

Prison systems and conditions

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The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Joëlle BERGERON (EFDD, FR) on prison systems and conditions.

Members recalled that in 2014 prisons across the EU were holding over **half a million inmates**, including both convicted persons serving their definitive sentence and persons accused of a crime who were on remand. Although prison conditions and prison management are responsibilities of the Member States, the **EU also has a necessary role to play in protecting the fundamental rights of prisoners** held in prisons in some Member States where conditions are degrading and inhumane.

Improving conditions of detention: in view of the alarming conditions of detention in some Member States and the state of a number of several European prisons, the report called on the Member State to comply with the rules on detention arising from the instruments of international law and Council Europe standards.

Members deplored the fact that prison **overcrowding** is widespread in Europe, with the number of prisoners exceeding the number of available places in a third of the European penitentiary institutions. Overcrowding in prisons often has serious impact on the safety of staff and prisoners.

While stressing that increasing prison capacity is not the only solution to overcrowding, Members called on the Member States to:

- allocate adequate resources to the **refurbishment and modernisation** of prisons in order to prioritise small units with accommodation for a restricted number of prisoners;
- establish **dignified conditions** of detention and create collective spaces that meet the objectives of activities provision and socialisation;
- encourage **rehabilitation and reintegration** into society and develop educational facilities;
- ensure a safer **living and working environment** for both prisoners and staff.

Detention rules: Members advocated that **detention rules that vary** in line with the prisoners and the level of risk they pose constitute a good method for preventing recidivism and preventing short-term inmates and those convicted of minor offences from coming into contact with long-term inmates.

Prisoners should be offered a **balanced programme of activities** that allows them to spend as many hours a day outside their cells to benefit from human and social interactions. Solitary confinement should be used as a last resort.

Member States should ensure that prisoners have **regular contact** with family and friends by allowing them to serve their sentences in establishments close to their homes, by encouraging visits, telephone calls and the use of electronic means of communication, subject to authorisation by the judge and monitoring by the prison administration.

In addition, **pre-trial detention should only be used as a last resort** and used in the strictly necessary cases and for the shortest period of time, in compliance with the National Code of Criminal Procedure.

The number of prisoners could be reduced by the frequent use of **non-custodial punishments**.

Rehabilitation and reintegration: Members stated that, in addition to the punitive aspect of imprisonment, attention should also be devoted to the development of practical skills and the rehabilitation of prisoners, as well as to reduce recidivism. They encouraged Member States to introduce sentence adjustment measures, particularly for the shortest sentences, including the use of day release, increased use of home detention and electronic tagging. The report also suggested that **reinforced measures should be put in place to monitor prisoners** after their release from prison where they have been convicted of serious crimes.

Members recommended, *inter alia*:

- taking better account of the vulnerability of elderly and disabled prisoners and persons with mental illness;
- acting against all forms of discrimination in the treatment of prisoners on grounds of sexual orientation;
- paying particular attention to the needs of women in prison;
- developing a national action plan to prevent suicide of persons in detention;
- ensuring that children in prison are treated in a manner that takes into account their best interests, including being held separately from adults at all times, also during prison transfers, and having the right to maintain contact with their families unless a court rules otherwise;
- ensuring the provision of health care services and infrastructure in prisons.

Radicalisation in prison: Members suggested tackling radicalisation by improving the **detection of early signs** of the phenomenon (e.g. by training staff and improving prison intelligence), developing educational measures and by strengthening communication and inter-faith dialogue. The report stressed that **differentiated detention regimes** for detainees who are considered to be radicalised should only be imposed on a **case-by-case** basis, be based on a judicial decision and be subject to review by the competent judicial authorities.

Member States are encouraged to **share best practices** regarding education, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, with the particular aim of improving reintegration after leaving prison and to help prevent recidivism and further radicalisation.