



news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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Secrecy makes estimates difficult

THE CHALLENGE OF DRUG USERS IN EUROPE'S PRISONS

Big gaps in how Member States respond

Drug use in prisons in the **EU** is difficult to quantify and authorities respond unevenly throughout the Member States. But experts agree that, of the estimated 350,000 people imprisoned throughout Europe on any one day, drug users are over-represented compared to their presence in the population at large. There could be a minimum of 180,000 and perhaps as many as 600,000 drug users passing through **EU** prisons each year.

These are among the conclusions of a report out today from the **Lisbon-based EU drugs agency, the EMCDDA**. *Assistance to drug users in European Union prisons* aims to give a scientific overview of the problem.

Surveys show that no European country has a comprehensive system to quantify the scale of the problem, even though its significance is generally acknowledged.

Drugs are seen as one of the main challenges of the current prison systems in Europe. Some experts even claim that prisons provide an environment that sustains substance abuse among existing users and even fosters it in non-users. Psychoactive substances seem to be easily available in many prisons.

Figures in today's report highlight the magnitude of the challenge but also the uncertainties surrounding it in most Member States. **Austria** appears to have the lowest proportion of drug users in prison although the estimate ranges from 10 to 20% of the prison population on any one day. At the other end of the scale, **Portugal's** estimate is 38 to 70%. The **Netherlands** also has an estimate with a wide span – 14% minimum and 44% maximum. Three of the larger Member States are broadly in line: **France** with 32%, **Germany** 20–30%, **Italy** 25–29% and **England and Wales** 15–29%, with **Scotland** 18–33%. But the **Spanish** estimate ranges from 35–54%, more in line with **Portugal**.

Drug users in EU prisons as proportion of total prison population on any one day: estimated minimum and maximum

Austria	10–20%	Italy	25–29%
Belgium	32–42%	Luxembourg	36%
Denmark	19–36%	Netherlands	14–44%
Finland	15–31%	Portugal	38–70%
France	32%	Spain	35–54%
Germany	20–30%	Sweden	47%
Greece	26–33%	England & Wales	15–29%
Ireland	30–52%	Scotland	18–33%

A problem in coming to terms with drug use in prisons, says the drugs agency, is that it takes place in extreme secrecy. Also, patterns of drug use vary widely – for instance, among female prisoners they are significantly different from those of men. Juvenile prison populations and gaols with a high proportion of migrants also differ from the average.

Women, for example, on average represent only some 5% of inmates in European prisons, but the proportion of drug users among them is disproportionately high in most **EU** countries. Some data suggest that two-thirds of women entering prison have a history of severe drug and/or alcohol use prior to imprisonment. The report points out that half to three-quarters of drug-using women earn their money for drugs by prostitution.

All prisoners, but especially young offenders, are subject to extremely high-risk behaviour, including drug use by injection with its risks of blood-borne viruses. 'This may be due to feelings of inviolability', says the report.

Big gaps in care

Today's report gives this profile of the typical drug user in prison: *Highly socially deprived, often poly drug user, with several stays in prison, several treatment attempts, high relapse experience, with severe health damage, including irreversible infectious diseases.*

There are, it adds, big differences **EU**-wide and from prison to prison in treatment, care and prevention in relation to drug users. Despite well-meaning intentions 'the realities of prison life are grim'. A number of studies have identified many disparities between health services inside and outside prison, including drug and alcohol treatment.

The **EMCDDA** says a number of international recommendations cover the principle of equity as the basis of treatment and care of drug-using prisoners. This means prisoners should have access to the same professional standards of medical and health care services as outside gaol.

Although in some countries this principle is enshrined in government policy, in practice it is hardly ever achieved – at least for drug-using inmates. One reason is that often different government departments are responsible for the care of drug users in the community and those in prison. 'This situation creates inherent problems for the continuity of care of drug users.'

Nevertheless, says the agency on a positive note, there is a considerable and increasing range of interventions across the **EU** focused on drug-users in prison. The **EMCDDA** study confirms that all Member States provide some form of treatment in their prison systems.

Commenting on the report, **drugs agency chief Georges Estievenart** says the **EU Action Plan on Drugs** recommends that the Commission and Member States join together in seeking to reduce crime linked to drugs, notably juvenile and urban delinquency. 'In this context, **EMCDDA** activities seek to inform policy-makers and the public about the treatment of drug users and addicts in the criminal justice system.'

Notes:

This week, the EMCDDA participates in a major European conference on 'Alternative measures to prison for drug-use offenders'. The two-day event, kicking off on 31 August in Hamburg, is organised by the European Network for Drugs and HIV Services in Prisons, a body supported by the European Commission. The EMCDDA will address the conference with a presentation on 'Alternatives to imprisonment, prevention of drug-related criminality and the EU Action Plan on Drugs (2000–2004)'.

Assistance to drug users in European Union prisons can be downloaded (abridged version) from <http://www.emcdda.org> EMCDDA news releases are available at: <http://www.emcdda.org/infopoint/newsmedia.shtml>

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