

**Conference on
Overcrowding in Belgian prisons.
Towards a proper detention regime.**

Held in Antwerp

A lecturer's perspective.

I arrived in Antwerp 18 years ago and quickly learned that Flemings cherish their "little house, little garden, little tree": that piece of private space where they can be alone. Ironically, the same people tolerate three people sharing 9 m² in their prisons - less space than the law requires for one cash cow.

If personal space is essential for 11 million Belgians, why should it not be so in Belgian prisons?

Let's take a peek inside the prison world. Not without first quoting Dostoyevsky from *The House of the Dead* (1862): "The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons".

Belgium had 20,346 people in detention on 15 April 2025: 12,877 inmates and the rest on alternative sentences. The maximum capacity of all Belgian prisons combined is 10,500. That means 1,500 people are sharing cells not intended for that. And no, this is not because of more crime - the system controls more, punishes just as harshly and reintegrates less.

But the numbers are not the worst thing. The worst is what happens when you lock someone up 22 hours a day in a cubicle where they eat, sleep and live - smokers next to non-smokers, violent offenders next to remorseful ones. While the UN prescribes 4 m² per prisoner (Nelson Mandela rules), here they cannot even stretch their legs. The European Court of Human Rights has condemned Belgium for this for years, but we would rather pay fines than improve cells.

A prison should be a place where mistakes lead to learning. But how? A student of mine, a repeat thief, put it this way: "Teacher, I can't do anything else. When I was four, my father was already taking me to break in - I could fit through the smallest windows." Do you really believe such a person gets "rehabilitated" after years of sleeping on the floor, with limited psychological counselling or educational opportunities?

When we choose schools for our children, we pay attention to the pedagogical project, infrastructure and class size. Why do we accept that prisons - which are supposed to reduce recidivism - lack all basic facilities?

The Council of Europe warns in its White Paper on Prison Overcrowding that at 90% occupancy, overcrowding becomes acute. This should prompt authorities to take immediate action to prevent collapse of the system.

Belgium has already received several injunctions for overcrowding and abuses. Improvement is not immediately in sight, but many are working on solutions.

To this end, the University of Antwerp and the Humanist League organised a conference with magistrates, experts and ex-prisoners on 26 April. Every opportunity we miss to guarantee a prisoner his rights is a lost chance for reintegration. In Belgian prisons, human rights are violated every day - in our name. How long will we allow this to continue?

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