

# Education of prisoners during the coronavirus pandemic on the example of Poland

## Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on education of prisoners during the coronavirus pandemic on the example of Poland. Education is an important tool in social rehabilitation of prisoners, which is provided to prepare them for the participation in professional, social and family life. At present, facing the coronavirus pandemic, the entire penitentiary system must deal with problems which have been unknown so far and it must meet new challenges related to education of prisoners. At the same time, the dynamic development of new technologies offers new possibilities in the field of education. The material presented in the paper has been collected by the methods of interviewing, data analysis and content analysis. The obtained results indicate that education of prisoners during the pandemic has not overturned any education schemes which have been applied currently. A fundamental task in education of prisoners is eliminating negative results of social exclusion which are related to education negligence. The results of the research can be applied in a multi-dimensional perspective by both theoreticians and practitioners. They can be also used for improvement and search of better and more efficient solutions in the field of education of prisoners. Considering numerous scientific fields, a discussion might be started to select methods for education of prisoners and to determine how to implement e-learning, with respecting security rules. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the system of prison education has not been disrupted and penitentiary units have been functioning without any problems, in their regular ways. However, it is necessary for every unit to follow the sanitary regime.

**Keywords:** prisoners, education, the COVID-19 pandemic, social readaptation

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## Introduction

In Poland, an average monthly cost of maintaining one prisoner was as high as 43 869.42 PLN in 2019 [Prison Service, 2020]. As a result, activities which contribute to social rehabilitation of prisoners and which prevent them from recidivism become particularly significant. Undoubtedly, education is one of the most important factors of such activities. Education comes as an important tool applied to prepare prisoners for participating in social and family life, for taking responsibility for themselves and other people, for bearing the consequences of their own decisions. Numerous activities related to education are oriented towards the main aim, namely: efficient social rehabilitation of prisoners. It refers to knowledge, skills and social competences. At present, facing the coronavirus pandemic, the entire penitentiary system must deal with problems which have been unknown so far and it must meet new challenges related to education of prisoners. At the same time, the dynamic development of new technologies offers new possibilities in the field of education.

The problem related to education of prisoners during the pandemic is discussed in the paper because of its current nature and its social impact. It is advisable to continue the research which has been initiated and oriented not only towards obtaining new knowledge but also towards developing practical and efficient tools in the field of prison education in emergency situations. It is also important to draw the reader's attention to education of future prison staff members who will be responsible for the implementation of prisoner education processes.

## Literature and research review

The research indicates that the process of social rehabilitation of prisoners depends on numerous factors, including education which allows prisoners to find employment. The prison education system

undergoes the process of constant evolution – it needs to be adjusted to the changing requirements of the labour market. Furthermore, the education systems in particular countries differ in terms of the general levels of prisoners' skills or gaps in basic qualifications.<sup>1-6</sup>

The research conducted in Poland indicates that social rehabilitation of prisoners who have left their penitentiary units without any qualifications is very difficult. People without education are most exposed to recidivism. Prison education is an important element which affects prisoners. It comes as a penitentiary-rehabilitating activity which can change prisoners' attitudes, which reinforces their self-reliance, independence, their value systems or causal reasoning. These are important components in making independent decisions. Education of prisoners is a form of their occupational activation. It is included in the idea of life-long learning, it allows them to follow the development of new technologies and dynamically changing reality.<sup>7-11</sup>

Education improves chances to re-enter the labour market which also changes dynamically. It offers new skills and improvement of qualifications. In accordance with the law, all prisoners serving their sentences at penitentiary units and remand custodies are allowed to exercise their rights to obtain education.<sup>12-16</sup> The prison education offer is supplemented with training courses organised by penitentiary units. There are also European programmes, state and individual solutions developed and implemented by the prison staff members employed at the particular penitentiary units and remand custodies.<sup>9,17,18</sup>

## Research method and questions

The research methods include a diagnostic survey and content analysis.<sup>19-21</sup> The techniques applied in the research include a questionnaire, document analysis, a free-form and question-targeted interview.<sup>22-25</sup> The following research problems have been formulated:

how is prison education implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic? How has the pandemic affected prison education? How does prison education during the pandemic differ from prison education under regular circumstances? What legislative regulations are addressed to the questions related to prison education during the pandemic? How have statistical data referring to prison education changed during the pandemic? How has prison education been implemented during the pandemic? What methods have been applied? To what extent has e-learning been implemented? Have any special means been applied? What is the cost of such education? How has the recruitment process been organised? What problems have been observed in the field of prison education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

There have not been any hypotheses formulated as it is typical of social research of exploratory nature, which is focused on phenomena that have not been analysed so far. The assumed approach is to foster the cognition of the analysed reality in an objective and holistic way, unrestricted by any cognitive schemes. The research is of the dynamic and exploratory character. The obtained results will be re-evaluated. A hypothesis comes as a scientific, rigid approach towards methodology.<sup>26,19</sup> The empirical material collected for the research and a review of literature include an in-depth plot of decoding the system which offers new chances to prisoners. All these components create a conglomerate and there is no space for a demarcation line. The collected material cannot be used for making any generalisation. However, it can be a good starting point for interdisciplinary research and search of efficient solutions in the discussed field.

## Conclusion and contribution

Prison education is one of the basic elements in penitentiary treatment. The tasks related to prison education come as the most important ones which are implemented by the Polish Prison Service. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the ordinance issued by the General Director of the Prison Service has been in force, in reference to the implementation of the sanitary regime and in accordance with the requirements defined by the Chief Sanitary Inspector and the Ministry of National Education. The ordinance of the Prison Service authorities was issued during a video-conference attended by the directors of the particular penitentiary units. Since March, it has been applied during the work with prisoners. It is of the official order character and it is sufficient at that legislative level. The applied regulations are compliant with the regulations issued by the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Justice, with the authorities responsible for education centres and supervision over prison education.

All prisoners at penitentiary units and remand custodies have the right to obtain education, which is guaranteed and organised in accordance with the regulations of the Polish Law. It is guaranteed by the Polish Law and stated in the respective regulations [the Ordinance of the Minister of Justice of 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016 on the method and mode of education provided at penitentiary units and remand custodies; the Act of 7<sup>th</sup> September 1991 on the education system and the Act of 6<sup>th</sup> June 1997 on the Executive Penal Code].<sup>12</sup>

Schools and education centres which operate at penitentiary units and remand custodies are organised at all the education levels, except for higher education institutions. In accordance with the legal regulations, prisoners can exercise their rights to educate themselves outside their penitentiary units.

Each year education is provided to 3500-4000 prisoners approximately. They can participate in various education activities. The number of places at prison schools allows all the prisoners

who need education attend their classes. There are 18 Continuing Education Centres which operate at 20 penitentiary units. A network of prison schools provides obligatory education to under-age prisoners and education to prisoners who have applied for a possibility to learn. Prison education is organised at the education levels defined by the relevant legal regulations: primary, secondary, post-secondary and vocational (extracurricular occupational training courses which have replaced vocational schools for adults).

Vocational training is an important education level. It is provided at occupational qualification training courses. Implemented at all the Continuing Education Centres, this form of education is attended by the highest number of prisoners. Education is organised to provide qualifications in the occupations which can provide the highest chances to find employment after leaving penitentiary units and which are most in demand on the labour market. Prisoners with the secondary education level can attend post-secondary schools. Education dedicated to prisoners which is provided at the Continuing Education Centres is supplemented with training courses organised by penitentiary units. The courses are mainly addressed to adult prisoners who do not have any occupational qualifications or who need occupational retraining.

Application of orthodidactics principles is very important in prison education. It includes integration of learners presenting various deviations from the standards into the common education system. The principles of social rehabilitation education include the principle of individualisation, tutoring, domination of general education, activities, adjustment of tasks to the learning abilities of students, educational content and team education.<sup>16</sup>

In Poland, during the COVID-19 pandemic, prison education has been functioning in the same way as under regular circumstances. The education schemes for prisoners have not been disrupted and prison education centres operate without any problems, in their regular ways (status on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020). There have not been any differences caused by the pandemic observed in the field of prison education. Education has been provided at the same levels, recruitment and examinations have been carried out in the same way as they were carried out before the pandemic.

The entire education system has the uniform character in Poland, regardless of who its beneficiaries are: free citizens or prisoners who serve their sentences at penitentiary units. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the functioning of the education system. Regulations issued by the Minister of Education also refer to prison schools and prisoners who learn there. If the system of prison education were different from the general education system, the principle of non-discrimination would be violated.

The Continuing Education Centres which operate at penitentiary units and remand custodies are state institutions operating in accordance with the Act on Education Law. Schools incorporated in such centres are schools for adults and they implement the same curricula and education programmes as schools in freedom. Considering the specific character of their work, teachers employed at prison schools are mainly employed based on fixed-term contracts or part-time agreements. They have to follow the same regulations and requirements as teachers at state schools in freedom.

Considering the pandemic conditions, the situation has not brought about any difficulties. The sanitary regime has to be maintained and followed also at schools operating in the prison education system. They have to meet the requirements and follow the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspector [the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate,

2020]. The situation in prison education could be changed if there were any cases of COVID-19 infection detected in any centre where prisoners are educated. So far, (status on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020) there have not been any cases of the above-mentioned infection confirmed, hence the functioning of the prison education system takes place on the regular principles, provided that the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspector are followed.

Since March 2020 and until the end of the school year 2019/2020, according to the requirements of the Ministry of National Education, prisoners were provided with distance learning. Considering the security aspect, the Internet was not used in distance learning. Prisoners were provided with their learning materials to their cells and they learnt independently. They also received grades for their work, they passed examinations and solved tests and various tasks.

The recruitment process was implemented in the same way as before the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed the relevant authorities to plan and to start the process of prison education in accordance with the schedule. There have not been and there are not any difficulties resulting from the pandemic in the discussed field.

In accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of National Education and the Chief Sanitary Inspector, since 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020, education is provided in its regular (contact) form. All the sanitary regime recommendations are respected.

E-learning does not seem to be a good solution for prison education, considering the security aspect, which is the priority in working with prisoners and in tasks implemented by the penitentiary system. Application of e-learning in prison education is the main concern of the participants of the education process and of the particular penitentiary units where prison education has been implemented in that form. The participants – prisoners make comments referring to the quality of their classes and to the lack of real contact with their tutors.

The only problem in prison education during the COVID-19 pandemic may result from difficulties related to the sanitary regime which must be respected. It is necessary to provide a proper amount of time needed for disinfection of classrooms. This activity, which usually takes about 10 minutes, must be included into internal daily schedules. It is very difficult to estimate the costs of implementing prison education during the pandemic in the Polish penitentiary system. Some indispensable materials, such as printing paper, are distributed from office supplies of penitentiary units and their distribution depends individually on decisions made at each penitentiary unit. No current education schemes of prison education have been affected during the pandemic. The fundamental task of prison education is to eliminate negative results of social exclusion which are related to negligence of education. Penitentiary units come as a very specific environment for learning and they pose numerous untypical challenges to educators, not only during the pandemic.

It seems that distance education can be a chance for prisoners and for the entire system. However, the specific nature of learners who serve their sentences at penitentiary units makes it impossible in Poland, due to the security aspects. Comparing Poland to other countries and considering the recommendations of the European Union, distance education becomes a challenge to the penitentiary system [European Prison Observatory, 2019]. At the same time, however, it comes as an indication to the initiation of an interdisciplinary dialogue and to the development of efficient solutions in the field of distance education. If virus infections are reported, distance education can be implemented or continued after the pandemic. Application of innovative solutions is a chance for prisoners and a challenge to prison staff members.

The unstable pandemic situation, which has been changing dynamically, may force the people responsible for the development and implementation of prison education to undertake some efficient actions in the discussed field. Therefore, the research in that field should be continued.<sup>27-30</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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