being jailed unnecessarily only because the devices are already in use.

SWEDEN

Update: 9/04/20

As of April 9, six inmates had **tested positive** for Covid-19. Five of them are housed in the Stockholm region while one is in the North Region. The chief of police at the detention center in Malmö, Andreas Wallin, has stated that if inmates show any symptom, they are immediately isolated in prison. The Prison and Probation Service has received personal protective equipments (PPEs) from the Swedish Armed Forces.

TURKEY

Update: 28/04/20

The Ministry of Justice, Abdülhamit Gül, has **announced** on April 28 that 120 inmates from 4 different penal prisons have been diagnosed with Coronavirus and they have all been hospitalised. At the moment there are no prisoners in intensive care and their condition is generally good. The Ministry has also stated that new detainees are quarantined for 14 days when they arrive to prison and that the correctional facilities are regularly disinfected, while cleaning products are provided for free to each prisoner.



UNITED KINGDOM

Update: 27/04/20

As of April 22 the Ministry of Justice has **confirmed** that 300 prisoners have tested positive for coronavirus across 69 prisons as well as 237 prison and 10 Prisoner Escort and Custody Services (PECS) staff working in 57 prisons.

This week inmates will start sewing visors and sets of scrubs and drawstring bags to help **combat the shortage of PPEs**. Robert Buckland, the Justice Secretary, has stated that eight category B and C prisons from all the UK will help the National Health Service in this way. The products will cost a third of the usual price and

detainees will be paid £12.50-a-week for their work. Prisoners will be making 1,000 sets of scrubs each week, since they still need to maintain the minimum social distance. An order for 5,000 visors and 5,000 drawstring bags has already been placed.

Meanwhile, more than half of the correctional facilities in England and Wales have at least a prisoner who has tested positive for Covid-19. At the moment, it has been confirmed that at least 13 inmates have died after contracting Coronavirus.

Two prison staff working at Pentonville jail in north London have died after showing several symptoms of Coronavirus. Three detainees recently died after contracting the virus were housed at HMP Littlehey in Cambridgeshire, while others were being held at Birmingham,

Manchester, the privately run Oakwood prison near Wolverhampton, Altcourse in Merseyside, Belmarsh in South East London, Whatton in Nottinghamshire, High Down in Surrey and Low Newton, County Durham.

The government has announced in the past few days that 4,000 low-risk detainees who have less than two months left of their sentence will be eligible for early release. The Probation Service has also stated that all those freed early, on temporary licence, will be electronically monitored before they leave prison. Recently around 3,500 prison staff, that represent about a tenth of the prison system workforce, were said to be in self-isolation because they showed coronavirus typical symptoms.



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