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The economic crisis hampers improvement of conditions in European prisons

Strasbourg, 11.02.2015 – Spending per inmate in European prisons has decreased during the economic crisis, and this has likely caused a negative impact on the quality of life of persons in custody. The crisis has not had a significant effect on the number of individuals in custody, although there has been a minor reduction in prison overcrowding. These are some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the 2013 Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics (SPACE I and SPACE II surveys), which were published today.

In 2012, European prison administrations spent an average of €97 per inmate per day, €2 higher than in 2011, although the amounts spent varied greatly. However, taking into account the period from 2007 – when the economic crisis started – to 2012, there was a decrease in expenses per inmate (from an average of €99.1 to €96.7 per person, and a median of €53.4 to €41.6 per person). There were increases in very few countries. In 2012, the 45 prison administrations that provided this data for the survey spent more than €26 billion.

On the other hand, the average prison population rate – which indicates the number of individuals in custody per 100,000 inhabitants – increased by 2.7% between 2007 and 2012. This, however, also varied greatly across countries, many of them experiencing significant increases or reductions.

In 2013, overcrowding remained acute in 21 out of 50 European prison administrations, the same proportion as the year before. However, there had been some improvement: in 2013 prisons were holding 96 inmates per 100 places, versus 98 in 2012, and 99.5 in 2011. Italy (which significantly reduced its prison population in 2014), Hungary, Cyprus, Belgium, “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Portugal, France, Romania, Croatia and Albania suffered the most serious overcrowding.

The proportion of individuals serving sentences of less than one year was relatively high, although it decreased from 15% in 2012 to 13% in 2013. In applying Council of Europe recommendations, these sentences could often be replaced with alternative measures to imprisonment in order to help to reduce prison overcrowding and contribute to the reintegration of offenders into society. The most common length of custodial sentence continued to be 1 to 3 years (23% of inmates), whereas sentences beyond 10 years slightly grew from 10.2% of inmates in 2012 to 11% in 2013.

Although there has been an increase in the number of individuals under the supervision or care of probation agencies, this only slightly contributes to reducing prison overcrowding. For example, in 2013, only 7.8% of the probation population was placed under probation before trial (versus 7% in 2012). In many countries, overcrowding occurred in pre-trial institutions where persons whose guilt is yet not established are held.

In 2013, the most common offences remained drug-related crimes and theft. Out of every 100 sentenced inmates, 18 were serving custodial terms for drug-related crimes (17 in 2012). Theft, which had traditionally been most common, was the main offence of 16% of prisoners, versus 17% in 2012.

There was a slight increase in the total proportion of foreign inmates (14.1% of all inmates were foreigners in 2013 versus 13% in 2012). This proportion was above 30% in many Western European countries and around 2% in Eastern European countries. There was also an increase in the proportion of inmates from EU member states (from 34% to 37%).

In 2012 the median age of the European population was 34 years, and the proportion of females (4.7%) and males (95.3%) remained stable.

The mortality rate is growing (in 2012 there were 28 deaths per 10,000 inmates versus 25 per 10,000

in 2010). The average rate of suicides in prisons was 11.2 per 10,000 inmates, whereas the median, which is considered statistically more reliable, was 5.4 suicides per 10,000 inmates.

The SPACE survey is conducted for the Council of Europe by the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Law of the University of Lausanne. The SPACE I 2013 survey contains information from 50 out of 52 prison administrations in the 47 Council of Europe member states, whereas SPACE II contains information from 47 probation agencies.

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