Emergency detention centres for drug couriers

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Summary

Problem definition and research methods

The researchers evaluated how the ‘Temporary law on the emergency detention centres for drugs couriers’ is carried out in practice. This law was intended to create cell capacity for arrested drugs couriers in as short a period as possible. The law on penitentiary principles was thus put aside and this created the possibility to detain drugs couriers under stricter circumstances than usual and to confine more than one prisoner in a cell. In order to solve staff shortage the emergency detention centres employ personnel from private prison services. The evaluation was carried out from 1 March until 1 October. During this period the detention centres were still in the making. In the beginning, there were growing pains that were remedied in due time. Organizational and constructional changes were made, as well as changes in personnel, enforcement of policies and prison population.

The research question is as follows:

*How are the special emergency detention centres for drugs couriers functioning and what are the consequences of the emergency provisions for both guards and prisoners, also in comparison with regular provisions?*

The researchers worked out the main research question into nine sub questions. In order to answer these, the following activities were carried out:

a. Gathering information from relevant sources and preparatory research.
b. Analysis of registration data of various populations.
c. Nineteen in-depth interviews with key informants.
d. Thirty-three semi structured interviews and twelve short interviews with staff members in four emergency detention centres.
e. Seventy-six semi structured interviews with prisoners in four emergency detention centres.
f. Four hundred and seven DKS questionnaires filled out by prisoners on the circumstances in the four emergency detention centres.
g. One hundred and forty-two BASAM questionnaires on working conditions filled out by staff members in three emergency detention centres.
h. Twenty-two interviews by telephone with various employees.

Main conclusions

According to the researchers the following findings stand out:

- the basic constructional nature of the provisions;
- the constitution of the target group: the percentage of ‘swallowers’ is relatively small in comparison with the percentage of other drugs couriers;
the prisoners are situated in a shared cell without taking into consideration the prisoner’s backgrounds, nor the phase of their criminal proceedings;

the inexperience of most of the staff members;

the detainees’ negative appreciation of the detention, related to strict prison policies, sharing a cell with one or more other prisoners and relatively long detention periods.

Other conclusions are:

During the research period, two thirds of the arrested drugs couriers were allocated in emergency detention centres and one third were placed in regular prisons.

Transfer from an emergency detention centre to a regular prison hardly occurred in this period of time.

In view of the strict policy, emergency prisons are less suitable for longer periods of detention. The average term of imprisonment for these drugs couriers is 1,25 years with a peak of four years;

The constructional provisions are rather basic. The emergency detention centres in Roermond and Bloemendaal are more suitable for the imprisonment of persons; the one in Zeist is the least suitable.

Men and women are allocated separately. Juveniles are not placed in emergency detention centres. Language and cultural background are taken into account.

Detention centres experience problems regarding personnel and these problems will partly remain, also when the number of provisions is extended. These problems are mainly the result of the enormous time pressure the private prison services were under and the limited training of a great number of their staff.

The day-to-day organization in the emergency detention centres is not yet functioning well.

The detainees’ negative appreciation of the emergency detention centres differs significantly from the appreciation of detainees in regular houses of detention. Complaints and grievances are related to issues such as autonomy, social assistance, activities and facilities. Services and facilities rendered vary between detention centres.

The range of disciplinary measures in the detention centres is limited.

According to key informants, measures to control and restrain are seldom used.

Above mentioned aspects may influence the safety and manageability of the emergency detention centres.

Recommendations

1. Pay more attention to training and guidance of the prison staff, preferably by experienced employers of the DJI (Dutch Department responsible for all penitentiary institutions).
2. When expanding emergency detention capacity, take into account limited availability of experienced personnel and reserve time for the training of inexperienced staff members.
3. Take the detainees’ background into consideration when situating them.
4. Situate suspected persons, convicted persons and repeated offenders separately.
5. Set a limit to the length of stay.
6. Design disciplinary measures for the specific circumstances in the emergency detention centres.