



Newsletter 1

28 April 2020

Dear readers,

COVID-19 has thrown a spotlight on prisons, on the inherent challenges in ensuring social distancing in overcrowded facilities, the inability to adequately protect health and welfare, the suspension of physical visits and the consequent loss of contact for prisoners, their children and families increasing children's concern for their parents there. Within the COVID-19 restrictions, the need for respect and care for and awareness of others have become more important than ever. This newsletter aims to highlight positive, human responses, often simple ways in which individuals, organisations and states across Europe are working to promote respect and dignity, to foster communication and solidarity, and to help ensure well-being among children and their parent in prison.

The more we know about positive outcomes emerging during this crisis, the more we can advocate for their implementation now and in future; in this way, our immediate emergency responses can lead to lasting change, and global crisis precede global awareness and global health. Rethinking prison and societal attitudes to it can resolve problems, including the stigma of imprisonment which affects prisoners and their children, and can help build more human, resilient justice systems. It's time for a paradigm shift. We hope that this regular newsletter will help provide some inspiration for just such a shift.

In collaboration,



A Note from the German Institute for Human Rights, CRC Monitoring Mechanism

Expansion of Europe-wide videoconferencing required

Children whose parents are in prison face a difficult situation that can in some cases be traumatic. Above all problems that arise, the most significant is that imprisonment severely limits the possibilities of direct child-parent contact. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, detainees throughout Europe currently cannot receive visits in prisons. External contact is only possible via telephone or letters, and rarely also via videoconferencing. The personal contact vital to children's development – difficult to facilitate and rarely designed to meet children's needs even in normal conditions – is therefore not possible.

This impacts children of all ages, but especially younger children, and aggravates an already difficult life situation for the estimated 2.1 million children who have a parent in prison in Europe. Even in times of the coronavirus pandemic, states must fully comply with the requirements of the UNCRC to honour the right to protection, provision and participation without restriction, and to uphold the right for children to maintain contact with a parent who is imprisoned (e.g., Articles 3 and 9).

Current examples from Germany

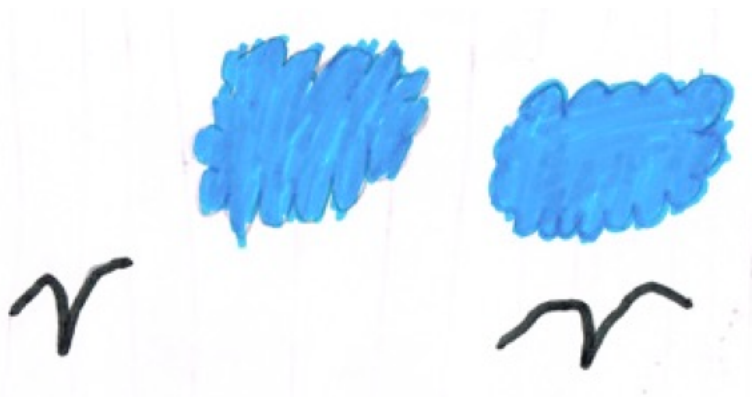
In Germany, legal regulations concerning contact between children and their imprisoned

parents vary among federal states, and thus videoconferencing technologies are being implemented regionally. In view of the current restrictions on personal visits, the federal state of Saxony has made virtual visiting via videoconferencing possible in all prisons since 22 April, setting up 33 video-visit stations in ten prisons; similar reports have also been given from other federal states in Germany. One of the reasons given for the measure is to meet the objectives of a family-oriented penal system that aims to honour the rights of children whose parents are imprisoned during the coronavirus pandemic.

Telephone contact between prisoners and families is widely possible in Germany's prisons. And while during times of normal functioning prisoners pay for phone calls with a credit balance, some phone companies, notably in Berlin and Saxony, have made a one-time donation of free minutes to prisoners as a response to the current crisis.

Further measures are needed, for example for smaller children or children for whom contact with their imprisoned parents via video is not possible. Although videoconferencing cannot replace personal visits in the long term – Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 stresses that videoconferencing should never be seen as an alternative which replaces face-to-face contact between children and their imprisoned parents – it should continue to be offered in addition to personal visits.

More information about the German Institute for Human Rights, National CRC Monitoring Mechanism, and their work relating to children with parents in prison, can be found on their website, [accessible here](#).



Updates from the COPE Network

ASBL Relais Enfants-Parents, Belgium

In Belgium, since in-person visits have been suspended as a result of COVID-19, ASBL Relais Enfants-Parents has been focused on facilitating contact between children and families, and parents in prison. One way in which this is taking place is through the printing and sending of messages and family photos to parents on the inside – especially pictures of kids enjoying time outdoors or doing fun activities. The team has been providing direct support to children and families over telephone and Facebook, relaying messages from families on the outside and from parents and loved ones on the inside, and is working on a project to send board games to families to raise morale.

The Relais has had some success in coordinating videoconferencing between kids and their parents in detention at Prison de Forest (Brussels) and Prison de Lantin (Liège), though the technical and organisational difficulties of instituting broad access to videoconferencing while working from confinement have made it clear that these systems must be put in place for the future. Hopefully the efforts made to connect children and imprisoned parents during this difficult period will result in permanent videoconferencing technologies in Belgium and elsewhere, which would be in line with Article 26 of the Council of Europe’s Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 concerning children with imprisoned parents.

In collaboration with other organisations, the Relais is composing an open letter to the Belgian Minister of Justice appealing for improvements to the [dangerous conditions](#) present in [Belgium’s prisons](#), hotspots of COVID-19 propagation, emphasising the need to acknowledge and act to mitigate social and psychological harms to prisoners and their families, which inevitably take a backseat to public health in the current crisis. A similar paper is being written to the Ministry regarding the rights protection of children with imprisoned parents.

For more information about ASBL Relais Enfants-Parents and their initiatives, have a look at their brand new website, [accessible here](#), and their [Facebook page](#).

KIND Centre of Expertise, Netherlands

The KIND Centre and their partners in the Netherlands have been focusing energies on producing light-hearted resources for connecting children with their parent in prison. One of these is a set of ‘interactive’ cards featuring games and puzzles, developed with input from children, which parents in detention send to their child or children on the outside. The child(ren) are then encouraged to fill out the cards, draw on them, write messages and return to parents in a pre-paid envelope.



The KIND Centre has also been sending children a video entitled [‘How do prisons cope with the coronavirus: Information for kids’](#) (in Dutch), produced by the Humanitas volunteer organisation and intended to answer questions that kids might have about the circumstances confronting their parent on the inside: ‘What if daddy gets sick?’ ‘Why can’t mommy and I visit?’ ‘What does the prison do to ensure that everyone there stays healthy?’ The video explains in child-friendly language that the rules inside prison look a lot like the rules outside, and that though they aren’t allowed to visit, they can ‘draw a picture of mom/dad and you together and send it, write a nice letter to mom/dad...think of what you like to do when you are sad, talk to someone about it at home.’ The Dutch Ministry of Justice has suspended visits but pledged to increase access to telephones and videoconferencing technology.

[Find updates on the KIND Centre’s initiatives by following this link.](#)

Prison Administration Social Services, Catalonia

Our contacts at the Social Services branch of the Catalonian Prison Service have mobilised their teams to respond to the suspension of family visits with ways to keep families in frequent touch with detainees, introducing remote visiting, extended telephone access and weekly videocalls. ‘Treatment teams’, which include social workers, educators, lawyers and

psychologists – along with cultural mediators and artistic monitors – are working together to call families to give support and information, notifying them about suspended visits and new procedures, including for maintaining contact with prisoners. A member of the treatment team also provides technical support and responds to detainees' concerns about their family after the call.

As well as providing guidance for prisoners requiring family support, especially in cases when a prisoner's partner must work and take care of a child, these same treatment teams have been responsible for the difficult task of individually assessing all cases proposing early release of prisoners. Núria Pujol, a Family Participation Manager and COPE member, writes, 'It has been a pleasure to see how all these measures and new family communications have allowed us to keep track of reactions and relations between the prisoners and their families, with great joy and satisfaction.'

Artistic monitors in all prisons in Catalonia have also led positive initiatives for families, children and frontline workers, where prisoners have painted posters with the mottos, 'Everything will be fine' and 'Stay home, save lives', pictures of which have been widely broadcasted as a way for prisoners to express thanks to healthcare workers. In one unit, prisoners, officers and treatment teams have made a [wonderful and reassuring video for families](#), using the same mottos and including other messages for family members, which does a great job of highlighting the importance of family for everyone – prisoners and prison officers included. These initiatives have led to [positive visibility](#) in the [Catalonian press](#).





Prisoners and prison officers in one Catalanian prison made this [wonderful and reassuring video for families](#) specific to the COVID-19 crisis

Families Outside, Scotland

Our Scottish partners at Families Outside report that progress is being made – though not without resistance – towards improving contact between families and prisoners while in-person visits are disallowed. The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) has responded to demands for increased contact by adding £2.50 in telephone credit each week to prisoner’s accounts, and suspending charges for their Email-A-Prisoner programme, which allows people to send emails, printed and delivered to loved ones inside, and prisons administrations have been asked to facilitate reply mail as well. One source has reported that 6,000 mobile phones and 200 tablets have been ordered, but at time of writing these have not been delivered, and no public announcement has been made. The SPS has also installed a method for the electronic transfer of funds to people in prison, where once family members were forced to send money or property via post.

For Families Outside, this period is marked by overwhelming demand for support from families and children with a parent or loved one in prison. Eighty-two per cent of recent referrals to their Regional Support team have related to COVID-19, and calls to their Helpline increased by 114 per cent in the span of three weeks. Most of the contact that they

have had with children and families is one-on-one via phone or videoconference, but they have additionally been experimenting with setting up online group sessions so that young people can keep in touch, following the success of a similar initiative by the [MyTime Project](#) in England.

[Check out the Families Outside website here.](#)

Fédération Relais Enfants-Parents, France

Since the French government's suspension of family visits in prison on 17 March, the Fédération des Relais Enfants-Parents, which has its headquarters in Paris, has organised a telephone hotline for all of its French branches, mobilising ten psychologists, available for several hours, five days a week, to provide children and parents living in confinement with a support resource during this unique situation. The support line is intended to allow children and parents in confinement to discuss the difficulties they are experiencing with a professional – from coping with restricted living space to separation anxieties – and the conflicts that come as a result.

With the support of the direction of the Penitentiary Administration, this service is being extended to children and families of detainees, with the hope that this service will become a long-term programme. Given this open channel with the prison administration, the Fédération is looking to permanently institute a similar 'Parenthood' call line for detainees to have access to parenting support.

[For more information about the FREP, visit their website by following this link.](#)

Call for children's voices

Dr Shona Minson, a legal expert on the sentencing of mothers in the UK and author of [Maternal Sentencing and the Rights of the Child \(2020\)](#), is conducting a study of the experiences of children who have a parent in prison during the coronavirus lockdown. If you are the parent or caregiver of a child with a parent in prison and are willing to share your experiences with her, please click on the link below, which takes you to an information sheet explaining more about the study and what taking part involves. The survey is completely anonymous, and you can withdraw at any time by closing your browser.

If you have questions, please email Dr Shona Minson, Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford (shona.minson@crim.ox.ac.uk).

Here is a link to the **survey for parents and caregivers** of children impacted by parental imprisonment during COVID-19: <https://oxford.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/children-during-covid-19>.

Dr Minson is also surveying **organisations and support services** for children impacted by parental imprisonment during COVID-19. A link to that survey can be found here: <https://oxford.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/support-services-during-covid-19>.



Other resources related to COVID-19

Key tools and perspectives:

- [COVID-19 Prevention Measures in European Prisons](#) (EuroPris)
- [‘Virtually there: the role of online visits in supporting family contact’](#) (Prison Reform Trust)
- [How to talk about human rights during COVID-19](#) (Civil Liberties Union for Europe)
- [‘Coronavirus: Prison Fever’ International information hub](#) (Prison Insider)
- [COVID-19 and Persons Deprived of Liberty global database](#) (Association for the Prevention of Torture)

Statements from the Council of Europe:

- [‘COVID-19 pandemic: urgent steps are needed to protect the rights of prisoners in Europe’](#)
- [COVID-19 related statement](#) from the Council for Penological Co-Operation Working Group (PC-CP)
- [‘Statement of principles relating to the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty’](#), by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

In the news:

- [‘It’s harder for them than it is for me’: When a mother does time, her children do too](#) (*The Guardian*)
- [Richard Garside: ‘The UK is lagging behind Europe on coronavirus in prisons’](#) (*The Guardian*)

Online Events:

- [Webinar on the implications of the coronavirus for the criminal justice system](#) (Centre for Crime and Justice Studies)
- [2getherland online gathering of children and adults](#) (Act2gether)

Keep an eye out for the forthcoming results of a survey carried out in the last month by the [International Coalition of Children With Incarcerated Parents \(INCCIP\)](#), which includes responses from 57 people in 14 different countries across 6 continents.

We wish health and resilience to you and yours, your collaborators and community, during this period of upheaval.

**Best wishes,
The COPE team**



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