



DIGICOR

**Preparedness and readiness:
Recommendation paper**

This project is financed by ERASMUS+ programme, KA2 – Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices, Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness. This material has been developed in the scope of the project DIGICOR - “Digitalisation in corrections towards reduced recidivism”, reference no. 2020-1-DE02-KA226-VET-00833.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

AUTHORSHIP

Die Senatorin für
Justiz und Verfassung  **Freie
Hansestadt
Bremen**

BREMEN SENATE OF JUSTICE AND CONSTITUTION

 **European
Strategies
Consulting**

EUROPEAN STRATEGIES CONSULTING



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



[DIGICOR Digitalisation in corrections towards reduced recidivism](#) © 2020-2023 by DIGICOR Partnership, funded by Erasmus+ Project Number 2020-1-DE02-KA226-VET-008330 is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)

Outline

This document forwards policy recommendations for changes to national legislation and prison regulations to allow and promote the introduction and effective use of technologies that support inmates' rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.

The DIGICOR state-of-the-art review identified several **challenges** to implementing information and communications technology (hereafter ICT) in correctional services, especially in the closed environment of prisons. When discussing inmates' access to technology, studies refer to the digital divide, understood as a form of social exclusion,¹ notably exacerbated by prison. Research shows that the deprivation of access to new technologies is a distinct pain of modern imprisonment (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016). Furthermore, prisoners have a low level of digital literacy, which, coupled with the precarious state of ICT in many prisons, may lead to further inequalities upon prison release. At the same time, the digitalisation process raises several security and safety risks for prison staff. Finally, most countries still need a national framework or commitment to implementing ICT in prison and probation, making the European landscape uneven in digitalisation practices.

The review identified several evidence-based **benefits of digitalisation in corrections**. For staff and prison administration, ICT has a positive impact on prison security. Empirical evidence shows that increased availability of secure communication (phone, video visits, message systems) has a positive impact on prison security, reducing tensions and conflicts, reducing the number of illegal mobile phones and their attempted entry which otherwise would often generate corruption, debt, violence, and extortions inside and outside the prison environment (Bredin, 2018). For prisoners, access to ICT can help maintain or strengthen social support networks and reduce the digital divide. When digitalisation prepares prisoners for release, research shows that prisoners can better arrange accommodation and employment while in prison, leading to lower reoffending rates. For probation counsellors, digitalisation can lead to an increase in efficiency and better access to communication. Research shows that there are instances where probationers are more open on the phone than in physical meetings (Dominey, 2021).

Several **stakeholders** have been considered for this policy recommendation: prisoners, staff, prison administration, probation counsellors, clients, and national and European stakeholders. The recommendation paper offers guidelines to overcome identified challenges and gaps in the training provision to prison staff regarding digital skills and their mobilisation towards inmate rehabilitation. Finally, it seeks to offer valuable recommendations for improving existing practices while ensuring that fundamental human rights are respected.

Recommendations for prisoners

¹ Digital divide refers to the inequality some countries, groups and individuals face as a result of barriers to accessing and using ICT (Kerr and Matthew, 2018).

Access to ICT training

- **Prisons should provide basic ITC training for digitally illiterate prisoners** to prevent exclusion and access to digital tools.
- **Provide access to digital communication for prisoners** to maintain relationships with family and friends. Research shows that contact with family and peers can improve prisoners' mental health and well-being and reduce the risk of social isolation.
- **Offer training to prisoners on how to effectively and safely use computers, tablets and the internet.** Involve educators, IT staff AND other prisoners as trainers for digitally illiterate prisoners. Provide incentives for prisoners to attend a digital upskilling class.

Access to educational programs and resources

- **Offer educational programs and resources to prisoners.** Digital devices can provide prisoners with access to educational resources, such as online courses, vocational training, and language learning programs, thus improving their chances of finding employment after release. Evidence from the classroom and the cells points out that access to educational programs has an impact on how a prisoner reframes their life, and so on recidivism. A report of the ET 2020 Working Group on Vocational Education and Training (VET) highlights the need for a systematic approach to how learning is developed, recognised and validated in our educational institutions, stating that “VET needs to be equipped to deal with [validation and recognition] at a system-wide level”, rather than leaving it to individual providers to work out a ‘patchwork’ solution².
- According to the Report Review of European Prison Education Policy and the Council of Europe Recommendation (89)12 on Education in Prison, "prison authorities should invest in modern digital technology [such as] access to supervised Internet services or Intranet systems" to **foster the acquisition and access to digital skills that allow inmates to "better manage their lives post-release"**. Having a recognised qualification for digital skills in prisons would encourage uptake.
- **Prison transfers should consider prisoners' progress in prison education to ensure the continuation of their studies.** Prison education and training programmes should be devised in a holistic way, so that prisoners can complete a course or get accredited in another prison or jurisdiction.

The use technology to prepare for release

² [Publications catalogue - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

- Prisoners have limited access to technology and digital skills and are subject to the digital divide. Access to ICT in prisons may normalise technology and ensure inmates are not digitally excluded upon release.
- Ensure that **every prisoner uses technology to better prepare for release**: finding accommodation, promoting prisoners' job-searching skills and positive relationships with family and peers.
- **Involve prisoners' families in how digital communication could be used most effectively and safely**. Liaise with the visitors' centre, local NGOs or faith practitioners to see how families can be assisted in using online and digital communication with prisoners.
- Ensure digital rights by providing **access to digital health and social welfare services** (Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022).

The implementation of digital technology in prisons needs to be grounded and sensitive to the needs of the people using and administering it.

Source: Van De Steene, S., & Knight, V. (2017). Digital transformation for prisons: Developing a needs-based strategy. *Probation Journal*, 64(3), 256–268.

Recommendations for prison staff

Include digital skills in the curricula for prison officers

- Ensure that prison staff is not excluded from the “digital revolution” in prisons (de Steene & Knight, 2017). In other words, **it is important to include digital skills in the curricula for prison officers.**
- Since prison staff is not equally digitally equipped, **assessing the level of digital skills among prison officers is essential.** Staff could undergo basic skill assessment tests to identify the specific areas where training is needed.

Adapt content and method to staff’s training needs

- Uniformed staff, reintegration staff and administration operate on different digital platforms and therefore have different training needs. For instance, uniformed staff usually working in security mention the importance of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, which may not pose similar threats to reintegration staff. Other employees may require assistance developing basic digital literacy skills (email, file management etc.) **Staff training should be tailored to the needs of prison officers, reintegration staff, and administration.**
- **Digital training and e-learning should be interactive and engaging.** The content of the training should be stimulating and relevant for the trainee. Trainees should be rewarded, and completion of courses should be incentivised, particularly by ensuring these are recognised, transferrable qualifications.

Offer ongoing feedback and support

- **Trainees should receive ongoing support.** Consider appointing a mentor or coach to provide guidance and support and celebrate milestones and achievements. Train this person in basic training methodologies. Divide the groups according to their needs and different profiles – support cross-pollination by training more digitally literate to mentor those keen to learn more.
- **Agree one or more ‘digital coordinators’,** staff who are included in wider digital coordination meetings, and can communicate progress, delays and changes in strategy to all staff.
- **Provide a helpdesk for staff and a helpdesk for mentors/trainees.** Make sure that uncertainties are quickly and easily overcome or avoided.
- Since digital technology constantly evolves, **digital training should be seen as a continuous process.** The digital training(s) content should be reviewed and updated periodically.

Recommendations for prison administration

Long-term digitalisation strategy and vision

- Prison administration should have a **vision of how to address digitalisation** for prisoners and staff. Within this, prison administrations should develop a **long-term digitalisation strategy** that prepares inmates for release into a technologically advanced society.
- Correctional services should conduct **needs-based analyses** to advocate for prison reforms that include e-rehabilitation. Where gaps are identified in prison staff skills and competencies to support e-rehabilitation, training developed should be bolted on to basic training.
- Prison administration should develop **evaluation mechanisms** to ensure that the digital technologies you want to implement in the national corrections system are the best fit. Make sure evaluation results go out to all stakeholders involved.
- **Ensure the infrastructure is fit for purpose** within a fast-paced development field – provide the framework and resources for an **annual evaluation** of infrastructure (computer, software etc.).
- Prison administrators must consider administrative issues like **security and access levels** while incorporating digital skills into programmes for prisoners' rehabilitation (Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022).

Prison staff as partners in the digitalisation process

- **Identify and make time to involve all stakeholders as early as possible** to create a vision that is supported by everyone in (local) government responsible for (re)integration and in relevant non-justice government-administration, as well as the prison governor, leaders and trade unions.
- **Co-create annual goals with staff** to help the administration stay on track and keep progress meaningful.
- The DIGICOR project has revealed instances when prison staff is reluctant to change and digitalisation. To **overcome resistance to change and motivate prison staff to learn digital skills**, prison administration should better communicate the benefits of learning digital skills, such as work efficiency and reducing workload, but most importantly, **address the concerns and fears of prison staff**. Furthermore, the discussions during the two training sessions show the need for **change management** within prisons. Prison administration must ensure prison staff understands that ICT will not replace human connection but assist staff in better organising their time.

Recommendations for national and European decision-makers

Setting strategic digital government objectives³

- To begin the process of digitalisation in corrections, national and European decision-makers must set a **strategic digitalisation vision, principles and standards**. The strategy should direct the digitalisation process in corrections by setting clear objectives and resources national administrations can access.
- Make time to identify, involve and regularly communicate with all relevant stakeholders. **Schedule enough time for this strategical planning and decision-making**: decisions made without stakeholder involvement may result in financial losses and a loss of trust between key parties.
- **Conduct research and evaluation**. The digitalisation of prisons lags behind the fast-paced digitalisation of society. It is essential to gather data and evaluate the effectiveness of these technologies in secure environments over time. research studies and evaluations commissioned by policymakers will help to assess the impact of digitalisation on prison operations and outcomes, and thereby understand the need for training in prisons.

Ensuring the coherent use of technology across policy areas and levels of government

- Support a working group to produce a **European Prison Rules addendum on digital communication** in recognition of the level of digital communication in normal society and the normalisation principle adhered to within many jurisdictions.
- Policymakers must **invest in the necessary infrastructure**. Research shows that security systems are purchased on a facility level and sometimes differ from one facility to another, complicating integration with other systems (see de Steene & Knight, 2017, p.260). Each member state could be **asked to achieve a degree of technical readiness in prison**, for example.
- **Transfer of knowledge and practice initiatives between member state administrations and prisons**. Support a digital platform like the European Digital Education Hub which each country could use at the level of prisons, prison administrations, and prison training staff to share what works and where they are currently investing.

³ In line with the OECD Recommendation on Digital Government Strategies (2014), for “more open, innovative and participatory governments”

- **Data privacy and security protocols should be established to mitigate cybersecurity fears and concerns**, Standardized protocols facilitate a ‘common language’ and standardisation over time and across jurisdictions. Jurisdictions tend hitherto to act independently, not benefitting from relevant progress made by others. For efficiency and effectiveness of cybersecurity, efforts must be made to ensure a greater exchange of knowledge and ideas.
- **Improve and connect data transfer legislation between member state jurisdictions.** The time a prisoner of a specific category spends on a video or telephone call should be the same in all European Union jurisdictions. Prisons' approaches to the privacy of emails/ letters should be the same.

Strengthening capacities to support better implementation of digital strategies

- **Appointing a digital coordinator** for prisons will ensure effective stakeholder management, communication and facilitate a holistic approach across prisons and jurisdictions.
- **Digital education and training opportunities for staff and inmates** should be available nationally and internationally. Facilitate visits and exchanges in person between different levels and experience of staff: digital concepts are sometimes easier to grasp first-hand.
- Ensure that basic telephone calls and video-conferencing costs are not prohibitive for prisoners, democratising **family and peer contact access**. Ensure that knowledge of procurement procedures is discussed more openly between member state prisons so that contract conditions become comparable.
- **Align investment into (former) prisoners with other socially disadvantaged target groups of European digital initiatives.** The 2022 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) clearly shows that digital change is accelerating in every aspect of the labour market and society. Additional support needs to be provided to socially disadvantaged groups such as former prisoners, if member states are to meet the Digital Decade targets in 2030.⁴

⁴ [Digital Economy and Society Index 2022: overall progress but digital skills, SMEs and 5G networks lag behind | Shaping Europe's digital future \(europa.eu\)](#)

“

The European Union’s Digital Education Action Plan sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age. Priority 2 focuses on enhancing digital skills and competencies for digital transformation. Action 7 supplies common guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training, whilst Action 9 outlines the European Digital Skills Certificate (EDSC)

Source: European Union Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)

<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

”

Probation practitioners and clients

Digitalisation strategies

- Probation services should develop **digitalisation strategies**. The use of remote supervision, primarily online, has increased significantly during the Covid-19 restrictions (CEP, 2020). During the pandemic restrictions, remote supervision and new supervision technologies were implemented with haste, with little resources and funding and no clear strategy in mind.
- Data is needed on people with little support, released early, assessed, and supervised remotely in terms of reoffending, engagement with probation and lifestyle (Phillips, 2022, p.18). Remote supervision can be a more permanent solution for particular **categories** of clients (low and medium risk).

Infrastructure – access to technology, digital skills, and programmes

- The literature counts numerous instances of **insufficient infrastructure** for remote supervision and the minimal digitalisation of probation work: telephones, computers, internet access for probationers and practitioners, and digital skills. Probationers are digitally marginalised. Some have difficulties accessing the technology required for remote supervision. When supervision is remote, probation services must ensure people have **access to technology**. At the same time, the literature reports that there needs to be **more training in digital skills** for probation practitioners.
- Disruptions to the normal structure and routine of treatment, services, and programmes could be addressed by **the inclusion of digital solutions and remote access to treatment, services, and programmes** (via telehealth or videoconferencing). Digitalising programmes and services could be beneficial, especially for clients in hard-to-reach areas and those who need easy access to service providers. Literature shows instances where virtual treatment services at home can bring stability to their daily routines. (Lockwood, Viglione, and Peck, 2023)
- Probation is challenging to perform well without the support of colleagues and **communities of coping** (to allow people to cope with the emotional demands of work). Services must ensure that staff are supported in accessing formal and informal sources of support to avoid higher levels of burnout and stress.

More fundamentally, and when thinking more broadly about the purposes of probation and the experience of being under penal supervision in the community, the greater flexibility afforded by remote communication may also reduce the ‘pervasive’ nature of punishment in the community.

Source: Phillips, Jake (2022). *The impact of the pandemic on probation: lessons for the future. Safer Communities.*

Remote supervision requires a good balance of supervision and support

- **Probation services should allow greater flexibility in incorporating hybrid or blended practices.** Literature shows that a blended probation system is more productive if used at the right time with the right people (Phillips, 2022).
- Most studies report the difficulty in creating **meaningful staff-client** relationships remotely. One implication is that probation services should allow greater flexibility in incorporating hybrid practices, which may mean building a relationship face-to-face and maintaining it online (Phillips, 2022). Every new digital step in probation work should be reviewed to ensure it will be an enhancement - not a replacement - of human interaction.
- Remote supervision can be conducive to a good relationship with clients who are more open than in face-to-face situations and can open up better ways to speak about personal issues. Remote communication has been shown to **stimulate self-disclosure** (Phillips, 2022).
- When implementing digital solutions in probation, probation services must ensure a **good balance of supervision and support**. There is evidence that electronic monitoring can reduce the prison population (Spain by 20% during Covid-19 restrictions, Perez du Tudela (2020)) and has value only if accompanied by a treatment program.
- All digital solutions for remote supervision should be implemented to respect clients’ **privacy** and maintain the **human element** of community supervision. Home visits usually elicit more information about the probationer but diminish people’s privacy and increase the risk that punishment in the community becomes tighter.

Other stakeholders

- **Technology moves quickly, and training needs to keep pace:** Prison schools and training providers linked to prisons should offer courses on digitalisation from the community, but delivered in prisons. If there are no outside providers, prisons should approach NGOs, adult education or higher education institutes to provide this training for prison staff and for prisoners.
- **Local administrations, councils and mayoral offices need to be made aware of the importance of digital skills for prisoners.** Prisoners need to know who to come to on their release, for support in catching up with new technological developments.
- **University and researchers, and other evaluation providers.** We urgently need evidence to support why digitalisation in prison is an important topic to address. Properly framed research questions could help prisons, administrations and jurisdictions to show the impact digital investment and training has on prisons, prisoners and their communities.

References

- Bredin, S. (2018). Correctional reform in France: more prison places, less incarcerations. Interview: Stéphane Bredin, Director General of the Prison Administration, France. 3rd Edition, June 2018. Pp.34–39. Available: <https://justice-trends.press/correctional-reform-in-francemore-prison-places-less-incarcerations/>
- CEP. (2020), “Covid-19: measures and protocols in probation”, *CEP Probation*, 8 June, available at: <http://www.cep-probation.org/covid-19-measures-and-protocols-in-probation/>
- Dominey, J. (2021), Remote supervision. What did we learn?. Presentation for the CEP expert group on Technology in Probation “The challenges and possibilities of digital probation and remote supervision”.
- Gormley C, Schinkel M, Barkas B, et al. (2020) Criminal justice involved. In: Armstrong S and Pickering L (eds) Left Out and Locked Down. Impacts of COVID-19 Lockdown for Marginalised Groups in Scotland. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, pp. 54–66.
- Jewkes, Y., & Reisdorf, B. C. (2016). A brave new world: The problems and opportunities presented by new media technologies in prisons. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(5), 534-551.
- Lockwood, A., Viglione, J., & Peck, J. H. (2023). COVID-19 and juvenile probation: A qualitative examination of emergent challenges and useful strategies. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 50(1), 56-75.
- OECD. (2014) Recommendation of the Council on Digital Government Strategies.
- Perez de Tudela, E.M. (2020). Telematic Control and Semi-Freedom as a Response to the Pandemic: The Spanish Penitentiary System Experience. *Victims & Offenders*, 15(7–8), 1186–1202.
- Phillips, J., Westaby, C., Ainslie, S., & Fowler, A. (2021). ‘I don't like this job in my front room’: Practising probation in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Probation Journal*, 68(4), 426-443.
- Phillips, Jake (2022). The impact of the pandemic on probation: lessons for the future. *Safer Communities*.
- Sturm, A., Robbers, S., Henskens, R., & de Vogel, V. (2021). ‘Yes, I can hear you now...’ Online working with probationers in the Netherlands: New opportunities for the working alliance. *Probation Journal*, 68(4), 411-425.
- Van De Steene, S., & Knight, V. (2017). Digital transformation for prisons: Developing a needs-based strategy. *Probation Journal*, 64(3), 256–268.
- Zivanai, E., & Mahlangu, G. (2022). Digital prison rehabilitation and successful re-entry into a digital society: A systematic literature review on the new reality of prison rehabilitation. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 2116809.



DIGICOR



"Digitalisation in corrections towards reduced recidivism"

Erasmus+ Project Number 2020-1-DE02-KA226-VET-008330