

Electronic Monitoring in Swedish low security prisons

Swedish Prison and Probation Administration

Being an old customer to ElmoTech for equipment to the home detention programme in Sweden, in 2003 I heard rumours of a prison site here in the Netherlands, a small low security prison, where they had set up a system for tagging of the inmates. I visited this pilot facility in Veenhuizen in spring that same year.

At the same time in Sweden we were preparing for the opening of a new low security prison with a couple of novelties compared to the usual set up – the facility was also expected to deliver a considerable lower cost per day and head than the traditional low security prisons. My original intention was to introduce the use of EM in half way houses or possibly in one of our smallest open facilities – to get the preferred set up for a pilot.

Back home I presented my ideas to some people preparing for this new and by Swedish standard rather big facility. All of a sudden I found myself involved in the project of establishing this new prison – and in April 2005 the first system for electronic monitoring (tagging) of the prisoners was taken into use at this new prison facility called Kolmården - a low security prison with a maximum capacity of 185 prisoners. As I said quite a big facility by Swedish standards and not quite the pilot set up I wished for.

The objectives for this new measure in prison were to establish sufficient security in terms of securing prisoner presence at the facility, to do so at a limited cost and without losing the desired open atmosphere - 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 absconding by the prisoners.

Amongst the public there are often rumours regarding absconding – and especially temporary ones - from this kind of facilities. No matter if that kind of rumour has any substance or not, they are a threat to the open prison concept. All together there are eleven facilities in Sweden similar to Kolmården. 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. Better public acceptance to Kolmården and to other open prisons as a result of the physically obvious - and also in fact improved presence control therefore was another important objective for implementing this new security tool.

A most important incentive for launching EM in this environment was the simple fact that the Swedish prison and probation administration, SPPA, had 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 of EM was already 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.

Based on the favourable outcome of the use of EM at Kolmården a second step was taken in the programme in early 2008, when the system was extended to be used on three other open prisons, increasing the target group from 185 inmates to just over 500 - corresponding to approximately 10 % of the total prison capacity and 36 % of the capacity of the low security prisons.

Also this expansion was motivated by security reasons and not by economic ones. From a technical point of view still using the same concept, but having the system servers moved from the local sites to the central data site at the SPPA head office.

The system is RF based and built on the same technology used in the Swedish home detention schemes – using a tag to monitor the inmate. EM is mandatory to all prisoners at the sites. The transmitters are 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 can be 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 the four present sites is not primarily for tracking of prisoners on the facility, but offers anyway a rough positioning and tracking possibility based on historic data.

Communication between the sites and the central servers is tunnelled through dedicated and secured lines.

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 constantly having two extra prison guards enrolled. The control established 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 atmosphere that characterizes Swedish low security prisons.

The evaluation of the first step of EM in prison, the one performed at Kolmården, presents a favourable outcome. The technology has proven it self to provide 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 90 % and both the staff and also the prisoners are satisfied with the impact the monitoring has had on their respective roles at the facility.

The expectations on the system preventing definite abscondings were not that high, but since the monitoring started registered abscondings on all the four sites has gone down to very low numbers, almost to zero. Under normal circumstances – without EM - you would expect each one of these sites to have approximately 10 abscondings per year. Some short term abscondings have been registered, but the awareness of the system presence and its capacity to report has kept also these attempts down to very low numbers.

A survey among the inmates at Kolmården during the first step of evaluation revealed a very high trust in the system capacity and its reliability to report attempts to tamper with the system and unauthorized leaves from the prison area.

In comparison to other low security prisons all four sites show low numbers on absconding. Therefore it is a fair assumption that the awareness of the monitoring has been keeping the disposition for absconding – especially temporary ones – down significantly. A most reliable sign on the public reliance on the EM concept to strengthen prison security, but also a direct result of the reported low rate on

absconding, 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 depends on many variables such as technical concept, security needs, size and division of the monitored area, size of the target group, life time of the system, desired support level e t c. The evaluation of the Kolmården pilot 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 and the extended operation in the second phase of the programme will most certainly bring these costs down even further – the expectation is a daily cost per head at some 1 Euro per day - a reasonable cost considering the prosperous outcome of the monitoring and the limited size of the sites. 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 the Swedish programme on EM in prison cutting costs is not a prime objective, but to increase security at limited cost preserving the open atmosphere. A desired secondary effect of this is that the employees would be able to focus on other tasks than manual control, such as interacting with the prisoners preparing them for the release or transferral to pre-release measures (such as home detention for instance) outside of prison. Being a brand new prison site with newly hire staff this was noticeable on Kolmården already during the first year of operation.

The second stage of evaluation is still in process but already at this stage it is obvious that this also has been the case on all the three new sites. Mind you the technology won't do this transferral of focus to new tasks automatically, but since redirection of resources was one of the main objectives for the programme this has been attended to in a structured and organised way.

Never the less I guess this part of the program has been the hardest one to manage since prison staff (at least in Sweden) tend to keep on doing things the way they have always done – and their ancestors before them – but bit by bit they have learned that the system provides them with information making their work easier and more efficient and slowly they have taken it to their hearts. Today none of the sites would be able to manage without the system.

My evaluation is that the concept of EM used at the open prison sites in Sweden is most suitable for use in this kind low security environment, to strengthen the control of prisoner presence, but it is still quite possible that the concept will be used for other reasons on other security levels in the Swedish prison system.

The evaluation in process will at least to some extent give guidance on this matter. If the enlarged operation 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 security levels in the prison system. If the tagging is directly connected to some kind of reward system or other sources of positive reinforcement of the offender it would be quite possible to use the concept also on a more severe clientele and in a more security demanding environment – the way they do in the Dutch prison Lelystad.

So far EM has not been used to manage costs, but it is also quite possible that the EM concept in the future will be used as cost cutting tool when establishing new prison sites. For the nearest future though, when implementing EM in already existing prisons the continued guideline will be to use EM as a supportive tool to strengthen security and where manual efforts can be redirected to more desired tasks.

In the same way that the knowledge and experience of the EM concept in the home detention programme made way for the use of EM in prison, the first experiences from use of the technology in prison for sure will lead to insights on possible new areas of application in this environment.

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