



# THE ISSUES ON REFORMING THE PENITENTIARY SYSTEMS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

**Peter Ruzsonyi, PhD**

*University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary*

*Dean of the Faculty of Law Enforcement*

**Keywords:** prison-crisis, COVID-19, international review, reintegration

## ABSTRACT

The criminal justice process includes: discovering information about the committing criminal offense; investigation; arrest of the suspect; imposition of a sentence; in many cases the enforcement of imprisonment and finally the reintegration of the former prisoner. The citizens' sense of security depends on the completeness of this process because it is in the common interest of members of societies that released ex-prisoners do not jeopardise the order of peaceful coexistence within communities. Nonetheless, during the analysis of the security challenges of prisons amplified by COVID-19, the law enforcement profession has very little engagement with the imprisonment and the reintegration of detainees. This is a huge mistake, because prison systems are in a global crisis and have been for more than 40 years – and the COVID-19 epidemic has only exacerbated this original ongoing crisis – so the effectiveness of prison systems has never been more questionable than it is at this moment. It can be stated that the COVID-19 infection affected the continents and certain geographical areas to varying degrees, resulting in the unfortunate outcome of prison riots breaking out in some of the most infected countries in Europe due to the uncertainty of the convicts and the restrictive measures taken. This paper will describe and analyse the typical causes of the both the original ongoing crisis of the prison systems and the new health crisis, then propose measures to improve the situation. The proposals are based on the international literature and positive experiences in Hungary.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the emergence and rapid spread of the COVID-19, prisons have become one of the defining contemporary security challenges of the present age in a matter of a few months, almost all over the world. However, it would be erroneous to attribute the current situation in prisons as solely a consequence of the coronavirus. To avoid misconceptions, the study distinguishes between two types of crisis: (1) “general crisis” (the ongoing crisis of the prison systems) and (2) “health crisis” (related to the COVID-19 pandemic). The development of the general crisis has been ongoing for decades, but the average citizen appears to hardly notice, and unfortunately it is more likely that it is preferable to turn a blind eye to the situation than it is to address publicly. A bigger problem is that in some countries, both the criminal justice system and the law enforcement profession pay unjustifiably little attention to the state of prisons and the treatment of prisoners. It is no exaggeration to say that countless prison systems have been in a general crisis over the last decades and the problem is much more complex and significant than the current health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We can posit quite confidently that the general crisis that had been smouldering under the surface for decades has now ignited and become much more evident by the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, it is important to make it clear that this additive “dual” crisis situation – at least in my interpretation - is an uncertain status from which the situation can turn for the better and for the worse. Ergo, a condition that professionals need to pay attention to and do everything possible to ensure that this “dual” crisis situation doesn’t turn into an extremely critical condition, which can mean a serious disturbance, an emergency and potentially the possible inoperability of the system.

There is a great deal of evidence-based research proving that the vast majority of prisons today are no longer able to perform their basic function: to facilitate the effective reintegration of prisoners. The efficiency of the traditional prison system is low, indicated by the rates of criminal recidivism around the world reported to be as high as 50% and have not declined in recent years (Walmsley, 2018).

Although the archaic prison fits into the course of the accepted criminal justice process, a significant proportion of the released inmates are only able to reintegrate into the “normal” society for a short time before returning to prison for committing further crimes. One of the reasons for this is that the “classical” prison model based on centuries-old traditions are largely located on the periphery of society — both philosophically and physically. We should not be surprised that the re-offending and recidivism among the released whom had been exiled from society is generally very high (Yukhnenko, Sridhar and Fazel, 2019). How could the released prisoners be prepared to be reintegrated into the real world by moving them away from the real world? In my opinion, there is very little chance for successful reintegration in prison systems operating in the “classical” form. Another major obstacle to effective reintegration is that when prisoners leave the prison gate and return to society, they immediately find themselves on the peripheral fringes, without a supportive environment and a financially stable family background, they hardly have a chance to provide themselves with work, accommodation and a normal livelihood. Of course, recidivism is not compulsory in their case either, but its risk is certainly very high (Ruzsonyi, 2009).

In the present study we review the characteristics of both types of prison crises on an international level, the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on prisons and finally we present the international recommendations and the measures taken in Hungarian prisons for the prevention of the epidemic and the reduction of its negative effects.

## 1. WORLDWIDE GENERAL CRISIS IN THE FIELD OF IMPRISONMENT<sup>1</sup>

This type of crisis started more than 40 years ago and has now grown significantly. Catherine Heard, director of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research's World Prison Research Programme, said: "Prison has a poor track record of reducing reoffending or equipping people for a worthwhile life on release. (...) Data show, many of the countries where the number of prisoners has grown the most in recent years also has some of the worst levels of overcrowding. We shouldn't be surprised when overcrowded, under-resourced prisons produce violence, despair, and more crime" (Walmsley, 2018). Russian prisons are, for example, infamous for their overcrowded conditions. The Kresty penal institution in Saint Petersburg is said to be one of the most overcrowded prisons in world. The capacity is virtually 3000 members, but the real number is never fewer than 10,000. (Ürmösné, 2018).

The experts from Great Britain and the United States of America are more critical and outspoken. Prins's opinion is that "the American criminal justice system is in a state of crisis" (Prins, 1996, p. 493). Generally, the physical conditions of the prisons are outrageous. The government issued with unprecedented warning that inmates are being driven to take their lives as inspectors reveal conditions "worse they've ever seen" (Bulman, 2018).

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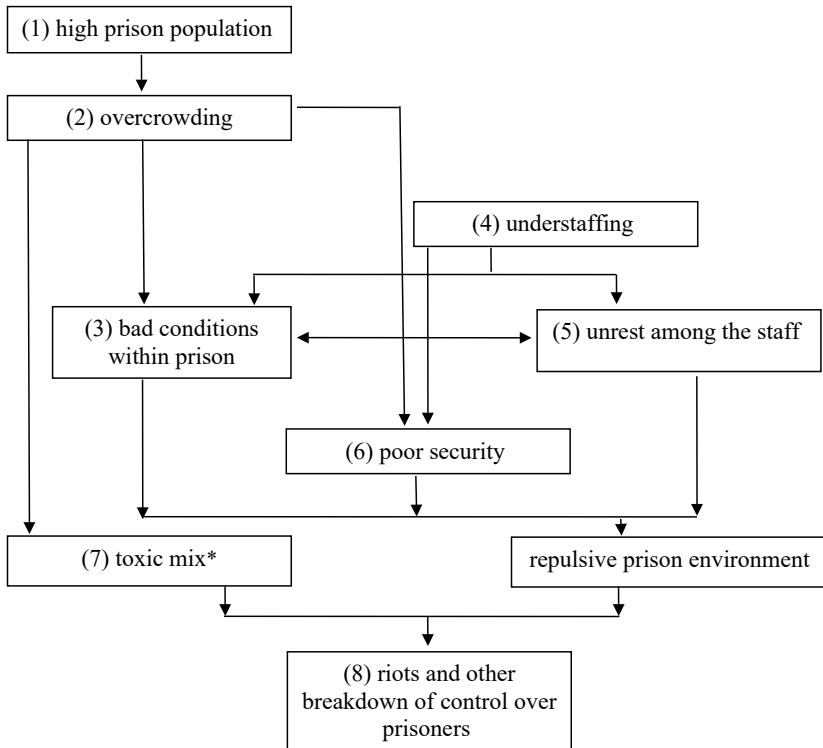
<sup>1</sup> The development and gradual intensification of the general prison crisis is true for most regions and countries on our planet, although the problems are present in varying degrees. The signs of the crisis are least recognisable in the Scandinavian states. Iceland's prison situation is exceptional, perhaps this country avoided the general crisis: the most: the RECONVICTION RATE of the released is only 27% and only half of the prison's capacity is used. Among the countries with a significant number of detainees, Norway has the best results and the best prison conditions. This is also noteworthy because in the 1990s its reconviction rate was still 60-70%, which has now dropped to 20%. For Norway, the growing number of prisoners may be a problem, although the number of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants is still considered very low worldwide perspective. In Denmark and Sweden, the RECONVICTION RATE is high (63% and 61% respectively) while in these two countries only 2/3rd of prisons capacities are filled. Finland's situation is exceptional in several aspects. The physical condition of the prisons is good, the situation of the staff is balanced, and one of the central elements of the country's penal policy is to support detainees and facilitate their reintegration. The overcrowding of institutions is AN unknown CONCEPT BECAUSE only half of prison capacity being used. Their only problem may be the increase in the number and proportion of foreign detainees – the number of foreign prisoners increased from a near zero to a figure that corresponds to about 9 % of the Finnish prisoner rates. (Yukhnenko – Sridhar and Fazel, 2019; Eurostat, 2021; World Prison Brief, 2021; Lappi-Seppälä, 2009)

Ricciardelli and his co-authors' statement is: "it must be recognised that prison, in its past or present form, has not been deemed successful for the rehabilitation of prisoners, the deterrence or prevention of future criminal behaviours and providing retribution – serving justice to those who were victimised by crime" (Ricciardelli, Crichton and Adams, 2014, p. 117).

Krason's judgement is that criminal law and criminal justice in the United States can reasonably be deemed to be in a state of crisis. The purpose of imprisonment – and more broadly of punishment – seems to be obscured (Krason, 2013).

The United Nations has the broadest perspective on the modern prison crisis. Its report summarises the recent situation: "a large number of prison systems around the world are at a stage of crisis, the serious effects of which harm prisoners, their families and societies as a whole. The reality in many prisons tends to be not only far from international standards, but also risks undermining the ultimate purpose of a sentence of imprisonment: the protection of society from crime" (United Nations, 2018). Elsner's opinion is to be followed: handling of this challenging situation became more and more difficult, because many experts agree that the penal systems of today are in a worldwide state of crisis (Elsner, 2006).

Cavadino and his co-authors offered the orthodox interpretation for the root causes of prison crisis. According to their opinion the 'crisis' has seven interlinking factors which culminate in grave problems for the prison system. To start, (1) the high prison population leads to both (2) overcrowding and (3) bad conditions (for both staff and inmates). In turn, this leads to (4) understaffing, (5) staff unrest and (6) poor security. The authors suggest that these factors symbolise the end product of the crisis; (7) the toxic mix of prisoners which ultimately lead to (8) riots and disorder (Cavadino, Dignan and Mair, 2013, p. 11).



**Figure 1:** The account of the original ongoing penal crisis

\* Toxic mix: a combination of different types of difficult prisoners within a single institution.

Source: Based on Cavadino, Dignan and Mair (2013, p. 11)

The general crisis or near-crisis situation has developed in other fields of prisons. Some authors and institutions and research groups have named additional nodes:

1. The mental health of prisoners has been steadily deteriorating for decades (Kupers, 1999; James and Glaze, 2006; Haney, 2006; Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015).
2. A relatively recent but significant problem is the drastic increase in the number of elderly detainees (Aday, 2003).

3. Race- and ethnicity-based prison gangs' activity (van der Kolk, 1987; Hunt et al, 1993; Western, 2002; McDonald, 2003; Hill, 2004, 2009; Valdez, 2005; Knox, 2005; Skarbek, 2012).
4. Economic crisis – the VERA Institute of Justice (2010) with a comprehensive analysis pointed out that in the US “the fiscal crisis began in December 2007 has spurred lawmakers to reconsider who is punished and how. High recidivism rates among formerly incarcerated people have also given officials cause to re-evaluate existing policies” (VERA Institute of Justice, 2010, p. 2). The study outlined a bleak picture of the measures expected to alleviate the economic crisis: “the ongoing strategies include reducing personnel costs, downsizing or eliminating programs, and closing facilities. States are also turning toward other administrative efficiencies as a means of cutting costs, including changes in food services, implementing new technology, and exploring strategies to save on energy costs” (VERA Institute of Justice, 2010, p. 10). Despite the difficulties, however, the VERA Institute of Justice in its study takes an optimistic approach. According to their opinion, the only way forward is if “for corrections agencies, this means operating facilities in the most efficient ways possible and reducing costs by identifying offenders who can be safely supervised in the community at less cost than in a prison cell. The fiscal crisis will continue to prompt states and the federal government to re-examine their policies and practices. Through efforts to reduce spending, policy makers are learning about less punitive, more effective ways to treat individuals who commit crimes, especially nonviolent crimes” (VERA Institute of Justice, 2010, p. 19).

The general crisis of imprisonment thus began decades before the coronavirus appeared, however, the emergence of the epidemic compounded the processes, and at the same time highlighted the weaknesses of the penitentiary system.



## 2. COVID-19 AND THE PENITENTIARY SYSTEM

### 2.1. THE BARBED WIRE DOES NOT PROTECT ANYONE FROM COVID-19 INFECTION

The coronavirus has caused a health crisis that affected all areas of our lives. The negative health and psychological impacts of the epidemic were multiplied by the fact that the virus reached almost all countries of the Earth in a very short time, so no effective treatment or antidote could be developed. Of course, the prisons were also unprepared for the release of COVID-19 and initially only promises of help were made. It was unfortunate, however, that in the first months the various health organisations' opportunities were mostly limited to emphasising the dangers of the situation and reassuring the detainees and their relatives. A World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (2020, p. 1) declared that "prison health is part of public health so that nobody is left behind. As part of public health response, WHO worked with partners to develop a set of new materials on preparedness, prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention."

The detainees, in fear, vulnerability and despair, carried out prison riots in many parts of the world. The situation was most favourable in Europe. Probably due to the swift and decisive action of our continent's penitentiary organisations it was only in Italy that a prison uprising took place in the first period after the outbreak (11 March) which resulted in the deaths of several people when the authorities were still completely unprepared to respond, moreover, Lombardy was then the centre of infection in Europe.

In prisons of the American continent the situation has developed significantly for the worse. Prisons becoming more disorderly and unsafe. Rupert Colville, the spokesperson of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights announced on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020 that "Thousands of inmates and prison officials have already been infected across North and South America. In many countries, the increasing fear of contagion and lack of basic services – such as the regular provision of food due to the prohibition of family visits – have triggered protests and riots. (...) Some of these incidents in detention centres have turned extremely violent. The latest happened on 1 May, in Los Llanos penitentiary in Venezuela, where a revolt by prisoners reportedly resulted in 47 inmates losing their lives. Four days earlier,

on 27 April, a riot broke out in the Miguel Castro Castro prison in Peru leaving nine inmates dead. On 21 March, 23 inmates died after security forces intervened to suppress rioting in La Modelo prison in Colombia. Other incidents, including attempts to escape, have been registered in detention centres in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, Mexico and the U.S.” (Colville, 2020, p. 1). Infection rates and the risk of infection in the US have reached almost inconceivable proportions. According to calculations by Robert P. Alvarez, employee of the Institute for Policy Studies “in Tennessee, where a person in prison is nearly 5000 percent more likely than someone walking the streets to contract the coronavirus, and 255 percent more likely to die from it. Or Marion Correctional Institution in Ohio, which has a nearly 90 percent infection rate.” Mr. Alvarez stressed that “it isn’t just the incarcerated who are at risk — it’s the people who work in prisons. In Indiana, for example, someone who works at a prison is 1,116 percent more likely than your average Hoosier to be infected” (Alvarez, 2020, p. 1). In Brazil, 1389 of prisoners have escaped from four semi-open prisons in São Paulo state after Easter prison holidays were cancelled and restrictions on visitors tightened because of coronavirus (Jozino and Cruz, 2020, p. 1). In Venezuela, a riot at a prison in Portuguesa state left at least 46 people dead and 60 injured (Reuters, 2020, p. 1).

Extreme conditions have also developed in Australia. According to Kriti Sharma “for the 43,000 people in Australia’s overcrowded prisons, social distancing is impossible. Lockdowns put people with psychosocial or cognitive disabilities – already at risk of being manipulated or abused by others – at heightened risk of violence, especially since independent oversight of facilities is limited” (Sharma, 2020, p. 1). Thalia Anthony, a professor at the University of Technology Sydney, assesses the situation in a similar way: Australia’s overcrowded prisons are unable to guard against the rapid spread of diseases. It is a combined product of the facilities and inadequate sanitation and health services in prisons” (Anthony, 2020, p. 1).

The situation is also tense in Africa. In countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, prisons are frequently characterised by overcrowding, cramped conditions, malnutrition, poor hygiene, inadequate sanitation and limited access to health care. In addition to human rights and humanitarian concerns, situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic heighten the risk of riots and breakouts, and endangering public health and security (United Nations News, 2020, p. 1).

## 2.2. CRISIS MANAGEMENT CAUSED BY THE CORONAVIRUS IN PRISONS

In the initial period of the spring onset and spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, hospitals and nursing homes were the focal points for the spread of the disease in almost every country. Prisons were equally potential sources of danger from the first moment, but in the “prison world”, epidemiological control was sought and organised exclusively by the penitentiary organisations of the countries concerned and the prisons themselves. In the field of penitentiary, there was a complete lack of international coordination, no “desirable practice” or guidance, and no scientific analysis, the latter is completely understandable because analysis requires data, which takes time to acquire). Different countries have taken up the fight against the virus using different strategies - and with varying degrees of effectiveness.

### ***2.2.1. International recommendations***

Today, with the emergence and amplification of the second wave, international patterns of preventive and protective measures have emerged:

1. Reduce the number of people in prisons. (This is not the moment to make general amnesties because the main goal shall be to protect the general population at large.)
  - 1/a. The simplest way to reduce admissions is to refuse admissions for technical violations of probation and parole rules.
  - 1/b. Early release for:
    - at-risk populations (prisoners who are medically fragile or are older. Prisons house large numbers of people with chronic illnesses and complex medical needs that make them more vulnerable to becoming seriously ill and necessitate more medical care for COVID-19);
    - prisoners for technical violations of probation and parole rules;
    - people nearing the end of their sentence;

- people in minimum security facilities and who are on work-release;
  - anyone whose offense is considered “minor” or anyone who has a “low likelihood” of committing another serious offense.
2. Eliminate unnecessary face-to-face contact for justice-involved people.
  3. Make correctional healthcare humane (and efficient) in a way that protects both health and human dignity.
  4. Don’t make this time more stressful for families than absolutely necessary (Aebi, 2020; Wagner and Widra, 2020).

The above measures are essentially based on a well-thought-out strategy, however, they deal less with inmates who remain inside. Facilitating telephony and using the Internet (possibly making it free) helps a lot, but there is something that is missing: increased engagement with those inside – meaning not just healthcare.

### ***2.2.2. Preventive measures in Hungary***

Hungary has taken over some of the international procedures<sup>2</sup>, and has developed its own procedure, from which we highlight the following specialties:

1. Separation rooms have been designated in all prisons, and new detainees arriving at institutions are undergoing an epidemiological investigation in all cases. The staff and detainees are regularly informed about compliance with preventive hygiene rules. The possibility of washing and disinfecting hands several times a day is provided, and all detainees are provided with a washable, disinfectable textile mouth mask.

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<sup>2</sup> In Hungary - as a result of the prison expansion program in recent years - overcrowding in prisons has disappeared. Therefore, further reduction of the prison population was not necessary, so the Hungarian penitentiary organisation did not apply the earlier release of prisoners who were less dangerous to society, the sick, the elderly and those close to release, and also received those convicted of less serious crimes.

2. Skype-based, live and online telephony has been made available to all detainees and the duration of traditional telephone conversations has also been extended to help them keep in touch with their relatives.
3. For inmates who do not have a mobile phone, the organisation provides a three-minute call three times a month at its own expense. A Skype user guide has also been prepared for relatives of detainees. An epidemiological call centre has been launched in all Hungarian prisons and the Prison Newspaper has also published a special issue related to the epidemic.
4. According to the communication, detainees are subjected to a medical examination during their admission to a penitentiary institution, after which, if there are no upper respiratory symptoms, they are placed in the community only after 14 days of segregation in accordance with the rules previously introduced.

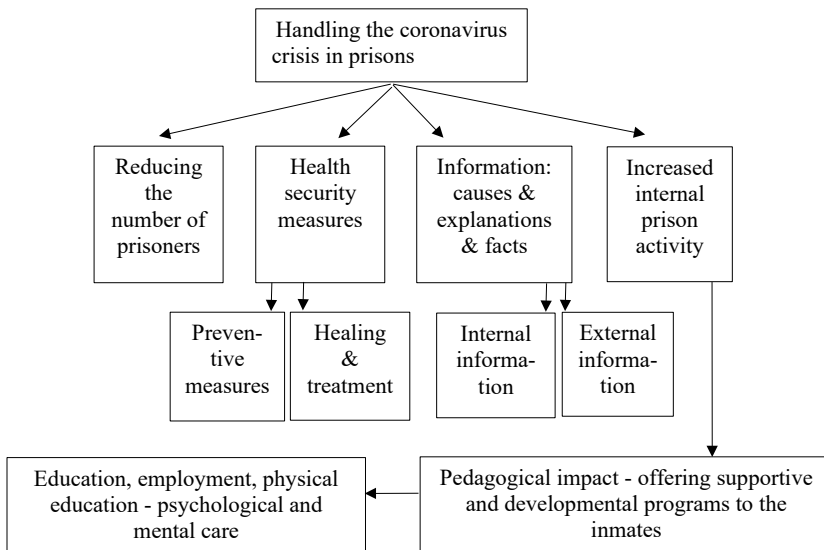
(The Hungarian practice was really successful during the first wave, until the last third of September 2020 no detainees and no prison staff caught the infection. Unfortunately, at the current stage of the epidemic the disease could no longer be kept outside the prison walls.)

5. Possibility of vaccination – in Hungary, the administration of vaccinations to the population started on 26 December 2020. The Government established a strict order: first the health workers, then the residents of the nursing homes, later the elderly and the chronically ill got the vaccine. The detainees did not enjoy any priority.
6. Vaccination level - after reaching a relatively high general vaccination level in Hungary, for the first time there was an opportunity for organised vaccination of prisoners. At the very end of April 2021, 70% of the total prison population had access to vaccination. By the date the manuscript was submitted, 92% of this group of inmates had already received the 2nd vaccine.

### 2.2.3. Recommendations

In summary, it would be accurate to suggest that there are alarming implications regarding the prison system in the current climate, and as an unfortunate consequence the “treatment” factor is being completely overlooked. Undoubtedly, the quality of the daily routine of prisons, the level of the cooperation between the staff and inmates and a sort of comprehensive organising principle of prison life determine (either reducing or extending) the prison ambience and the level of prison crisis. In such a frustrating and shocking situation experts and researchers have to seek new and innovative resolutions.

From our perspective, the management of the crisis caused by the coronavirus can be effectively addressed along four key components: reducing the number of prisoners; introducing health security measures; operating a comprehensive information system and increasing activity within the prison. (See below on Figure 2.)



**Figure 2:** The main components of health crisis management caused by the coronavirus in prisons

Source: Drawn by the author

The importance of eliminating overcrowding in prisons and the importance of health security measures have been discussed in the past, as the virus spreads more among closed communities, and it is even more justified to follow prevention rules in prisons to successfully control the epidemic. In what follows, we emphasise the importance of providing information (operating a comprehensive information system) and increasing the activity of detainees in prisons, (increased internal prison activity) as the importance of dealing with detainees in a crisis situation generated by the COVID-19 epidemic is unfortunately not emphasised and goes unmentioned in any document.

## 1. Comprehensive information system

1/a. Internal information: It is very important for detainees to understand the reasons and importance of the restrictive measures, because then it will be significantly easier for them to accept them and cooperate during their implementation. The connection must be kept in mind that sudden and exaggerated measures – without the proper justification – can easily generate unjustified tempers and trigger extremist actions. To avoid this, it is advisable to establish a “prison radio or TV” within the institutions which will keep the detainees informed on the latest news about the epidemic and the measures that would be put in place in the given prison.

1/b. External information: It is more important, in this time of crisis, for incarcerated people to know that their loved ones are safe and vice versa. To this end, it is necessary to support the possibility of a cheaper and possibly altogether free telephone calls, as well as keeping informed via the Internet.

## 2. Increasing internal prison activity

2/a. Increasing activity within prisons is perhaps the most difficult task, but it certainly requires the most caution and organisation. On the one hand, maximum compliance with health and safety regulations must be sought, and on the other hand, meaningful forms of activities must be sought and created.

- 2/b. Maintaining employment is an important task in several aspects: in addition to its economic significance, the formation and development of the knowledge, skills and habits to be acquired is one of the basic conditions for the effective reintegration after liberation. It is advisable to divide workplaces into smaller units wherever possible, even a simplistic measure of outstretched wide tape to minimise physical contact between those working there could prove effective.
- 2/c. Ensuring exercise and being in the open air should be maintained in all circumstances as it contributes to increasing the body's resilience.
- 2/d. The use of the services of the prison library also contributes to spending the free time in a meaningful way. Borrowing can be arranged with a personal presence, but it is safer if detainees can "order" books selected for reading based on a library list which are then delivered to their cells.
- 2/e. In this epidemic situation it is also justified to continue education – even in a smaller group setting. The best solution is distance learning, which in some countries has a decades-long history, when the teacher and student would not physically meet, however, the real time online connection allows for interactive learning.
- 2/f. The best solution to reduce the tension caused by the increased closure ordered due to the epidemic (suspense of liberation and reception of visitors, uncertainty of the future) is to increase the access to individual psychological help and pastoral care.

In organising the various procedures and activities, care must be taken in each case to: "the needs associated with security and the prisoners' personalities have to be harmonised in a goal-oriented manner in order to avoid any damaging overlaps and harmful effects associated with a zero-sum game" (Ruzsonyi, 2018, p. 121).



## CONCLUSIONS

In line with the above findings, it can be stated with confidence that this study has proven that the professional renewal of prisons, and thus the response to one of the key security challenges of the present, can only be carried out after studying the development and current state of the crisis situation in penal systems from a scientific perspective. In an absurd way, the COVID-19 worldwide epidemic has helped to accelerate the process in addressing such problems; psychological “prison walls” have become more permeable. The direct impact of the pandemic is of course devastating, the high level of infection within prisons, the large number of deaths of staff members and detainees, and the prison uprisings that also claim human lives are tragic. It is unfortunate that such serious events and, inextricably, a further deterioration of conditions had to take place in order for the existence of prisons and the conditions there to reach the stimulus threshold of society. At the same time, the growing public interest on the matter is encouraging; the public became aware of the current situation and condition of the prisons, and many questions arose as a result. Hopefully this change of attitude will encourage the criminal justice profession in both a narrower and broader sense to be critical of the situation, to find quick solutions to acute problems, and at the same time seek scientific and professional answers to the crisis that has gradually deepened over the decades.

The optimal functioning of the criminal justice system, where the responsibilities of prisons are increased, it cannot function as a “revolving door”. Detainees need to develop a willingness to act and cooperate; they must be made to contribute actively to the development of general and professional knowledge and to the development of skills that will give them a real chance at leading a responsible and law-abiding life after release (Ruzsonyi, 2014). The help of society (housing, job opportunities, health care) is essential in the first period after releasing the prisoners. Fortunately, more and more people today are realising that it is in the interest of all of us to successfully reintegrate the released detainees.

COVID-19 draws attention to the importance of this very cooperation and symbolises this interdependence. In the first phase, i.e. at the time of

the outbreak, prisons would have been completely vulnerable without the rules and measures in place for society as a whole. In the second phase, when the epidemic had already claimed victims in a free society but had not yet reached prisons, the more fortunate penitentiary systems had developed and implemented internal special procedures for prevention that apply to them. In the third phase, once the epidemic has entered prisons, increased protection for non-infected detainees and prison staff is not only in their interest but also in the interest of society as a whole. We must not forget that *the barbed wire does not protect anyone from COVID-19 infection, however, the barbed wire is unable to keep COVID-19 in prisons*. The positive result, the minimisation of human tragedies can only be imagined through the cooperation of prisons and a free society.

**Contact:**

**Peter Ruzsonyi, PhD**

University of Public Service, Budapest,  
Hungary

Dean of the Faculty of Law Enforcement,  
professor

E-mail: [Ruzsonyi.Peter@uni-nke.hu](mailto:Ruzsonyi.Peter@uni-nke.hu)

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