



Newsletter

01/2017

15,000 illicit mobile phones and sim cards in UK prisons

Ministry of Justice and Ministry of the Interior decide on personnel, legal and technical countermeasures

Meckenheim, January 2017

State of emergency in UK prisons: The violence against staff and fellow prisoners is steadily increasing. In mid-December, the Manchester Evening News received an anonymous letter. It was written and sent by a prison officer who turns to the public in despair for help. The officer describes the current situation in prisons, where staff is living in growing fear of the outbreaks of violence by prisoners. The officer points out that he and his colleagues felt left alone by the prison authorities and the Home Secretary, who would do "nothing to protect the staff". Also, nothing would be done against the extensive and partly openly lived use of drugs and illegal mobile phones behind bars. Often the abusers wouldn't even be punished, if they were caught.

Explosive increase of illegal mobile phones

Especially the number of mobile phones smuggled into prisons has dramatically increased in 2015 with more than 15,000 handsets and sim cards recovered in jails over the year. The real figure is likely to be much higher. The smartphones are being used by criminals to trade drugs, guns and organise murders in the outside world. The inmates also shoot pictures and videos inside prison before posting them on all social media channels.

Growing fear among staff

Prison officers feel increasingly unsafe. As a result, the absentee rate among staff is enormously high, and a growing number of officers are leaving every month. The consequence is an acute shortage of staff. Attracting new employees, however, is difficult, more than ever with the increasingly bad reputation of the profession and the poor payment linked with it. In November 10,000 prison officers staged a nationwide walkout to call attention to the precarious situation. A cry for help.

UK government decides on measures

To tackle the prison crisis, the UK government has now decided on a package of measures and has provided £550 million for its financing. With the money prison staff is going to be built up to 2,500 by 2018. The financing also goes to the refurbishment and technical equipment of some ageing jails. £14 million have already been invested for more than 400 extra staff in ten of the most challenging prisons, as well as in launching a £3 million intelligence hub to tackle the increasing criminality behind bars. Home Office security minister, Ben Wallace, affirms: „Criminals are locked up to protect communities from their actions, so it is totally unacceptable for them to continue their life of crime from behind bars.“

Better disconnect or block illegal mobile phones?

New mobile detection and elimination technology has therefore been installed at three especially notorious prisons – a high-security site, one in London and one in a city in the north of England. The technology is to go into operation earlier this year. The technical upgrading and installation represents a complementary measure to an agreement, that was signed at the end of November 2016 and is praised by the government as 'ground-breaking'. It enables prison authorities to secure civil court orders requiring mobile network operators to blacklist illegally held mobiles and disconnect sim cards. The former chief inspector of prisons, David Ramsbotham, however, has strong doubts as to whether the new powers will prove to be effective. In his experience the new orders will be immediately undermined by people smuggling new sim cards into jails. He considers the nationwide roll-out of elimination technology that reliably prevents the use of mobile phones to be the far simpler and more effective countermeasure.

Index of sources: The Guardian, 11 August 2016: „New powers to cut off illicit mobile phones used in prisons“, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/aug/11/new-powers-launched-to-cut-off-illicit-mobile-phones-used-in-prisons>; The Sun, 24 November 2016: „Prisoner Cell Block - Prisoners will have their mobiles cut off as Justice Secretary Liz Truss launches £550m bid to tackle the prison crisis“, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2257411/prisoners-will-have-their-mobiles-cut-off-as-justice-secretary-liz-truss-launches-550m-bid-to-tackle-the-prison-crisis/>; Manchester Evening News, 14 December 2016: „Inside Strangeways: What one prison officer thinks you should know“, <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/inside-strangeways-what-one-prison-12322407>

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