



Oifig An Chigire Príosún

Office of the Inspector of Prisons

Office of the
Inspector of Prisons
(OIP)

Summary of inspection reports: Prison conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic

January 2022

This booklet tells you about prison inspections carried out by the Office of Inspector of Prisons (OIP) in 2021. It has information on:



What is the OIP and what do we do?



Our inspection findings



Our recommendations and the Irish Prison Service's response



Our next steps



How to contact us

What is the Office of the Inspector of Prisons?

We are inspectors who inspect and investigate prisons. We are an independent prison oversight body. This means we visit prisons to check that they follow Irish law and international human rights standards. We share the findings of our prison inspections and investigations with people in prison, the Minister for Justice, the Irish Prison Service and the public.

We work separately from the Irish Prison Service and other government departments and agencies. We consider many issues about prisoners and prisons, but we do not look into individual complaints. We do not investigate individual prisoner complaints, but the Irish Prison Service must give us information about serious complaints (Category A complaints) such as ill-treatment or discrimination. We may use the information we learn from complaints to help plan inspections.

Our team includes experts in human rights, healthcare, investigations and prison research, policy and reform. Currently, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons is led by the Chief Inspector who works alongside senior inspectors, inspectors, a data analyst and administration staff.

What we do

- Inspect Irish prisons
- Investigate prisoner deaths
- Reply to confidential letters we get from prisoners
- Oversee serious complaints (called Category A complaints see – Prison Rules, Rule 57B)

Our inspection findings

Our main work is to inspect the twelve prisons in Ireland to check if you are treated with respect, and that your human rights are protected.

In 2021, we carried out inspections of prison conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic across all prisons in Ireland. Because of the pandemic, we only told the prisons about the inspection 24 hours in advance. During the inspections, we spoke to many prisoners and prison staff. We also reviewed prison records and observed conditions in prisons. Our aim was to see how human rights were being protected across five areas, as shown in the figure below.



During the twelve inspections we looked at things like:

- 'lock-back' times,
- access to psychology services,
- access to education,
- access to addiction counselling,
- the quality of the food, and
- what it was like to be in quarantine or isolation.

Based on the twelve prison inspections, these are the top issues we saw across the prison system in Ireland.

Top issues from 2021 prison inspections

Quarantine	Prisoners in quarantine had little or no time out of their cells, which means they were in solitary confinement. In many cases, prisoners in quarantine were not allowed to take a shower.
Information	Prisoners were not given written information about what to expect in quarantine.
Family contact	Prisoners had little or no family contact, and many experienced problems with video calls. Some prisoners had not seen their family in over a year.
Post	There were delays in the post across many prisons.
Rehabilitation	Prisoners had little or no opportunity to take part in rehabilitation activities during the pandemic.
Meal times	In ten prisons, meals were not served at regular times. Because of this, many prisoners said they were often hungry.
Remote court hearings	Some prisoners felt their voices were not heard during court hearings that were held online.
Education	Prisoners had limited access to education during the pandemic.

We also found **positive** things in the prisons. These included:

- The overall number of prisoners went down by about 9% from March 2020 to December 2021.
- Prisoners and staff worked together to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Red Cross prisoner volunteers helped to share COVID-19 information.
- Video calls allowed prisoners to see their families when no in-person visits were allowed.
- In-reach services used video calls, where possible, to speak with prisoners.
- An in-cell TV channel was created to share information and education programmes.

Our recommendations and the Irish Prison Service's response

After each inspection, we prepared an inspection report for the Minister for Justice. These reports had recommendations for the Irish Prison Service. The recommendations were designed to help the Prison Service put in place practices that protect the human rights of prisoners. The Prison Service responded to each recommendation we made. We made a total of 242 recommendations across the twelve prisons. Many of our recommendations applied to more than one prison.

The next page shows some of the common recommendations and what the Irish Prison Service said in response.

Recommendations to Irish Prison Service (IPS)

OIP recommendation	IPS response
<p>Quarantine / Isolation</p> <p>Prisoners in quarantine should have at least one hour in the open air daily, and they should be allowed to shower at least twice a week.</p>	<p>The IPS did not accept the recommendation that prisoners in quarantine / isolation should have one hour out-of-cell time. However, from July 2021, the IPS accepted that prisoners in quarantine should be allowed to shower twice a week.</p>
<p>Information</p> <p>Prisoners should receive written information in a language and form they understand about what to expect in quarantine.</p>	<p>The IPS accepted this recommendation. The IPS created a COVID-19 information book. This book was available in different languages.</p>
<p>Family contact</p> <p>The Irish Prison Service should consult with Public Health authorities on the safe return to weekly 30-minute visits, and consider the removal of the ‘one child’ visitor restriction.</p>	<p>The IPS partly accepted this recommendation and said in December 2021 that all prisoners could receive one physical visit every two weeks. Up to three visitors were allowed, of which one may be a child (under 18 years of age).</p> <p>Prisoners continued to receive a video visit once every two weeks.</p> <p>The IPS said all restrictions would be reviewed continuously and they would be removed when safe to do so.</p>
<p>Post</p> <p>Post should be delivered to prisoners in a timely manner.</p>	<p>The IPS accepted this recommendation and said they would examine this issue. The IPS said it was testing email correspondence for families of prisoners.</p>

OIP recommendation	IPS response
<p>Meal times</p> <p>Meal times should be changed so prisoners have meals at regular times: breakfast (morning), lunch (midday) and dinner (evening).</p>	<p>The IPS accepted this recommendation. The IPS said it would continue to discuss the possibility of meal-time changes with the Prison Officers' Association, which is the staff representation body.</p>
<p>Remote court hearings</p> <p>Prisons should monitor the impact of remote court hearings and a person's right to a fair trial.</p>	<p>The IPS partly accepted this recommendation. The IPS said it would continue to speak with the Courts Service about this.</p>
<p>Education</p> <p>Prisoners should have access to digital tablets for education.</p>	<p>The IPS is currently reviewing this recommendation. Education and Training Boards produced in-cell learning materials. The IPS said it is developing an in-cell learning strategy for prisoners.</p>
<p>Prison population</p> <p>The Irish Prison Service should work with other criminal justice agencies to reduce the prison population to allow for social distancing.</p>	<p>The IPS accepted this recommendation. The IPS said it would continue to talk with the Department of Justice to manage the prison population to make sure that (a) prisons are used as a last resort, and (b) actions are taken to reduce re-offending.</p>

In 2021, we sent our 2021 inspection reports on prison conditions to the Minister for Justice. The Minister for Justice has published our reports on the OIP website (www.oip.ie). We have recommended to the Irish Prison Service that all OIP materials and reports should be available to all prisoners. In response, the Irish Prison Service said that it would work to find ways to make reports available to all prisoners.

Our next steps

- In 2022, we will track the progress being made on the recommendations in the reports and come back to speak to you with a progress update.
- In 2022, and in the years to come, we will continue to inspect all twelve prisons in Ireland. After our inspections, we will share information with you so that you are up to date with our work.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us and to share information with us when we are in the prison. We look forward to speaking with you during our next prison inspection.

How to contact the Office of the Inspector of Prisons

Under Rule 44 of the Irish Prison Rules, you have the right to write to us (Inspector of Prisons) about any matter you want to raise, in the strictest of confidence. This means that, by law, the Irish Prison Service:

- should not read any letters you send to us, and
- must send your unopened letter to us without delay.

This is the address for the Office of the Inspector of Prisons:

Office of the Inspector of Prisons

24 Cecil Walk

Kenyon Street

Nenagh

Co Tipperary

E45 NN73

We will write back to you in a sealed envelope. On the envelope, we will write 'Rule 44', and we ask the Governor to make sure you get the delivered to you unopened. The law allows the Governor to open a Rule 44 letter. But, you must be there with them when they do this. A letter should only be opened to check that it has come from the Office of the Inspector of Prisons.

To learn more about us, you can visit our website: **www.oip.ie**



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