

Bridging the health gap in prisons

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Portugal has embarked on an ambitious journey to integrate prison health services into the national health service, a move rooted in the country's constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. This initiative, developed in close collaboration with the Regional Office, aims to ensure that people in prison receive the same quality of health care as the general population, addressing long-standing health inequities.

The Regional Office has played a key role by facilitating a policy dialogue and supporting the development of a comprehensive health plan for prisons. The partnership began by establishing a working group comprising representatives from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education. The working group's main proposal was to transfer the responsibility of prison health care from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Health.

The impact

Portugal's working group has developed a prison health plan built on six pillars: health protection and promotion, early detection and prevention, continuity of care, social reintegration, information systems and technology, and research. The country is already rolling out activities such as telehealth services and transitioning to electronic medical records, which improve access to health information and boost continuity of care.

Lessons learned

- Bringing together experts working on mental health and infectious diseases alongside representatives from hospitals, NGOs, civil society and the justice system is paramount for success.
- Data-driven decision-making processes ensure that health interventions are effective and appropriate for the prison environment.
- Political commitment and intersectoral agreement (in particular between health and justice sectors) are essential to ensure health care is equitable in underserved environments such as prisons.

Donors and partners

Ministry of Health; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education; Institute of Public Health; University of Porto



European Region



A prison exterior in Lisbon, Portugal.
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“Government commitment can enable the strategic plan and nourish it to its full potential.”

Dr Ana Paula Martins, Minister of Health, Portugal

What's next?

Portugal plans to build on these initial successes by expanding health services within prisons and ensuring they are on par with those available to the general population. Future efforts will focus on enhancing mental health services, strengthening health education and regularly monitoring the prison health plan's recommended actions.