



THE PREVENT PROJECT: STRENGTHENING MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION ACROSS EUROPEAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The PREVENT project is a European Union funded initiative seeking to improve mental health support and suicide prevention across criminal justice systems. The project responds to evidence that justice-involved individuals frequently experience complex mental health needs whilst criminal justice practitioners often receive limited training to address them. Bringing together partners from Portugal, Greece, Romania, Ireland, Italy and Cyprus, PREVENT aims to strengthen inter-agency collaboration, improve workforce capability and promote sustainable approaches to mental health support within prison, probation and community settings. This article reviews the rationale underpinning the project, examines its key implementation activities and considers its potential contribution to improving outcomes for both service users and criminal justice professionals.

Keywords: mental health; suicide prevention; probation; prisons; criminal justice; rehabilitation; Europe

Introduction

The European Union funded PREVENT project is founded upon a challenging but important reality: many individuals who come into contact with criminal justice systems experience significant mental health difficulties, whilst the institutions responsible for supporting them are often poorly equipped to respond effectively. These challenges affect people in prison, individuals supervised in the community, those leaving custody, veterans, people experiencing homelessness and others living with multiple and overlapping disadvantages.

The project also recognises that criminal justice professionals themselves operate within highly demanding environments. Probation practitioners, prison officers and other frontline staff frequently encounter trauma, self-harm, crisis situations and complex behavioural needs whilst receiving comparatively limited specialist training in mental health support. PREVENT therefore approaches mental health not as a marginal concern but as a structural issue affecting both service users and professionals.

The rationale for PREVENT

A central concern identified within the project proposal is the disparity between mental health provision in prisons and probation services. Whilst many prison systems have established suicide prevention arrangements, provision within probation settings appears considerably less developed. This is particularly significant because periods of transition between custody and community often coincide with increased vulnerability, instability and elevated risk. Individuals leaving custody may simultaneously experience unemployment, substance misuse, family breakdown, housing insecurity and untreated mental health needs.

The project identifies another fundamental challenge: the fragmentation of support services. Health providers, criminal justice organisations, voluntary sector agencies and employment services frequently operate independently of one another. Consequently, individuals are often required to navigate multiple systems without continuity of care or clear coordination. PREVENT seeks to strengthen these connections and reduce the likelihood of individuals falling through gaps between services.

Implementation across Europe

Portugal serves as one of the primary implementation sites for PREVENT. The project is coordinated by Aproximar, working alongside the General Directorate of Reintegration and Prison Services. Within the Portuguese context, PREVENT seeks to address limitations in community mental health provision and support more effective transitions from custody into the community. Particular emphasis is placed upon reducing barriers associated with stigma, unemployment and restricted access to psychological support.

In Greece, project activities respond to pressures associated with longstanding challenges in mental health provision, prison overcrowding and limitations within probation services. Partner organisations IASIS and InnovED contribute expertise in mental health practice and digital education respectively, supporting the development of enhanced training and service provision.

Romania presents a different set of challenges, including geographical inequalities in service provision and persistent stigma related to mental illness and criminal justice involvement. Through the contributions of Start pentru Performanta and Fundatia Estuar, the project seeks to strengthen social inclusion, employability and community reintegration opportunities. PREVENT therefore recognises reintegration as both a social and a mental health issue.

Supporting partners from Ireland, Italy and Cyprus contribute policy, research and academic expertise. Collectively, these organisations aim to ensure that project findings extend beyond pilot locations and contribute to wider European discussions concerning justice reform and mental health support.

Training and workforce development

One of the most significant elements of PREVENT concerns workforce development. The project acknowledges that many practitioners encounter complex mental health presentations without necessarily possessing the training required to respond confidently and effectively. As a result, PREVENT proposes structured educational programmes designed to strengthen mental health literacy, suicide prevention awareness and crisis intervention skills.

These initiatives target prison staff, probation practitioners, social workers and other professionals likely to encounter vulnerable individuals. Through a combination of digital and face-to-face learning approaches, PREVENT seeks to improve professional competence whilst strengthening confidence in managing mental health related risks.

Inter-agency collaboration

A further strength of the project lies in its emphasis upon partnership working. PREVENT recognises that many public sector systems continue to operate within organisational silos despite working with similar populations and addressing

overlapping social problems. By encouraging collaboration between criminal justice agencies, healthcare providers, community organisations and policymakers, the project aims to improve continuity of care and create more integrated responses to vulnerability.

The project therefore seeks not only procedural improvements but also cultural change. Through workshops, consultation exercises and policy development activities, PREVENT attempts to establish stronger and more sustainable inter-agency relationships.

Sustainability and long-term impact

A distinguishing feature of PREVENT is its focus on sustainability. The project recognises that many externally funded initiatives achieve promising short-term outcomes but struggle to maintain momentum once funding concludes. Consequently, PREVENT incorporates mechanisms designed to embed learning beyond the project's lifespan. These include accredited training pathways, micro-credentials, online knowledge repositories and dissemination activities across partner organisations.

The project's broader ambition is that mental health literacy, suicide prevention and staff wellbeing become embedded within routine prison and probation practice rather than remaining isolated project activities. Success will ultimately depend upon whether lessons learned become integrated into policy, commissioning and operational decision-making across participating jurisdictions.

Conclusion

PREVENT represents an ambitious attempt to address the complex relationship between mental health and criminal justice involvement. Rather than viewing mental health problems solely through a clinical lens, the project acknowledges the influence of housing instability, unemployment, social exclusion, organisational fragmentation and workforce pressures. Its focus on training, partnership working and long-term sustainability provides a potentially valuable framework for strengthening mental health support across criminal justice systems.

At its core, PREVENT seeks to improve the capacity of justice systems to recognise and respond to vulnerability before it escalates into crisis. Whether the project achieves lasting impact will depend upon the extent to which its findings become embedded within everyday criminal justice practice across Europe