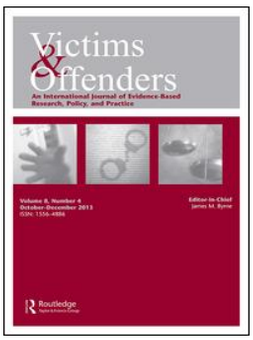

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South Korea's Responses regarding Mitigating the COVID-19 Crisis behind Bars

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ABSTRACT

As one of the earliest countries to identify cases of COVID-19 infection, South Korea is often considered a success story in responding to the global pandemic. This article examines South Korea's responses in terms of its incarcerated population during the crisis, provides a snapshot of how the coronavirus has impacted prisons, and outlines the mitigation strategies used to create COVID-19-safe spaces in the country. With correction officers being identified as some of the earliest COVID-19 cases in the country, South Korea has striven to manage the coronavirus in correctional facilities as part of the ecosystem of the entire country. This paper discusses South Korea's unique strategy, which focuses less on the size of the prison population and more on treating correction officers and prisoners, who also need to be protected from the virus. In particular, this paper analyzes the multifaceted strategies adopted by South Korea to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus within the criminal justice system, and specifically to protect inmates and correction officers from infection. Strategies centered on public health and human rights were implemented, combined with in-prison strategies, modestly downsizing the prison population and/or maintaining the status quo during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Correctional facilities; criminal justice system; COVID-19; mitigation strategy; South Korea; Pandemic; Alternatives to incarceration; Early release mechanisms; Prison reform

Introduction

The first case of SARS-CoV-2 (widely known as COVID-19, or coronavirus) was reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Subsequently, in January 2020, the virus was introduced to that country's neighbor South Korea through an infected person who flew from China to Incheon. In February 2020, one of the early COVID-19 cases identified in South Korea was a correctional officer, who turned out to be a devotee of the Shincheonji church – a secretive religious sect of Christianity, located in the city of Daegu, that became a primary source for spreading the virus.[1] This case garnered attention in the country not only because of the correctional officer's religiosity but also because of the role of prisons and detention centers as potential COVID-19 hotspots. These concerns over prisons aligned with the belief that correctional officers could be potential transmitters of the disease as a result of the time they spend and contact they have in the outside world (Pyrooz et al., 2020). Along with the country's COVID-19 mitigation strategy, South Korea has striven to manage the virus in correctional facilities as part of the ecosystem of the entire country since then.

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South Korea, one of the earliest countries to identify cases of COVID-19 infection, has been considered a success story in its response to the global pandemic (United Nations Development Programme Seoul Policy Centre, 2020). Key factors of its success include the central government's concerted efforts with various ministries and other local governments on mitigating the COVID-19 public health crisis, the daily briefings, the universal, rapid COVID-19 testing, the recommended social-distancing measures, and the mask-mandating policy. These efforts were not only aimed at mainstream society and the general population, but they also exist for those who are distanced from society because of their criminality. While increasing attention has been paid to Korea's COVID-19 story in terms of the country, people behind bars are often not discussed.

It is widely believed that correctional facilities are vulnerable as potential epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mitigating the spread of the virus to these facilities' populations is a public health issue. The ability of the corrections system to contain the virus and mitigate its spread is increasingly important. A collective lifestyle is a necessity in prisons and correction facilities. While outside factors that contribute to COVID-19 infection can be controlled, the communal nature of everyday life, including the impossibility of social distancing, essentially contributes to and increases the vulnerability of prison populations and correctional officers to the virus. In the first half of 2020, an increasing number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in correctional facilities around the world, particularly in the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines (International Drug Policy Consortium, 2020; Santos, 2020). There are conventionally three approaches that can be taken to address this double crisis of the pandemic and its impacts on prisons: downsizing, status quo, and upsizing (Byrne et al., 2015; Lux et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2015). Downsizing efforts include the early release (or shift to house confinement) of certain prisoners based on bail, misdemeanor charges, and underlying health conditions. This approach has been taken in Turkey, Cyprus, Slovenia, and some parts of the United States (American Bar Association, 2020; Letzing, 2020). Efforts to either maintain the status quo or upsize the prison populations, which are less commonly used so far, result in a greater emphasis on the public health concerns of the general population.

This article examines South Korea's responses to prisons and prison populations during the COVID-19 crisis and provides a snapshot of the impact of the coronavirus on prisons and the mitigation strategies for creating a COVID-19-safe space in the country. This research uses data compiled from the official websites of the Ministry of Justice and the Korea Correctional Service, newspaper articles, and publicly available sources concerning COVID-19 cases in the Korean corrections system. As there are no available databases tracking COVID-19 in prisons and detention centers in South Korea, estimates of confirmed cases presented in this paper, which provides an overview of COVID-19 behand bars in the country, are inherently preliminary. This paper further discusses South Korea's unique approach to its criminal justice system during the global pandemic. The country's strategy focuses less on the size of the prison population and more on treating correctional officers and the incarcerated populations, who may need more protection and attention than the general population. In particular, this paper analyzes South Korea's multifaceted strategy to prevent the virus from spreading among prison populations, in terms of two specific goals: (1) protecting correctional officers from the coronavirus and (2) protecting inmates from the coronavirus by amending visiting policies and providing public health supports to them. This paper also presents South Korea's in-prison strategies and the

implications of maintaining status quo and/or modestly downsizing the prison population during the pandemic.

The following section of the paper outlines the South Korean context, in particular, the country's prisons and corrections facilities. The next section discusses Korea's in-prison and out-of-prison mitigation strategy for prison populations and correctional officers, which is primarily to maintain the status quo with a modest downsizing of the prison population during the pandemic. This research summarizes South Korea's successful mitigation strategy. This paper ends with reflections for future study and implications of understanding this case as an intersection of public health, public safety, and human rights of the prison community in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era.

South Korea's criminal justice system

In South Korea in 2020, the prison system comprises 53 institutions: 38 correctional institutions, 1 private correctional institution, 11 detention centers, and 3 detention branches. There are four regional headquarters: 16 in Seoul, 18 in Daegu, 10 in Daejeon, and 9 in Gwangju Headquarter. The official capacity of Korea's prison system was 54,744 in 2018. While the number of people incarcerated increased steadily from 2012 to 2017, the number of inmates started to decrease in 2018, when the occupancy level went down from 0.111% to 0.106% (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2019; Korea Correctional Service, 2019). The number of correctional staff in South Korea amounted to 15,999 people as of December 31, 2019, representing 3.4 inmates per officer (Korea Correctional Service, 2019; see Table 1).

COVID-19 cases and estimates of incarcerated populations in South Korea's prison system

COVID-19 cases in South Korea's correctional facilities

As of July 2020, 6 of the 53 correctional facilities in South Korea had confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection, with the total number of cases amounting to 14,305 in the country (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2020). Table 2 presents the number of and details of contracted COVID-19 cases by facility. Because closed, indoor settings such as seniors' nursing homes, prisons, and jails are reported to be more vulnerable to COVID-19

Table 1. Trends of incarcerated population and correctional officers in South Korea.

	Korea's population	Prison population	Incarcerated population (% of country's population)	Correctional officers	Inmates per officer
2010	48,746,000	47,471	0.097	15,221	3.1
2011	48,876,000	45,845	0.092	15,478	3.0
2012	49,779,000	45,488	0.091	15,757	2.9
2013	50,004,000	47,924	0.094	15,476	3.1
2014	51,141,000	50,128	0.097	15,934	3.1
2015	51,529,000	53,892	0.105	15,887	3.4
2016	51,696,000	56,496	0.109	15,892	3.6
2017	51,778,000	57,298	0.111	15,871	3.6
2018	51,826,000	54,744	0.106	15,999	3.4

Source: Korea Correctional Service (2019).

Table 2. Number of contracted COVID-19 cases by facility.

Location/ Jurisdiction	Date	Prison	Inmates tested	Number of COVID positive inmates	Staff tested	Number of COVID positive staff	Total cases
Daegu	February 2020	Daegu Prison	40	-	62	2	2
Daegu	February 2020	Daegu Detention Center	-	1		4	
Gyeongsang-bukdo	March 2020	Kimcheon juvenile prison	29	3	18	1	3
Gyeongsang-bukdo	February 2020	Gyeongbukbukbu No.2 Prison	83	-	18	1	1
Jeonllabuk-do	June/ July 2020	Jeongeup Prison	49[a]	-	-	-	-
Seoul	May 2020	Seoul Detention center	301 or 254	-	100 or 23	1	1

[a]Whether this number of people administered COVID-19 tests were staff or inmates is not clear. However, all these people were COVID-19 negative.

transmission than other settings (Heo, 2020), each facility where infected individuals were discovered carefully took multiple steps to mitigate the further spread of the virus to the inmates and officers.

Chronologically, COVID-19 cases were identified in two facilities in February, another two in March, one in May, and one in June/July. On February 21 and February 28, 2020, two correctional officers who worked at Daegu Prison tested positive for the coronavirus. Sixty-two staff and 40 inmates were then tested. On February 25, 2020, a 27-year-old correctional officer at Kyungbuk bukbu No. 2 prison, located in Cheongsong, who was a member of the Shincheonji church, tested positive; subsequently, 18 staff and 83 inmates were administered tests, and their results were negative (Kookmin Ilbo, 2020).

In early March, a 60-year-old inmate at Gimcheon male juvenile prison[2] in Gyeongsang-bukdo contracted COVID-19 (Jeong, 2020). His cellmates, one man aged 44 and one in his 50s, were tested and found to be infected as well. All three of the infected prisoners were released on bail and self-quarantined after release. A 36-year-old staff member at the facility was also infected. Prisoners and correctional officers, who used to commute from home, are staying within the institutions due to COVID-19 infection concerns. At the juvenile prison in Gimcheon, doctors had to go home for self-quarantine immediately after confirmed cases were reported, and they could not provide education on prevention of infectious disease for Justice Ministry officials, according to Jeon (2020).

In early March, several COVID-19 cases were identified in the Daegu Detention Center, including four staff members. One inmate, who had committed burglary, was infected when he visited a hospital for an ankle treatment; a nurse at that hospital was diagnosed with COVID-19. The prisoner's sentence was suspended and he was ordered to stay in his home with supervision. On March 18, 2020, three guards and four cooks at Daegu prison, which houses 3,000 prisoners, tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, all movements, activities, and visits in the facility were suspended. Two nonresidential doctors were monitoring daily the prisoners who showed symptoms of the virus (Prison Insider, 2020).

On May 15, 2020, a 28-year-old correctional officer at the Seoul Detention Center tested positive. The officer had attended a wedding with a friend, who had visited a karaoke in Seoul. Infections have been reported at the karaoke facility where an acquaintance of the officer who went to an Itaewon club, which was one of the recent sources of COVID-19 high

infections in the country, had visited. Officials at the detention center immediately disinfected the facility and quarantined 29 other employees and 254 inmates; all staff and inmates were administered COVID-19 tests, but all of their results were negative (Korea Times, 2020). In order to minimize the potential risk of infection, prisoners' meetings with both visitors and lawyers have been suspended. As a result of this case, trials that were scheduled at the Seoul Central District Court and Seoul High Court were also postponed (Korea Times, 2020; Prison Insider, 2020).

On July 2, 2020, a correctional officer at Jeongeup Prison in Jeolla province who had retired on June 29, 2020, gathered with his former colleagues. The retired officer had attended a church in Gwangju on June 28, where new COVID-19 cases were reported. Because of the potential risk of infection through this connection, 49 people from the prison were tested; all the results turned out to be negative. As of August 2020, no further hot spots had emerged, despite the national surge of COVID-19-infected cases in South Korea.

Estimates of incarcerated populations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Conditions of confinement in a country's criminal justice system impact the damages of COVID-19 on their correctional facilities, staff, and inmates. In particular, people behind bars are one of the most vulnerable, and often forgotten, populations in terms of the spread of diseases such as COVID-19. They live in a communal space, where social distancing is virtually impossible. They often have preexisting conditions (e.g., drug use, mental illness) for which treatment is delayed or improper. Therefore, in a number of countries, including the United States and India, jails and prisons became coronavirus incubators.

Although it would be useful to pinpoint the number of infections in a country's prison system, achieving an accurate estimate of cases among prison and staff populations is difficult during this global pandemic. South Korea's situation contrasts with that of most other countries with large prison populations. First, the spread of COVID-19 in South Korea is rather different from the majority of countries, which are experiencing high infection and death rates not only among the general population but also among the prison population (e.g., the United States). South Korea's relatively small case number, lower infection and mortality rates, and relatively quick flattened curve of the pandemic at large has made its criminal justice system less vulnerable than other countries' equivalent population. Thus, in South Korea, where prisons and jails have not been a primary source of COVID-19 infection, reducing prison populations for the sake of lowering the infection rate has not been necessary. The South Korean system is relatively good in terms of incarceration rate per 100,000 population, access to health care, extent of crowding, and other relevant matters. Although there are no official data about the impact of COVID-19 on South Korea's criminal justice system, such data may not be needed owing to a very small number and remote chance of infection among offenders in the country.

Within the very small number of cases among the country's prison populations, South Korea's COVID-19 infection rates were higher in terms of correctional staff than of inmates: 3 of 54,744 inmates were infected, which accounts for 0.005% of the total prison population,

while 9 of 15,999 correctional officers were infected, or 0.06% of the total correctional staff population, in 6 of the 53 South Korean correctional facilities (11.3%).

South Korea's approaches to COVID-19 mitigation

South Korea's multifaceted strategy of mitigating the spread of the coronavirus within its criminal justice system involves both correctional staff and prison populations. While some measures taken by the Korean government apply to both groups, other measures are specific to one or the other group.

Mitigation strategies for inmates

South Korea's in-prison strategies, aimed primarily at protecting incarcerated individuals from the virus, are as follows: (1) the size of prison populations adjustment, (2) public health and human rights-based dimension, (3) social distancing-oriented dimension, and (4) front-end mitigation strategies for sentencing options and detainees and parolees.

The first in-prison COVID-19 mitigation strategy involves a combination of modest downsizing of the prison population with maintenance of the status quo. The country has pursued downsizing in certain facilities where infections were reported, while overall it has been maintaining the status quo. For example, a 60-year-old from Gimcheon Prison and a man in his 50s from Daegu Prison were granted early release from their sentences; not only were they considerably older than the other infected inmates but they had been convicted of misdemeanor crimes and were also close to having served their time. The government's use of minor downsizing along with status quo was a strategy performed in the spirit of public health.

The second in-prison COVID-19 mitigation strategy involves a dimension of public health and human rights. First, correctional facilities have secured and provide the prison population with personal protection equipment (PPE) (e.g., N95 masks, gloves, protective eyewear, and clothing) and hand sanitizer. While South Korea never experienced a shortage of PPE, masks were in high demand and initially, at the early stage of the pandemic, it was not easy to secure enough for each facility in the country. Some facilities started to produce their own masks, for self-sufficiency and as part of their prison labor. These were distributed to inmates, some of whom may not have been able to purchase masks otherwise. In relation to the distribution of PPE to the prison population, the prisons began to broadcast programs aimed to educate prison populations about best practices concerning prevention of transmission, causes of the coronavirus, infection routes, and preventive measures that had been initiated. Such information is still broadcast to the facilities on a daily basis (see Pyrooz et al., 2020).

Second, for prevention, prisons strengthened their isolation measures and medical examination of new people entering the facilities. While for the most part admission and transport of prisoners has ceased, there are cases of newcomers arriving in another facility. Upon arrival, they are given a medical examination and asked about symptoms and about potential contact with people who have the virus. At first, a three-day segregation policy was applied to these newcomers; since it became known that COVID-19 has a presumed asymptomatic period of 14 days, the newcomers are subject to a 14-day period of isolation in a one-person room. Those who may potentially be probable cases of infection live in a different place (annex to the main building) and they are offered the use of N95 masks,

thermometers, etc. After use, these are sanitized or disposed of. Third, prisoners who require urgent hospital treatment wear protection clothing and, upon returning to the prison after the hospital visit, are put in protective isolation.

The third in-prison COVID-19 mitigation strategy entails a threefold social distancing-oriented dimension. First, prison admissions have been reduced to lessen potential contact with the virus. There has been a suspension of newly incarcerated people and those transferred from one facility to another to minimize the possibility of spreading coronavirus. This strategy is also endorsed by agencies in other countries, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States (see Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Second, visitation rules have changed and visiting, except under very exceptional circumstances, has been discontinued in correctional facilities by May 2020. With the progress of COVID-19 infection in South Korea, visiting rules changed as follows[3]: (1) from May 11, one visitor for each visit (offender classification) for pretrial detainees and class 1 inmates (S1) twice a week, the rest (class 2, 3, 4 inmates (S2, S3, S4)) were allowed to have visitors for 6, 5, 4 times per month, respectively; and (2) from June 15, one visitor for each visit was allowed. Some places where the number of infections is on the rise have amended their visiting policy. For those places, pretrial detainees and S1 have a chance to have visitors once a week, whereas class 2, 3, 4 inmates (S2, S3, S4) are allowed to have visitors twice a month. On August 24, 2020, due to the recent surge of COVID-19 infection cases in South Korea, all prisons and jails started to limit the number of visitors and visitations. Pretrial detainees and S1and S2 inmates may have visits once a week, while S3 and S4 inmates are allowed to have visits once every other week (Korea Correctional Service, 2020).

In the pre-COVID-19 era, more than one visitor at a time could visit an inmate, but in the post-COVID-19 era, only one visitor was initially allowed per inmate to minimize the risk of inmates' infection; in August 2020, this number was increased to two people per visit (Korea Correctional Service, 2020). Third, training programs for incarcerated populations have been discontinued. The Korean government and the correctional institutions believe that the sources of coronavirus infection are outside of the facilities. By the very nature of training programs – which include training and educational opportunities, lectures, religious services, and job-matching sessions – contact with outside populations is inevitable. These programs have therefore been suspended.

Lastly, we are seeing front-end mitigation strategies for sentencing options and detainees and parolees. While previously mentioned measures were aimed primarily at the status quo, this final set of strategies is more related to decarceration. At present, the Korean correction system is not systematically creating and implementing front-end mitigation strategies around sentencing. This is largely because the country's prisons and jails have not been greatly affected by COVID-19 infection and, more importantly, because more cases have been reported among corrections officers than among inmates so far. Releases of inmates resulting from COVID-19 were granted on a case-by-case basis, considering their status within the criminal justice system (e.g., how far along in their sentences they were); regardless, these circumstances are worth mentioning. As of August 2020, there had been two cases of COVID-19-related (temporary) releases of inmates, involving different options. On the one hand, inmates at Gimcheon male juvenile prison infected with COVID-19 were granted full release because of their ages, which carry potential risks of being infected and infecting others, and the duration remaining in

their sentences. On the other hand, Daegu Detention Center's infected inmate was released, temporarily, on terms of house supervision with suspended sentencing because he had underlying medical conditions, which may not be related directly to COVID-19 but require regular visits to hospitals.

Inmates in these two cases occupied fundamentally different positions in South Korea's corrections system, and the sentencing options for COVID-19-related releases are reflected in such differences. Convicted inmates are sentenced to a length of prison time, which can potentially be shortened owing to their good behavior, appeal results, and/or (special) parole. In contrast, pretrial detainees technically have not been convicted, but they are supposed to be held in detention centers during trial for a designated duration. Considering these contexts, the first inmates in the first case had served almost all of their prison terms, whereas the inmate in the second case had not been convicted and therefore his sentence (if convicted) had yet to be determined.

Mitigation strategies for correctional officers

Infection by COVID-19 has affected more staff than offenders in South Korea's prison system, which confirms the belief that the source of such infection is outside of a closed setting. In line with strategies targeted at inmates, South Korea's strategies for protecting correctional staff from the virus are public health-oriented and geared toward social distancing.

First, in terms of a public health dimension, the government's mitigation strategy includes the installation of thermal imaging cameras. One of the key symptoms of COVID-19 is a fever or high temperature; therefore, in order to control or mitigate the coronavirus spread, 52 correctional facilities in the country installed these cameras. Correctional officers, who are in charge of who enters and exits the facilities, observe symptoms of people who enter the main gate of each facility. Not only are thermal imaging cameras used but contactless thermometers are also used to measure temperature and facilities have mandated that entrants answer questionnaires, wash their hands, and wear masks. Staff are equipped to perform temperature checks on any group of people (staff, visitors, or incarcerated/detained persons) or provide medical care to asymptomatic quarantined persons. Staff present during a procedure on a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case, they use respiratory aerosols. Staff receive essential PPE support such as N95 respirator, face mask, eye protection, gloves, gowns/coveralls. Staff, those who have direct contact with asymptomatic incarcerated/detained persons, are put into quarantine. Also, staff are discouraged from traveling (overseas) and from being in facilities where many people are. Public health doctors who regularly enter the prisons are also advised not to travel during the pandemic.

Second, to promote social distancing, correctional staff are encouraged to minimize travel inside and outside of the country, minimize their commute to work, and avoid any group activities. Some prisons enabled their staff to stay in the facilities in an effort to mitigate transmission of the virus. Unlike inmates, correctional staff have contact with the outside community, such as their family and their social life away from work. Thus, it is important that they practice social distancing and thereby minimize opportunities for contact with COVID-19 and avoid spreading the virus to their workplace.

Assessing mitigation strategies

Overall, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for public health conditions in South Korea's prisons, and the impact of the coronavirus on the size of the country's prison population, were minor. Thus, the primary, overarching goal of South Korea's strategy was not so much to modify the size of the prison population (i.e., to downsize/upsize the prison population) as to treat corrections officers and incarcerated populations as embedded in the ecosystem of the country. Back-end release options (i.e., sentence adjustments) were adopted in certain cases, but above all the Korean response to the pandemic centered around front-end alternatives as successful mitigation strategies.

South Korea's mitigation strategies that targeted both inmates and officers were in accordance with ensuring health, safety, and human dignity, ensuring access to continued health services, and respecting human rights, as suggested by the joint statement on COVID-19 in prisons and other closed environments released by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the World Health Organization (WHO) (World Health Organization, 2020; World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe, 2020). Strategies specifically targeted at inmates can be understood as a combination of downsizing the population and maintaining the status quo. One element of South Korea's strategies for inmates – a mitigation strategy that has been frequently suggested and employed elsewhere in the world – is to decarcerate populations in correctional facilities in order to reduce overcrowding, among other issues. To achieve this, South Korea took the following measures: (1) sentence adjustments (applicable to prisoners who were infected with COVID-19, who were at risk of infection due to age or underlying conditions, and who had light sentences); and (2) reductions in populations, admissions, and transports of prisoners. Decarceration as a mitigation strategy is also observed in some countries, like the United States, where overcrowding in prisons and jails could potentially contribute to the spread of the virus (Prison Policy Institute, 2020). Another part of mitigating the transmission of coronavirus among inmates, which is more predominantly used than the previous strategy, is maintaining the status quo while keeping up with safety, health, and human rights. This is done through such measures as distributing PPE, offering adequate public health services, keeping the facilities safe, healthy, and clean, and discontinuing visitations to the incarcerated population. These measures are also applicable to correctional staff as well; in addition, officers practice social distancing and careful behavior when outside of their workplace. Altogether, South Korean responses to such settings and populations are in accordance with the humane approaches suggested by international human rights organizations.

Conclusion

This article examines South Korea's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in relation to its correctional system and incarcerated populations. It provides a snapshot of how COVID-19 has impacted prisons and of the mitigation measures the country put in place to create a safer space. With correctional staff being identified as some of the earliest COVID-19 cases in the country, South Korea has striven to manage the potential spread of coronavirus in correctional facilities as part of the ecosystem of the entire country.

This paper discussed South Korea's unique strategy, which focused less on the size of the prison population and more on treating the vulnerable populations who live in and work in those institutions – and who also deserve the same protection from the virus as the general population. South Korea's multifaceted mitigation strategy included protecting both corrections officers and inmates from the coronavirus. For inmates, South Korea's in-prison strategy was to largely maintain the status quo while modestly downsizing the size of the prison population during the pandemic. Thus the country's mitigation strategies aimed at inmates and correctional officers offer comprehensive public health insights into South Korea's responses to COVID-19 behind bars.

South Korea's measures related to COVID-19 in the criminal justice system are very much in line with the guidelines of global agencies such as UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS, and OHCHR. While it is unknown whether South Korea based its strategy directly on the guidance of these agencies, it is worth mentioning the guidelines and the similarities they share. The joint statement by UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS, and OHCHR on COVID-19 in prisons and other closed environments include the following recommendations: reducing overcrowding, ensuring health, safety, and human dignity, ensuring access to continued health services, respecting human rights, and adhering to United Nations rules and guidance (WHO, 2020). These guidelines play a role in putting recommendations to South Korea's approach to its prison system in this COVID-19 era.

The infection and mortality rates for South Korea's general population are relatively low, and this trend is also observed in its incarcerated populations. While more cases were found among correctional officers than inmates, the number of cases is considered extremely low in terms of a global standard. Thus, perhaps because of this small number, official data on coronavirus-related infections and deaths in South Korea's corrections system do not exist. South Korea has implemented public health-oriented, humane, human rights-based approach to both inmates and correctional staff in terms of its prisons, jails, and detention centers, institutions that are known to be a potentially dangerous epicenter of COVID-19.

While the pandemic has yet to come to an end, and thus it is rather early to draw conclusions as to the impacts of COVID-19 on the Korean criminal justice system, this paper presents a preliminary analysis of an ongoing, rapidly changing public health crisis in the country and the world. South Korea's strategy for combating COVID-19 among people in the criminal justice system has several implications: First, the system needs to better prepare for a pandemic or communal disease crisis. Second, if possible, incarceration rates should be managed as reasonable, while other options such as house imprisonment and social services can be offered to misdemeanants. Third, the Korean criminal justice system is highly state-oriented with minimal privatization (Byrne et al., 2019). The centralized system has worked well in situations like COVID-19, which is highly transmittable. The prisons and detention centers in South Korea were well coordinated with the Ministry of Justice and government agencies at central and local levels. However, if prisons and/or community corrections are increasingly privatized in the future, those facilities would also need to align with usual practices of the nationwide criminal justice system to mitigate the potential risks of viruses and diseases and to provide adequate materials and care for populations behind bars.

While the current study is presumably the first on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Korea's criminal justice system, the research is not without

limitations, which can inform further research. First, as discussed earlier, given that there are no existing public data about the number of coronavirus cases in Korea's corrections system, as of July 2020, it is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the exact number of such cases among offenders. While acknowledging that the number of cases in the corrections system is relatively low compared with other countries, it is still valuable and important for the government to make such data publicly available to researchers. The United States, for example, where the infection rate among inmates is high and prison populations have been downsized to prevent further infection, maintains a database on COVID and prisons; this database is a valuable source for researchers (e.g., Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020; Marshall Project, 2020) and might be useful as a model elsewhere, including South Korea. Second, once transmission of the coronavirus slows and becomes manageable, future research should present a more comprehensive view of the pandemic's impact on Korea's criminal justice system. Such studies could evaluate correctional performance, the existing criminal justice system, and public health risk management in prisons and detention centers in both the public and the private sector. Lastly, COVID-19's impacts on criminal justice systems and their populations can be further examined within and across Asia.

Notes

1. Confirmed cases associated with the church are 5,175 cases as of April 2020 (Park, 2020).
2. Typically, teenagers are held in juvenile detention centers, but for exceptions, some older inmates are also assigned to be in the juvenile facilities in South Korea.
3. South Korea uses an offender classification of four classes: Class 1, 2, 3, 4 inmates are referred to as S1, S2, S3, and S4. The higher number of a class indicates a severity of criminal offenses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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