Electronic Monitoring in Swedish prisons

Swedish Prison and Probation Administration

In April 2005 a system for electronic monitoring of the prisoners at the prison facility Kolmården was taken into use. Kolmården is a low security prison with a maximum capacity of 185 prisoners and a staffing of 45 people.

The objectives for this new measure were to establish sufficient security in terms of securing prisoner presence at the facility, to do so at a limited cost and to make the security work at the facility more efficient. Swedish low security prisons like Kolmården has no or very little physical security arrangements such as walls or fences to prevent definite or temporary escapes. Amongst the public there are often rumours regarding escapes – and especially temporary ones - from this kind of facilities. No matter if that kind of rumours have any substance or not, they are a threat to the open prison concept that Kolmården represents. All together there are eleven similar facilities in Sweden. When Kolmården was taken into use in 2004 it was heavily attacked by the media and others, described as resort where the prisoners could come and go as they pleased. To establish better acceptance to Kolmården and to other prisons of this open concept as a result of the improved presence control provided by the monitoring system therefore was a secondary objective for implementing this measure.

Another important incentive for launching EM in this environment is the fact that the Swedish prison and probation administration, SPPA, have a vast experience from using EM based on the same kind of technology to support home detention of offenders and an insight into the capacity of the technical concept. Due to the success of the use of EM in the home detention programme the concept is highly trusted among the public and presented a tool that could easily be accepted as a reliable measure to use for higher security in other environments, such as prisons.

The system installed at Kolmården is RF based and built on the same technology used in the Swedish home detention schemes. EM is mandatory and all prisoners are tagged with transmitters communicating with a net of transmitters/receivers, ”transceivers”, covering the complete prison in- and outdoor area. The net continuously register the presence or absence of all transmitters allocated to the system and presents the result in real time in the system interface. The monitored area is divided into different zones, defined as inclusion or exclusion zones, making it possible to secure that each prisoner is where he is supposed to be at any given time. The system as it is installed at Kolmården is not primarily for tracking of prisoners on the facility, but offers a rough positioning and tracking possibility.

The system presents a continuously updated report on the prisoner presence, absence and to some extent even their whereabouts on the facility to a cost comparable to the addition of two extra prison guards to the staff. The control delivered by the system would not be possible to obtain without adding a large number of guards to the prison

staff. The system presents a control measure that is far from rational or economically possible to create with additional manpower on the site and provides a possibility to add security to this kind of facility without corrupting the open environment that characterizes Swedish low security prisons.

A recent evaluation of the first twenty months of EM at Kolmården presents a favourable outcome. The technology has proven it self to have the availability needed for this kind of application, the manual security work mostly in terms of manual head counting and searching for prisoners missing at those occasions has been reduced by at least 70 % and both the staff and the prisoners are satisfied with the impact the monitoring has had on their respective roles at the facility.

During the first twenty months there have only been four definite escapes from Kolmården and no temporary escape has been registered. In comparison to other low security prisons this is very low numbers, but still it is not that easy to estimate the impact of the EM on this low rate of escapes. Even so a fair assumption is that the awareness of the monitoring has been keeping the disposition for escapes – especially temporary ones – down. A first survey among the detainees at Kolmården suggests that this has been the case. A most reliable sign on the public reliance on the EM concept to strengthen prison security, but also a direct result of the in fact low rate of escapes, is that as soon as the system was taken into use the media hunt for Kolmården was called off.

The economic outcome of EM in prison is dependant on many variables such as technical concept, security needs, size of the monitored area, the division of the area into zones, size of the target group e t c. The evaluation of EM at Kolmården shows that the concept certainly could be used to cut costs. The Kolmården set up has resulted in a daily cost per head of some 1.5 Euro - a reasonable cost considering the prosperous outcome of the monitoring and the limited size of the site, with an average target group of some 150 prisoners. If cutting costs is the main objective for EM in prison the desired effect at least theoretically grows with the size of the target group.

In Kolmården cutting costs is not an objective, but to increase security at limited cost. A desired secondary effect of this is that the employees would be able to focus on other tasks than manual control, i.e. interacting with the prisoner preparing him for the release or transferral to pre-release measures outside of prison. If this has been the case at Kolmården has not been properly evaluated yet, but the outcome so far at least suggest that the monitoring has freed resources that could be used for that kind of issues.

Based on the favourable outcome of the use of EM at Kolmården SPPA have decided to expand the use of EM in prison. Just like in the Kolmården case this expansion of EM is not primarily motivated by cutting costs, but to increase security in terms of upgraded control of the prisoner presence at the sites. In a first step three other prisons will be equipped with EM during the second half of 2007, with an expected start of production in January 2008. These new sites are all low security facilities like Kolmården, but at least one of them have higher standards for security than Kolmården. When fully implemented, this expansion will result in a total capacity to monitor a bit more than 500 prisoners, corresponding to approximately 10 % of the total prison capacity and 36 % of the capacity of the low security prisons.

The technical concept for the expansion will be the same as in the system used at Kolmården. One system - managed by and operated at SPPA - will be managing all four prison sites. When fully implemented this expansion is expected to reduce costs down close to 1 Euro per day and head.

The concept of EM used at Kolmården and comparable concepts are possibly most suitable for use in low security prisons, to strengthen the control of prisoner presence but it is also quite possible that the concept could be used for other reasons on other security levels in the Swedish prison system. The expansion at hand will at least to some extend give guidance on this. If the expansion presents a favourable outcome SPPA is prepared to expand the use of EM on low security prisons even further and also evaluate the possibility to use EM on other levels in the prison system. The guideline will be – like in the home detention programme - to use EM as a supportive tool to the programme where manual efforts can be saved to reduce costs and to improve the efficiency and the quality of those efforts.

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