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Attn: Newsdesks, Photodesks and Religious Affairs Correspondents

ICPO survey: 60% of Irish prisoners abroad experience mental health difficulties

- **Biggest concern for Irish prisoners abroad during pandemic was for their families**
- **Prayer and spirituality help best to manage prisoner stress and anxiety, followed by exercise and gym**
- **Adverse impacts identified from the pandemic include lack of visits and 23 hour lockdowns in cells**
- **Access to video-calls should continue when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, but cannot replace physical visits by family and friends**
- **42% of prisoners abroad don't know what their plans will be after completion of their sentence**
- **See below graph highlighting main difficulties experienced in prison and anonymised case studies reflecting findings of the ICPO report**

The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas has undertaken a global survey of its 1,100 client-base which is made up of Irish citizens imprisoned overseas. The survey provided feedback of first-hand accounts and testimonies of the experience of prison abroad, with all the additional challenges that that entails. The objective of the survey was to engage directly with clients so as to better inform the future work of the ICPO.

Commenting on the survey findings, Bishop Denis Brennan, chair of the ICPO said, "Our survey highlights the mental health difficulties experienced by Irish people who are in prison abroad. While it is widely accepted that such problems are a reality for many in prison at home, in the case of a citizen in prison in a foreign country these are exacerbated by time; distance, especially from loved ones and family; finance; isolation; language, and a myriad of potential cultural barriers. Our findings complement the ongoing feedback we receive as to the importance of outreach to people on the margins of society."

Bishop Brennan continued, "I am concerned by the relatively high number of survey respondents indicating an absence of a clear sense of direction after their release from prison. It seems that such uncertainty is a consequence of resettlement supports being withheld from foreign national prisoners in a number of countries and the inability for many to access educational, resettlement and offender behaviour courses during the pandemic. It also serves to highlight the value of the resettlement work undertaken by ICPO staff – something which became increasingly significant throughout the pandemic period."

“I wish to commend the tireless commitment of the small ICPO team which is in regular contact with approximately 1,100 Irish citizens in prison in thirty countries around the world. In 2020 this work involved 10,000 letters, phone calls, emails and prison visits made to, from or on behalf of Irish citizens overseas. All of this is Trojan but unheralded work, and bears real witness to the Gospel mission to love God and to love one’s neighbour as oneself. Our evidence-based survey results will inform the ICPO’s future service in meeting the needs of prisoners and their families,” Bishop Brennan said.

The survey asked questions under a number of different headings: ‘Life in Prison Overseas’ (including during Covid 19), ‘Resettlement’, and, ‘The Services and Supports you Receive from ICPO’. The following are the key findings and conclusions:

Findings

- 60% of respondents reported experiencing mental health difficulties whilst in prison. A significant proportion of respondents reported feelings of isolation and having little time outside of their cell (a feature exacerbated by Covid).
- A range of other difficulties and adverse impacts were identified from the pandemic including lack of visits, 23 hour lockdown in their cells, concern for their own health in a confined setting, delays in legal hearings and inability to access educational and offender behaviour courses.
- More than 70% of respondents said their primary concern arising from Covid was not for their own health but for their welfare of their loved ones at home.
- When it came to managing stress and anxiety a majority of respondents identified prayer and spirituality as the most helpful, followed by physical exercise and access to the gym.
- 42% of prisoner responses indicated they didn’t know what their plans were after their sentence overseas was completed.
- The majority of respondents were in regular contact with ICPO with 23% in contact at least monthly and a further 50% contacting ICPO at least a few times a year. The survey responses indicate that Irish prisoners overseas view ICPO as a trusted source of information and support.

Conclusions

Lifting of Covid 19 restrictions

The survey findings concluded that restrictions imposed in prisons during the pandemic led to considerable hardship for prisoners. Whilst some restrictions may remain necessary on a country-by-country or prison-by-prison basis, access to physical, educational and certain social activities should be provided to the greatest extent possible within national health guidelines. Covid-related restrictions should be lifted as soon as it safe to do so. They should not be permitted to become the ‘new normal’. For example, access to video-calls should continue to be permitted when restrictions are lifted but should not be used as a replacement for physical visits from family and friends.

Access to mental and physical health care

It is well understood that prison impacts negatively on the mental and physical health of prisoners and this was confirmed by the findings of the survey. The negative impacts on prisoner’s health were exacerbated during the pandemic as many prisoners were kept in almost constant lockdown, with no visits and few if any activities including access to the gym and other forms of exercise.

The report found that prison authorities must ensure that appropriate supports are in place for prisoners who are experiencing mental health difficulties. The lack of adequate mental and physical healthcare in prisons in some parts of the world highlights the importance of prisoners having an advocate whether it is family, ICPO or an Irish Consular official.

Release and resettlement

The survey shows that a significant number of Irish people in prison do not have plans for their release. This underlines the importance of dedicated resettlement services for this group of prisoners who may not be able to access offender behaviour, education or vocational skills courses or preparation for release programmes when in prison overseas. Some former prisoners will no longer have family members or support networks in Ireland, and may not have lived in this country for many years. Appropriate support is vital to ensure successful resettlement and reintegration into society.

Repatriation

It was recommended that well-resourced, transparent, fair and expeditious repatriation system should be put in place as a matter of urgency. This will ensure that those prisoners who wish to do so can, if eligible, return to Ireland to serve the remainder of their sentence in Ireland close to their families and be better supported in preparing for release. While long awaited draft legislation has now been published in relation to prisoners in EU states, it will be insufficient without further amendments to existing legislation and adequate resources to process applications efficiently.

ICPO support

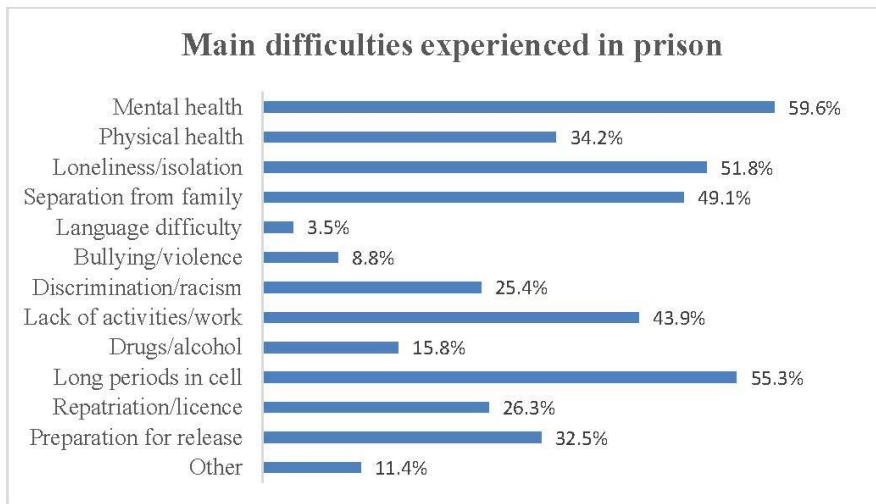
ICPO has supported Irish people in prison overseas and their families for over 35 years. The findings of this survey validate the work of the ICPO in supporting prisoners and emphasises the need for its services.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

ICPO survey

- **Background:** One of the strategic priorities of the *ICPO Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023* is: ‘Undertaking further research into clients’ needs to better understand the nature of the supports required.’ To this end, the ICPO devised a survey and sent it to Irish people in prison in approximately thirty countries; the majority of whom are based in the UK.
- **Methodology:** This quantitative survey involved ten questions circulated in 1,100 questionnaires to Irish prisoners abroad, and these generated 114 anonymised responses. Over 55% of respondents were aged 45 or older, with 43% aged from 25 to 44 years of age. The vast majority of respondents were male (over 92%). Responses covered the period from January to March 2020. The survey results are available on www.icpo.ie
- Please see the below graph outlining the main difficulties experienced in prison:



Anonymised case studies reflecting the findings of the report

Case 1 - Mental Health

Mark became mentally unwell and during a video call with his ICPO caseworker disclosed he had thoughts of self-harm. Mark's caseworker was concerned for his welfare and advised him that she would need to let the prison know of her concerns. Information was provided to the prison and a risk assessment was carried out on Mark. He was relocated to the medical unit at the prison for close observation but still made an attempt on his life. He did not wish to engage with staff at the prison and was extremely paranoid about them. He would engage with his ICPO Caseworker who encouraged and supported him to meet with the psychiatric staff at the prison. They adjusted his medication and made some adjustments to his medication regime which has had a dramatic improvement in the client's mental health.

Mark is now mentally stable and making positive choices with the support of his ICPO Caseworker. A rehabilitation plan was discussed with the client and he has just commenced a violence prevention programme which he could not previously participate in as his mental health had been too unstable. Mark is making excellent personal progress.

Case 2 - Resettlement

Thomas was introduced to the ICPO by the Irish Embassy whilst he was being detained in a detention centre. He has been released from prison and taken straight to the detention centre. Resettlement support commenced with Thomas immediately as he did not have an Irish bank account or a residential address in Ireland. Thomas was provided with contacts to set up an Irish bank account from overseas and contact details for Client Identity Services to assist obtaining his PPS number. ICPO worked closely with the Embassy to secure emergency travel documents as Thomas' passport had expired.

Once Thomas had arrived in Ireland he was taken immediately to mandatory quarantine. The next morning, his ICPO Caseworker travelled to Dublin and purchased a SIM card with credit and provided Thomas with a modest post release grant as he did not have any money. Thomas was assisted in reconnecting with his family who were able to provide temporary accommodation. Within two weeks Thomas had been able to secure employment but due to a lack of money Thomas could not afford appropriate clothing for work. The ICPO was able to support Thomas enabling him to purchase work clothes. Thomas is now gainfully employed and saving towards securing his own accommodation over the coming months.

Case study 1: Mental Health and Family Support

Sinéad is a vulnerable woman with some mental health issues. Her family contacted ICPO soon after her imprisonment and described her as “frightened and lonely with little or no activities”. Since her imprisonment Sinéad has been moved several times and has found it hard to settle. The ICPO sent Sinéad a support pack including information on the prison system there and the ICPO regularly contacts Sinéad by post. ICPO also provides her with a quarterly hardship grant which Sinead uses for regular calls to her family in Ireland. Sinéad has expressed her wish to use her time in prison productively and, to this end, ICPO has provided a small grant towards a prison course which is provided in conjunction with a nearby education facility. While life in prison is difficult for Sinéad - especially as she has not been able to receive family visits due to Covid-19 pandemic – due to ICPO support Sinéad can call her family regularly and has remains active through thanks to her course. Sinéad wrote recently to the ICPO stating: “I can't express how grateful I am for all the support you and the ICPO have given me during the most difficult time of my life.”

General

- For the ICPO to effectively undertake its work, the confidentiality of its clients is respected at all times. It is estimated that, at any one time, there are up to 1,200 Irish people in prison overseas in approximately thirty countries around the world. A significant majority are in prison in the UK, with relatively high numbers in the USA, Australia and throughout Europe.
- In 1985, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference established the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas in order to work for Irish prisoners overseas wherever they are. The ICPO has supported prisoners abroad from every county on the island of Ireland, and it makes no distinction in terms of religious faith; the nature of a prison conviction or of a prisoner's status.
- The ICPO offers a comprehensive service to prisoners and to prisoner families which includes: provision of information on repatriation and deportation, assists in making referrals to post release support agencies for those returning to Ireland, a hardship fund for prisoners where access to food, water and medical treatment are very real concerns. Loneliness and isolation is common amongst Irish people imprisoned overseas. The ICPO operates an extensive prison visiting programme in Britain and elsewhere (pre-Covid) and provides a newsletter twice yearly to its clients. ICPO provides a pen friend scheme, language books and dictionaries where needed. In recognition of the hardship endured by prisoner's families, ICPO offers assistance with prison visits, information about the different issues affecting their loved one in prison and holds a Family Day twice annually.
- The ICPO is funded by the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, the Department of Foreign Affairs (through the Emigrant Support Programme) and by the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

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