

Expanding Global Understandings of the Environmental Conditions of Detention



Concept Note

12-13 May 2025

Old College, Edinburgh Law School

Expanding Global Understandings of the Environmental Conditions of Detention is a joint University of Edinburgh/UK National Preventive Mechanism Project which will build on academic research, detention monitoring practice and practical understandings of how environmental conditions within places of detention can cross the threshold of prohibited treatment. In the first phase of this project (June 2024), academics and practitioners came together to discuss how specific environmental conditions contribute to findings of ill-treatment including sound, temperature, light and air quality conditions. The outcome of the 2024 workshop was a four-page briefing paper *Guidance on the Environmental Conditions of Detention* (<https://detentionconditions.org/environmental-conditions-of-detention/>), which was produced in collaboration with the UK's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM). The UK NPM is made up of 3,500 individuals within 21 statutory organisations with mandates to inspect and monitor places of deprivation of liberty under the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT). The NPM Central team has produced resources to lead and support these individuals in preventing ill-treatment in detention. The UK NPM works with international scrutiny bodies and global NPMs to share best practice and continuous development. The NPM has distributed the initial guidance to monitors who regularly visit prisons, immigration detention centres, police custody, court custody and custody transport and sought to fold it into monitoring practice. It also sits among the NPM's resources for scrutiny ([Training resources – National Preventive Mechanism](#)).

In the next phase of this project, we aim to cast our net wider and expand our knowledge base regarding further aspects of detention conditions that we were unable to address in the first phase. The purpose is to explore how different environmental conditions both within detention settings, as well as the broader physical/geographical landscapes in which they sit, can shape detention experiences.

Objective:

This workshop aims to strengthen the capacity of NPMs to enhance oversight, advocate for systemic reforms, and ensure compliance with domestic, international and Council of Europe (CoE) standards, including NPM expectations, the revised European Prison Rules (EPR) and the CPT recommendations. The workshop will provide practical tools to enhance scrutiny models, ultimately working to drive improvements to treatment and conditions for those deprived of their liberty.

Key issues we aim to explore:

- How are individual environmental conditions, including and in addition to those previously examined (sound, temperature, light and air), accounted for in monitoring places of detention, if at all?
- Is it possible to establish a baseline for environmental conditions in light of the different contexts, cultures and geographies of detention, and the diversity of prison populations?
- Are there ways to benchmark specific and collective conditions of detention?

In consolidating the knowledge of international experts on detention monitoring and the prohibition against torture, the project brings together key researchers across law, musicology and criminology with practitioners to explore the variable ways in which inadequate attention to the environmental conditions of detention can individually and collectively affect a detainee to a point that amounts to prohibited treatment.

This workshop aims to consolidate existing research on the environmental conditions of detention, both broadly conceived and in specific relation to vulnerable groups. Previous research has identified that environmental conditions of detention can exacerbate existing physical and mental vulnerabilities of detainees. These conditions may be created through punishment, such as the use of loud music or light manipulation, or result from neglect of detainees' needs, such as overuse of air conditioning and lack of consideration of health impacts of e.g. environmental noise. The one-day workshop also considered how some conditions may produce an immediate impact on some detainees – for example constant or unpredictable noise for neurodivergent people in prison – while others would build cumulatively to create longer-term health competitions. For example, the increased likelihood of osteoporosis for detainees, particularly women, who have little or no access to natural light.

During the two-day workshop, we will consider presentations by researchers and practitioners that identify circumstances where different environmental conditions have exacerbated the negative impacts of detention on individuals deprived of their liberty. We will also consider contributions discussing how we can shape a greater, collective understanding of

environmental conditions as a framework for discussing detention and assessing detention conditions against existing standards for cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Each day will include small group sessions aimed at drafting common understandings as a step toward generating further guidance on environmental conditions of detention.

The aim is to gradually develop concise recommendations to supplement existing minimum standard guidelines for the treatment of individuals deprived of their liberty. It is intended that the work-product will be a further step forward in shaping future detention practices and design, and will support torture prevention monitoring organisations, detention facility professionals and investigators in defending against prohibited treatment.

Format:

The interactive workshop will be hybrid, to allow for accessible participation. It will feature panel discussion with NPM representatives, interactive group work, expert presentation and the sharing of practical tools for oversight.

Target audience:

NPM representatives, the academic community, prison managers, civil society, and experts from international and regional organisations working on detention and prison reform.

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