



ABOUT THE PROJECT

With the project Open Research Behind Closed Doors (July 2020 - March 2021), the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Fundamental and Human Rights (LBI-GMR), in cooperation with partners from Austria (SiM), Italy (Associazione Antigone) and Germany (Strafvollzugsarchiv), gives an insight into the lived experiences of persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities detained during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 - February 2021). The project aimed to develop recommendations on how to improve the situation of the persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities during the pandemic and identify paths for future research.

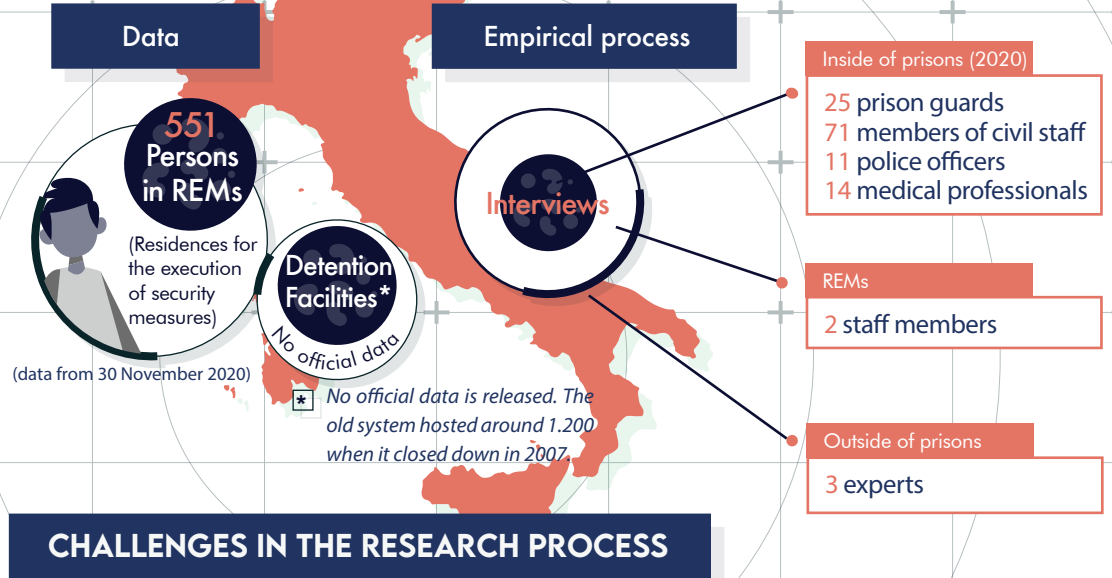
COUNTRY BACKGROUND



ITALY

Institutions:
Residences for the execution of security measures (REM); detention facilities

Responsibility:
Ministry of Health (REM); Ministry of Justice



CHALLENGES IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

- 1 Lack of comprehensive data on numbers due to the transition to the new system (REMs).
- 2 Due to the pandemic, access to REMs and detention facilities is very limited for researchers.
- 3 Many persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities are in regular prisons.



As in many other countries, at the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy, the penitentiary system already presented significant problems in some of the areas that later became the most critical concerning COVID-19, namely prison overcrowding, healthcare deficiencies and lack of contacts with the outside world.



FINDINGS: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON...

DETENTION FACILITIES

Initially family visits were suspended, but later resumed under various preventive measures (acrylic glass separations, masks, temperature control, etc.) and a limit of one or two visitors. In addition, facilities increased the number and length of phone calls and offered video-calls.

Contact with relatives and friends

- Privacy is not guaranteed during video calls and in some cases they are counted as family visits.
- Video calls showed many advantages for elderly parents or young children who were able to see their imprisoned relatives without the need for a long commute.

REMs

Visits were reduced, but telephone and video calls increased.



DETENTION FACILITIES

Incidents of violence

On 8 and 9 March 2020 riots took place in prisons.



Antigone received some allegations of ill-treatment (investigations are ongoing).

Prison population

prison population decreased



Number of detainees reduced by the application of both the already-existing and newly introduced alternative measures.

Vaccination

A vaccination campaign for inmates and staff started in some Italian regions. There are reasons to believe that some of the restrictions that are in place now can be lifted soon.



REMs

Activities



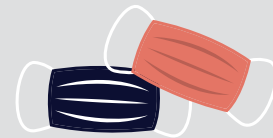
Internal activities



External activities

Group therapies were reduced, but individual therapy session mostly continued.

Safety measures



Safety measures have been implemented, including, social distancing. Efforts have also been made to organise spaces with single rooms. Consequently, there was a limited rate of infection.

Therapy

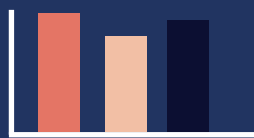
The small dimension of the REMs and the healthcare system made it possible to react to the pandemic in a way that minimized the restrictions imposed on the patients and to guarantee the continuity of therapeutic treatments.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Adequate treatment:

Make efforts to release persons concerned who are dispersed in ordinary or special detention wings in prisons, and find alternative solutions to cover their needs.



Gather further data:

Authorities should publish data and commission further research to address the specific needs and situational vulnerabilities of persons concerned.



Enhance transparency:

Transparency and openness should be guaranteed also during times of pandemics to protect the persons concerned from torture and ill-treatment.

The difficulties posed by the pandemic, the restrictions, the stress on persons concerned and staff, and the fear of contagion generate tension that could undermine the orderly and management of prisons. A lesson this long year taught us is that the more critical the situation in prison is, the more vital becomes the presence and the scrutiny of institutions and civil society.

COVID-19 RELATED

Launch a vaccination campaign:

In order to lift most of the current restrictions, authorities should organise the vaccination of persons concerned and staff as soon as possible in all regions.



Good practice from Lombardy: The vaccination campaign is run prison by prison, taking into account the entire prison community. Everyone who enters for any reason is entitled to the vaccine, without distinction: prisoners and administrators, penitentiary police and volunteers. The aim is to create pockets of immunity within closed environments.

