

## BLACKOUT IN PRISONS AS A SECURITY PROBLEM

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### Abstract

A blackout, understood as a large-scale and often prolonged loss of electrical power, represents a specific security risk for prisons. The operation of a prison is currently critically dependent on an uninterrupted supply of electricity. This includes perimeter security, control of the movement of incarcerated persons, the functioning of security technologies, camera systems and communication systems, as well as the provision of basic needs for sentenced inmates and Prison Service staff. A blackout is therefore not only a matter of comfort and technical inconvenience. It represents a direct threat to the safety of the facility and, subsequently, to public safety outside the prison. This article views the prison as part of the state's critical infrastructure. It describes the types of threats that emerge immediately after the loss of power and in the following hours and days of operation, how operational and tactical procedures inside the facility should be directed, and what role is assumed by the prison's crisis staff. It also outlines the process of returning to normal functioning once power supply is restored. We argue that preparedness for a blackout cannot be understood solely as a matter of having a diesel generator and sufficient fuel reserves. It is also about personnel readiness, established command processes, functional lines of communication, prioritisation of essential operations, and secure basic logistics. If a prison fails in this initial phase, the risk of panic, collective unrest, escape attempts and direct threats to staff increases significantly.

Keywords: Blackout, Prison, Crisis Management, Perimeter Security, Critical Infrastructure

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### Introduction

A prison constitutes a specific security environment of the state. It is not only an institution of supervision and punishment. It is an environment with a high concentration of individuals deprived of their liberty, for whose protection, control, and continuous supervision the state bears direct responsibility (Frois, 2024; Martens *et al.*, 2025; McLeod *et al.*, 2020). The operational stability of a prison is therefore part of wider internal security. When this stability is disrupted, the resulting risk is not limited to the interior of the facility but extends to the surrounding society (Martens *et al.*, 2025; Midtlyng, 2025; Usman and Turanovic, 2025).

In this context, a blackout is understood as a large-scale or prolonged loss of electrical power supply. It is not a brief interruption of power lasting only minutes. It is a condition in which key technologies of the facility are offline or operating only in a restricted emergency mode (Kavan *et al.*, 2021; Vichova *et al.*, 2022). This condition has an immediate impact on physical perimeter security, staff safety, the protection of the health of incarcerated persons, and the prison's ability to maintain order and discipline (Allard *et al.*, 2006; Martens *et al.*, 2025; Vichova *et al.*, 2022). A loss of electrical power is therefore not merely a technical failure. It is a security scenario.

The aim of this article is to describe a blackout in a prison as a specific crisis situation. We focus on why a prison is structurally vulnerable under blackout conditions, what types of risks emerge in the first hours after loss of power, how the prison's crisis staff should direct the response, and which conditions must be verified before the facility returns to standard operation. We also emphasize that preparedness for a blackout is not only a technical question of backup power and reserve systems. It also requires organisational and legal anchoring, planning of human capacities, and the sustainability of basic logistics.

### Prisons as Critical Infrastructure

In this text, we understand the prison as part of the state's critical infrastructure. If a prison ceases to function, the state loses its ability to enforce court decisions and at the same time weakens its guarantee that high-risk individuals will remain in isolation (Al Weswasi, 2024; Nagin *et al.*, 2009). The operational stability of prisons is therefore a matter of internal security, comparable to the operational stability of the energy sector or healthcare. A blackout directly disrupts this stability. The operation of a prison is technologically dependent (Allard *et al.*, 2006; Pan, 2022). Electronic locks on entry gates, unit doors

and protected corridors are powered by electricity. Key management systems are electronic. Perimeter sensors and alarm systems require a constant power supply. CCTV systems provide visual control over the movement of incarcerated persons and at the same time serve as documentation of staff activity during the shift. Perimeter lighting, roof lighting and lighting of control routes enables both surveillance and deterrence. All internal communication within the prison – including radio communication among officers, internal telephone lines and the central control desk – relies on electrically powered systems, and without a stable power supply its functionality is limited or lost. If the power supply fails, these protective layers are weakened or disappear entirely. In practice, this means reduced control of the perimeter, reduced ability to monitor movement, and reduced capacity to direct an operational response.

A blackout therefore does not only mean darkness. It means a transition to a technologically degraded operating mode. In this mode, staff must rely on the physical presence of officers, manual perimeter checks and improvised lighting and communication tools. This transition is demanding and psychologically stressful. If it is not rehearsed in advance and anchored in established crisis procedures, the risk of improvisation, confusion and error increases in relation to the dynamics of status, loyalty, and stigmatization in both male and female prisons.

### Security Risks During a Blackout

A blackout creates several types of acute security threats that are interrelated and may reinforce one another. One of the key impacts is the weakening of the perimeter and an increased risk of escape (Allard *et al.*, 2006). Reduced visibility around the fencing, on roofs and along controlled corridors means that certain sections are no longer under full supervision. If the functionality of electronic barriers and entry mechanisms is also limited, opportunities arise for opportunistic or pre-planned attempts to break the regime. The longer the blackout lasts, the more likely it is that incarcerated persons will test identified weak points. The external security of the facility is therefore directly threatened, and with it the security of the surrounding public space.

At the same time, a blackout significantly increases the risk of attacks on staff safety. Loss of power produces a state of uncertainty (Carrabine, 2005; Midtlyng, 2022). Less experienced officers or civilian employees may have restricted communication tools and less immediate support. Incarcerated persons simultaneously assess whether the institution appears firm, decisive and capable of intervening quickly. If the institution appears uncoordinated, the risk increases of physical assault, attempts to seize keys, hostage-taking and coercive behaviour. This risk is particularly acute in the first minutes and hours after the onset of the blackout, before command has stabilised and personnel have been redeployed.

Another effect is the creation of conditions for collective unrest. Loss of light, disruption of daily routine and weakened control over movement inside housing units generate an environment in which group tension can escalate rapidly. This may include blocking circulation routes, refusing to return to cells, taking control of a particular space within the prison and attempting to negotiate from a position of force (Carrabine, 2005; Dieter, 2023; Useem and Kimball, 1987). A disturbance or broad refusal to comply can arise spontaneously, without prior coordination. The trigger is the combination of reduced supervision and reduced traceability of individuals (Boin and Rattray, 2004; Carrabine, 2005). This combination is dangerous because it can very quickly exceed the immediately available intervention capacity.

A blackout also has direct consequences for health and operational stability. Power loss may mean restricted access to water, disruption of meal preparation, failure of ventilation or heating systems, and reduced availability of medication. If the prison cannot continue to provide basic needs, the situation deteriorates rapidly. Every acute health incident in this mode additionally draws supervisory capacity and attention to an individual case, which in turn weakens oversight of the whole. An operational or health-related problem therefore immediately becomes a security problem.

At the same time, communication vulnerability emerges. The routine functioning of the prison relies on internal communication systems. If these systems fail or operate only in a limited mode, command must fall back on radio communication and direct visual contact. This slows the transmission of information and complicates the coordination of any response. Under conditions of rising tension, every delay in communication increases the likelihood of flawed decision-making (Allard *et al.*, 2006; Kutsch *et al.*, 2025; Useem and Kimball, 1987).

In summary, a blackout in a prison is a combined technical, organisational and social problem. Technical degradation produces social tension, and that social tension can very quickly develop into a security crisis.

### Crisis Management During a Blackout

The response of a prison to a blackout cannot be based on improvisation. It is necessary to move into a controlled crisis regime centred on the prison's crisis staff. The crisis staff must be activated without delay, immediately during normal working hours and outside working hours according to the established call-out plan. Its task is to transfer the institution from routine operation into emergency mode and to define priorities (Boin and Rattray, 2004; Dement, 2024; Useem and Kimball, 1987).

Initial priorities include establishing the cause and scope of the outage based on available operational information, ensuring fuel supply for the diesel generator and keeping online those systems that can be powered from backup sources. Backup energy must be directed first to those security technologies that directly protect the perimeter and enable supervision. This refers in particular to camera systems, entry and locking mechanisms and critical lighting. At the same time, all activities that are not essential for managing the situation must be suspended without delay. The suspension of routine production, workshop activity and educational programmes is part of the crisis regime. The purpose is to prioritise the security functions of the institution over secondary activities, to concentrate staff in critical posts and to minimise their dispersion across less secured areas.

A further phase of crisis management concerns stabilisation of staff. The prison must, depending on the situation, call in additional officers and reinforce staffing at critical posts. This phase also includes the obligation to ensure food provision and basic operating conditions both for incarcerated persons and for the prison's own staff, who will likely be working in an extended-duty regime (Ellison and Gainey, 2020; Stohr *et al.*, 1994; Useem and Kimball, 1987). Maintaining the physical and psychological endurance of staff is a direct security measure, because it reduces the risk of errors and of a breakdown of command structures at the point of highest pressure.

A central task of the crisis staff is to maintain control over the perimeter and over visibility (Ellison and Gainey, 2020; Jusić and Korajlić, 2024; Useem and Kimball, 1987). Under blackout conditions it is necessary to establish layered lighting according to priority, both inside and outside the facility. In practice this includes the use of improvised sources of light, for example vehicle headlights, handheld floodlights and other available means. The purpose is to maintain uninterrupted observation of fencing, roofs, high-risk corridors and other areas where an escape attempt could emerge or where a pressure group of incarcerated persons could form. This regime also includes irregular patrols in vulnerable parts of the site. The irregularity is intentional and is intended to deter coordinated action against a predictable weak point.

Crisis management also includes the obligation to report the event as an extraordinary incident to the General Directorate and to maintain continuous communication with higher command structures. This provides legal backing for extraordinary measures inside the prison and creates space for external support if the blackout affects a wider area. In this phase the prison cooperates with the Police of the Czech Republic. This cooperation concerns both the protection of the external perimeter and the clarification of the cause of the outage and its expected duration. It is essential to determine whether the situation is the result of a technical failure or an intentional disruption of infrastructure. That distinction shapes the expected duration of the reinforced regime, the need for further reinforcement of capacity and the assessment of the risk of an escape attempt supported from outside.

## Return to Standard Operation

Restoration of electrical power does not mark the end of the incident. A prison cannot return to routine operation immediately. After power is restored, there must be a controlled transition period during which the facility continues to operate in emergency mode. The purpose of this transitional phase is to verify that critical systems are fully functional and safe. This includes a technical check of camera surveillance, electronic locking systems, lighting of external and internal perimeters, communication channels, and other elements that were weakened or offline during the outage (Glade *et al.*, 2022; Steen *et al.*, 2021).

During this transitional phase, the reinforced physical presence of custody staff remains in place. Guard posts and high-risk areas are not immediately reduced simply because lighting and power have returned. If the Police of the Czech Republic was called in to support the protection of the external perimeter, its involvement does not automatically end at the moment of power restoration. It ends only once it is confirmed that the prison is again capable of sustaining routine security with its own resources. This managed return is intended to limit the risk that incarcerated persons could exploit the moment of personnel reshuffling and technological switching to initiate a new incident or attempt escape.

The emergency regime can be formally terminated only if two conditions are met. The first condition is technical stability, meaning that core security infrastructure and key technologies are fully operational. The second condition is operational stability, meaning that the situation among incarcerated persons and among staff is calm and under control (Allard *et al.*, 2006; Midtlyng, 2022; Useem and Kimball, 1987). Only at that point may the institution notify the General Directorate that the extraordinary incident has been closed.

## Strategic and Legal Implications

A blackout in a prison must be understood as a foreseeable security scenario, not as an unimaginable anomaly. In the European context, extended loss of electrical power is increasingly treated in security planning as a realistic threat (European Commission, 2025; Schliesser, 2024). The drivers include failures in the transmission grid, extreme climatic conditions, and deliberate attacks on energy and distribution

infrastructure. In this context, a prison must maintain a crisis regime that is not only written down in policy but is practically executable. This requires a functional crisis staff, defined competences, a clear chain of command, and clear operational priorities for the event of a power loss (Boin and Rattray, 2004; Dement, 2024; Goldstone and Useem, 1999).

Logistical preparedness is equally important (Dement, 2024; Maner *et al.*, 2022). Fuel for backup power sources, emergency lighting, potable water, food supplies, essential medication, and available service vehicles are not routine administrative details. They are conditions of security stability. If these resources are not secured in advance, the likelihood that a blackout will develop into an overt security crisis within a matter of hours increases sharply.

A blackout also has a legal dimension. Declaring an emergency regime means that the prison may temporarily restrict certain rights of incarcerated persons, for example freedom of movement between units or access to particular internal areas (Maycock, 2023; Schliehe *et al.*, 2022). For these restrictions to remain legitimate and defensible under later review, it must be documented who authorised the declaration of the emergency regime, at what time the decision was taken, how the situation was communicated to higher command structures, and which specific measures were implemented. This documentation serves one further function. It enables retrospective analysis of vulnerabilities. It allows the leadership of the facility to identify factors that increased risk, to identify points at which the response was slow or ambiguous or dependent on individual improvisation, and to adjust the crisis plan so that a future response can be faster, more predictable, and less dependent on individual endurance.

From a regional perspective, a blackout cannot be treated as an internal technical problem of a single institution. A simultaneous loss of electrical power in multiple correctional facilities would no longer constitute a local exceptional event, but rather a security problem with systemic reach. Under these conditions, a prison blackout becomes a matter of regional public order and public security, not only a matter of internal continuity of operations (Maycock, 2023; Useem and Kimball, 1987).

## Conclusions

A blackout in a prison is not a purely technical malfunction but a complex security event that immediately tests the stability of the institution and, by extension, the capacity of the state to maintain lawful custody. Loss of electrical power undermines surveillance, perimeter integrity, communication, routine logistics and the ability to deliver basic care. This creates conditions for escape attempts, targeted violence against staff, collective unrest and rapid deterioration of health and welfare conditions inside the facility. The response to such an event cannot rely on ad hoc measures. It requires the immediate activation of a crisis staff, the concentration of personnel at critical posts, the protection of visibility and perimeter control, the preservation of communication capability and the prioritisation of functions essential to safety. It also requires explicit recognition that the emergency is legally exceptional. The institution must be authorised to impose temporary restrictions on prisoner movement and access to spaces, and those measures must be documented and internally defensible.

Recovery does not begin when the lights come back on. The prison must pass through a controlled transitional phase in which it still operates under an emergency regime. Only when core security technologies are fully functional and the internal situation is stable among both incarcerated persons and staff can the extraordinary regime be lifted and responsibility return to routine line management. This has strategic implications. A blackout must be treated as a foreseeable scenario in prison planning, training and budgeting. Preparedness is not limited to diesel fuel and backup lighting. It also includes personnel resilience, defined chains of command, logistical continuity in water, food, medication and mobility, and the ability to communicate with external security actors. If these capacities are not in place before the outage occurs, even a relatively short-term loss of power can escalate into a crisis with direct consequences for public order beyond the perimeter of a single facility.

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