



## Prisoners forgotten in COVID-19 pandemic, as crisis grows in detention facilities

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Prisoners around the world have been forgotten during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new report from Amnesty International, as prisons have faced systemic challenges to prevent the spread of the virus, with control measures leading to serious human rights violations. The organization is calling for the millions of people languishing in overcrowded cells to be included in national vaccination roll-outs.

*[Forgotten Behind Bars: COVID-19 and Prisons](#)* reveals that, with more than 11 million estimated people imprisoned globally, prisons in many countries risk becoming hotbeds for the disease. Many inmates struggle to access soap, proper sanitation, or personal protective equipment, while physical distancing is difficult to achieve and only limited health care is available.

“As COVID-19 continues to rip through prisons across the world, measures introduced by governments to prevent the spread of the disease have led to human rights violations, including the use of excessive solitary confinement to aid social distancing and inadequate measures to reduce the detrimental effects of isolation,” said Netsanet Belay, Amnesty International’s Research and Advocacy Director.

The full scale of COVID-19 infections and related deaths in prisons is hard to assess as governments have failed to publicly provide up-to-date, reliable information. However, available data indicates worrying patterns of COVID-19 infections in prisons across the world. And as vaccine roll-out strategies and plans take shape, many governments remain silent on their plans to vaccinate prisoners who are particularly at risk.

### **Dangerous and unabated overcrowding**

Overcrowding is widely recognized as one of the most serious problems in prisons today. Around 102 countries have reported prison occupancy levels of over 110%, with a significant proportion of prisoners charged with, or convicted of, non-violent crimes.

Though steps have been taken to release eligible prisoners, Amnesty International's research indicates that current release rates are insufficient to address the huge risk posed by the virus.

"Many countries with dangerously high levels of prison overcrowding, such as Bulgaria, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nepal, have failed to address concerns over COVID-19 outbreaks. In other countries, such as Iran and Turkey, hundreds of prisoners detained arbitrarily, including human rights defenders, were excluded from COVID-19-related releases," said Netsanet Belay.

### **Health crisis**

COVID-19 has also laid bare the years of underinvestment in, and neglect of, health services in prisons. Prison authorities have been unable or unwilling to cope with the increased need for preventive health measures and medical services for prisoners. During the early phases of the pandemic, Amnesty International found prisoners in many countries were unable to get a COVID-19 test due to acute shortages, while some detainees in Iran and Turkey were arbitrarily denied medical treatment.

Countries including Cambodia, France, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Togo and the USA were also unable to put in place adequate preventive and protective measures in prisons to curb the spread of COVID-19.

"No matter who you are, or where you are, people deserve access to face masks, adequate quantities of soap, sanitizing items and clean running water," said Netsanet Belay. "In prisons, especially, personal protective equipment needs to be provided free of charge and governments need to increase access to COVID-19 testing and treatments to prevent and manage potential outbreaks."

### **Control measures resulting in abuses**

In many countries, prison authorities have resorted to dangerous measures including excessive and abusive confinement and quarantining measures to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, leading to serious human rights violations. In some places such as Argentina and the UK, detainees were put in isolation for up to 23 hours per day, often for weeks or months.

"Excessive and abusive isolation and quarantine measures were used to contain the spread of COVID-19 in some prisons around the world. In some cases, these could amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Humane measures to protect prisoners must be put in place now," said Netsanet Belay.

Some COVID-19-related lockdown measures in prisons also impacted family visits, increasing the risks to detainees' mental and physical wellbeing. In some instances, these sparked widespread protests and unrest in prisons, to which authorities often responded with excessive force.

"While some prison authorities have retained visits by adapting conditions, others have resorted to banning visitors, effectively depriving detainees from their lifeline to the outside world and undermining their emotional and physical wellbeing," said Netsanet Belay.

### **Prioritizing vaccination of people in detention**

At least 71 countries have now put in place a vaccination policy for at least one clinically vulnerable group. While some of these countries have included prison populations and staff among the priority groups to receive vaccines, Amnesty International's research found that many others, including higher-income countries, are either silent or remain unclear on their plans.

"Prisons are some of the most at-risk settings for COVID-19 outbreaks and we cannot neglect the right to health of people in prisons any longer. Lack of clarity about vaccination plans, policies and treatment of incarcerated populations is a pressing, global concern," said Netsanet Belay. "As vaccine roll-out strategies take shape, a failure to prioritize the health of people in detention will have catastrophic consequences for prisoners, their families and the public health care system."

Amnesty International is calling on states not to discriminate against those held in detention when developing vaccination policies and plans. Furthermore, it urges states to make every effort to prioritize prisoners in their national vaccination plans, particularly given that their confined conditions do not allow them to physically distance, and ensure that those at particularly high risk of COVID-19 (such as older prisoners and those with chronic health conditions) are prioritized for vaccination on a par with comparative groups in the general population.