

# 1 Introduction: Social Work and Health in Prisons – Key Challenges and Developments

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*‘The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.’  
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead* (1862)*

This publication deals with the development of social work and health in prisons in Central Asia and China. The focus on social work in prison might seem odd at first sight. The topic is difficult, as the relations between social work services for people in prison and the management of penal institutions are fraught with tension and conflict. Whereas prison institutions operate on the logic of correction and control, social work and health services in these institutions are geared (or should be geared) towards providing assistance and acceptable minimum standards of health to the prison population (Matejkowski et al., 2014).

In Central Asia and China, these inherent tensions regarding social work and health in prisons are especially pronounced. The countries of Central Asia inherited a large prison system from the Soviet era, when this region had been one of the preferred locations for Gulag camps and forced displacement (Applebaum, 2003; Khlevniuk, 2004). After the end of the Soviet Union, prison reform in the newly independent countries of Central Asia has not been an easy endeavour. On the contrary, in the context of political and economic crisis, prison reform has not been prioritised by the governments in this region. Due to authoritarian trends in the region, with many prisoners incarcerated for political reasons, the Central Asian prisons became overcrowded hotspots of growing drug use and HIV epidemics (Walcher, 2005; Thorne et al., 2010; Vagenas et al., 2013). Since the 1990s, international human rights organisations have been reporting about widespread violations and even torture in the penitentiary systems of Central Asian countries (IWPR, 2011; HRW, 2012). The development of China’s penal system has not been easier, as frequent reports about forced labour and compulsory treatment centres show (Khalid, 2021; OHCHR, 2022).

Despite these difficult circumstances, however, there are also signs of cautious progress. Some Central Asian countries have taken first steps towards prison reform and engaged in a dialogue with international orga-

nisations (UNODC, 2019). Most notably, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have introduced medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and needle and syringe programmes (NSPs) in their penitentiary systems to conquer the spread of infectious diseases (Moller et al., 2009; Azbel et al., 2018). Kazakhstan has reduced its prison population from 78,029 in 2000 to 29,403 in 2020, a decrease of 62% in two decades (WPB, n.d.). Similarly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have managed to lower their incarceration rates and improve prison conditions. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have also been successful in setting up rehabilitation services. In Uzbekistan, too, there have been first signs of improvement with regard to the conditions in the penitentiary system: since 2016, the new president has released a number of political prisoners, and in 2019, the notorious Jaslyk prison was closed (HRW, 2019). Observers, however, criticise the process of prison reform in Central Asia for being slow and superficial. Some of the intended institutional changes appear to have stalled (HRW, 2018).

An important proponent of prison reform in the region of Central Asia and China is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which is the global custodian of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners ('the Mandela Rules'), the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders ('the Bangkok Rules'), and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures ('the Tokyo Rules') (UNODC, 2019). The agency promotes the implementation of these global prison standards and encourages prison reform programmes that are guided by international human rights considerations (UNODC, n.d.). In the region of Central Asia, UNODC advises government authorities on new probation services, prison staff training curricula, and the implementation of prison-based rehabilitation programmes with UNODC support (UNODC, 2019). In China, collaboration focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention and care initiatives among drug users in prison settings (UNODC, n.d.). Overall, key concerns with regard to prisons include the overcrowding of correctional facilities, general violence and human rights violations against prisoners, prison health issues such as drug use and the spread of infectious diseases, and the prevention of religious extremism among detainees (UNODC, 2019).

This volume discusses the prospects of humanising the prison system in Central Asia and China, with all its existing limitations and contradictions. A key focal point is social work and health services in prison settings, including drug rehabilitation, medication-assisted treatment, needle and syringe exchange programmes, and other health interventions. The volume follows a broad approach to the topic, covering all types of correctional institutions and services, including probation and prison rehabilitation

programmes (UNODC, 2019). We aim to provide an overview of the development of social work and health in the prisons for the entire region, even if there are significant differences in data availability across the countries. The contributions of the volume focus on a number of key research questions:

- 1) What kind of social work and health services are provided in the penitentiary system of the countries of Central Asia and China?
- 2) What barriers and challenges for social work and health are there in the penitentiary system?
- 3) How can these challenges be addressed to ensure basic human rights and health standards in the penitentiary system?

The publication is divided into three parts. The first part presents the global framework of prison standards and its application in different country settings.

Chapter 2, ‘The Global Framework for Social Work and Health in Prisons’ by Ulla Pape and Heino Stöver, presents the most important international standards and discusses the global framework for the promotion of prisoners’ rights and humane prison conditions. Special attention is paid to the question of how international standards are applied to advocate for the adoption of acceptable minimum standards in closed institutions. In addition to studying the role of international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the chapter looks into the main areas for international action on improving prison conditions, including the prohibition of torture, the restriction of solitary confinement, and the promotion of prison health.

Chapter 3, ‘Women in Prisons and the Bangkok Rules – A Practical Guide for Social Workers’ by Ulla-Britt Klankwarth and Simon Fleißner, draws attention to social work practice and demonstrates how human rights agreements can be made useful for the social workers in closed institutions. The authors show how the Bangkok Rules can be applied to improve the conditions for women in prisons.

The second part of this publication includes four country studies that delve deeper into the development of prison reform in the region of Central Asia and China. Each country case study comprises information about the prison system, the prison population, and the development of social work and medical programmes in the penitentiary system.

The first case study is Chapter 4, ‘China: Social Work and Health in the Penitentiary System’ by Hang Su, which analyses the development of social work and health in the penitentiary system in China. The author argues that social rehabilitation in China remains insufficient and

incomplete, as community work is not sufficiently coordinated among institutions. As a result, social work in the penitentiary system in China is still at a relatively preliminary stage, and many aspects of social work need to be improved, especially with regard to medical care, education, vocational training, psychological counselling, and social support.

Chapter 5, 'Kazakhstan: Social Work and Health in the Penitentiary System' by Dinara Yessimova, Mariya Prilutskaya, Dalida Mukasheva, Medet Kudabekov, Sandugash Ismagulova, and Zhanar Shaidullina, provides a comprehensive account of the development of social services in the Kazakh prison system. The chapter studies the development of prison reform in Kazakhstan and argues that the introduction of alternatives to imprisonment, for example in the development of probation services, are of key importance in reforming Kazakhstan's prison system.

Chapter 6, 'Kyrgyzstan: Social Work and Health in the Penitentiary System' by Nurgul Musaeva, Jarkyn Shadymanova, Eric Orosaliev, and Cholpon Omurakunova, deals with the development of social work and health in the Kyrgyz penitentiary system. In contrast to other countries of the region, Kyrgyzstan has developed a broad range of harm reduction services in closed institutions. The authors conclude that Kyrgyzstan has made efforts to improve its criminal law mechanisms and its prison system to ensure a better observation of human rights. An important aspect in prison reform is the course towards the development of humanitarian values and the adherence to international standards for the treatment of prisoners. However, there are still major gaps in the implementation of international standards. Most importantly, prisoners are still facing problems regarding access to quality medical care and drug treatment in Kyrgyzstan.

The last country case study is Chapter 7, 'Uzbekistan: Social Work and Health in the Penitentiary System' by Sergey Soshnikov and Heino Stöver, which examines the efforts to reform the prison system in Uzbekistan. The authors argue that many prisons in Uzbekistan do not have the trained social workers or other mental health and social service professionals to provide the level of support that is needed. In addition, many prisons have limited access to programmes and services that can support successful reintegration into society.

The third part contains additional case studies and cross-cutting issues, such as resocialisation services in Kazakhstan and needle and syringe programmes in Kyrgyzstan, which can serve as models for other countries in the region.

Chapter 8, 'Compulsory Drug Treatment in China' by Hang Su, deals with a specific form of closed institution in China: the centres for compulsory drug rehabilitation. These centres provide compulsory treatment to

drug users as a form of mandatory treatment of drug dependency. Hang Su argues that compulsory drug rehabilitation centres suffer from a lack of cooperation between different institutions, of social work interventions, and of qualified social workers as staff members in the centres. According to Hang Su, compulsory drug rehabilitation centres could overcome existing barriers if they strengthen community support in drug recovery and make use of social organisations.

Chapter 9, ‘Compulsory Drug Treatment in Kazakhstan’ by Mariya Prilutskaya, focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of compulsory drug treatment in Kazakhstan. Similar to China, the country runs centres for mandatory treatment of drug addiction. Kazakhstan’s compulsory treatment system was inherited from the Soviet Union and has since been reformed. The author argues that more attention should be paid to the development of evidence-based approaches in drug treatment, with the aim to not only reduce the symptoms of addiction but also to promote the well-being and social adaptation of the patients and their families. It is worth mentioning that medication-assisted treatment (MAT), although available outside the prison system, has been neither implemented nor even discussed within the prison system.

Chapter 10, ‘Resocialisation Programmes in Kazakhstan’ by Dalida Mukasheva, Medet Kudabekov, Dinara Yessimova, Nurlan Tulkinbayev, and Anna Konvisar, turns to the issue of rehabilitation, which is part of the ongoing prison reforms in Kazakhstan. The authors present the empirical results of a study on rehabilitation and social adaptation services for persons released from prison and compare the implementation of these services to international prison standards. The authors show that Kazakhstan has increased efforts in social rehabilitation to reduce its prison population and facilitate better social adaptation for ex-detainees. The reforms require the state and the administration of penitentiary institutions in Kazakhstan to change their approaches to working with people, as can be seen in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. However, the authors demonstrate that Kazakh state institutions do not sufficiently involve non-profit organisations in the development of social rehabilitation programmes.

Chapter 11, ‘Legal and Regulatory Frameworks of Social Work with Drug Users in Kyrgyzstan’ by Tynchtyk Estebeu uulu, discusses the development of social work services for drug users in the prison system in Kyrgyzstan. The author argues that despite a number of positive changes, Kyrgyz state policy still does not meet the challenges related to drug use within the prison system due to the criminalisation of drug use. State services should therefore invest in a broadening of harm reduction services in the prison system.

Chapter 12, ‘Syringe Exchange Points in the Penitentiary System of Kyrgyzstan’ by Heino Stöver and Jarkyn Shadymanova, presents another case study from Kyrgyzstan. The authors discuss the history of the implementation of needle exchange programmes as one important form of harm reduction in Kyrgyz prisons and show that the coverage of needle exchange programmes lags far behind the recommendations of international organisations. More efforts are therefore needed to increase the coverage and access to harm reduction services among drug users in the Kyrgyz prison system, which is one of the very few programmes of this kind worldwide.

Chapter 13, ‘Naloxone as Overdose Prevention in the Prison Setting and in the Community. A Comparison of the Situation in Germany, Kyrgyzstan, and China’ by Zhyldyz Bakirova, Tynchtyk Estebe Uulu, Simon Fleißner, Ulla Pape, Heino Stöver, and Hang Su, deals with the use of naloxone as an emergency medication for drug overdoses in the prison system. Naloxone programmes aim to increase the availability of naloxone in emergency situations by administering the medicine to opioid-using peers as well as their family members and friends. The chapter is a comparative study of the prison systems in different countries. The starting point is the pilot programme ‘Take-Home Naloxone’, which was introduced in three federal states in Germany in 2021. The comparison shows that Kyrgyzstan also has a naloxone programme to combat overdose mortality, which already started in 2008.

Chapter 14, ‘Medication-Assisted Treatment in Prisons’ by Heino Stöver and Ingo Ilja Michels, discusses the development of drug-treatment services for drug-using people living in prisons. The authors show that drug use is prevalent throughout prison populations. Despite advances in prison-based drug-treatment programmes, access and quality often remain substantially poorer than in the community. The authors present examples for the effective use of MAT in the prison system and recommend upscaling the implementation of these services in order to respond to the needs of people in prison more fully.

All in all, this book gives – for the first time – a comprehensive overview of the situation of prisoners in closed settings in Central Asia and China, focusing on drug-using prisoners and the specific responses of the prison administrations and NGOs, if they exist in these settings. The contributions show that in the countries discussed, promising steps have been taken towards the introduction of a more human approach to health and social care for prisoners, mostly accompanied by a reduction in the number of prisoners, the introduction of probation services in order to better resocialise people released from prisons, and the introduction of evi-

dence-based interventions – at least in some countries (medication-assisted treatment for opioid dependent prisoners, needle exchange programmes, provision of naloxone, etc.) – that have been suggested by the United Nations (2020). However, a lot of work still needs to be done in order to comply with international standards. The authors of this volume analyse the main obstacles that need to be overcome in order to meet international standards of prison health and social care.

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