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An Examination of COVID-19 Outbreaks in Prisons and Jails in Oceania

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the unique nature of the Oceanic region and its impact on the extent of COVID-19 outbreaks in the Oceanic region, both within correctional and community settings. Mitigation strategies implemented in Australia, New Zealand, Papa New Guinea, and Fiji are identified, and the reasons for the differences we identified in how governments in this region defined the problem, and developed mitigation strategies, are explored.

KEYWORDS

international; prisons; corrections; Pandemic; Alternatives to incarceration; Early release mechanisms; Prison reform; COVID-19

Introduction and overview

The Oceanic region includes islandic countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Papa New Guinea, French Polynesia, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, and more. Compared to other regions of the world, these countries exist in relative isolation. In theory, it is much easier to blockade and restrict the arrival of a disease such as COVID-19, so long as border crossing is limited and importations are monitored early on. Consequently, the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Oceanic region has been much smaller than other regions of the world (Worldometer, 2020). Once penetrating the border of island communities, however, these benefits may transform into foes. Isolation, particularly in the case of Oceania's smaller islands, often equates to more barriers in providing and accessing medical care (Buhre, 2020). It also means that certain items may be more challenging to secure or to rely on due to scarcities or price fluctuations of imported goods (Buhre, 2020). Thus, while still holding the lowest cumulative prevalence of COVID-19 cases among all continental regions, Oceania has, nevertheless, experienced outbreaks across its islands (Worldometer, 2020). Just under 28,000 cases and 600 COVID-19 related deaths region-wide have been confirmed to date, according to the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020).¹

Despite the relatively low rates of COVID-19 across Oceania, due to the vulnerability of prison populations, prison and jail inmates in this region have the potential to be disproportionately impacted by the virus. Once the virus enters the prisons, transmission can be more rapid than within the broader community due to living in close quarters, overcrowding, inadequate sanitation materials and procedures, and reduced access to health services while in prison (Kinner et al., 2020). Additionally, individual-level factors including drug use, pre-existing health conditions, and more can further exacerbate this population's susceptibility.

Communicable diseases, in general, are much more difficult to contain within prisons than other community-based settings. Demonstration of such a trend includes the already high prevalence rates of Hepatitis C infections in Australian prisons, which currently comprises 30% of the prison population (The Kirby Institute, 2020). Given that Australia also has the largest prison system in the Oceanic region (World Prison Brief, 2020) and that its prisons are presently struggling with the spread of other communicable diseases such as Hepatitis C, the prison population is highly susceptible to the spread of COVID-19. To date, of the nearly 28,000 positive COVID-19 cases present in Oceania,² over 25,300 have been detected in Australia among prisons and the community at large, which is approximately 90% of Oceania's cumulative total count (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020).

The Australian prison system and COVID-19 outbreaks

Australia currently houses over 44,000 inmates, which equates to an incarceration rate of approximately 174 inmates per 100,000 individuals (World Prison Brief, 2020).³ Overall, Australia ranks 43rd in the top 50 largest prison systems globally and is the only country in the Oceanic region that is represented in the top 50 (World Prison Brief, 2020; see Figure 1). This is unsurprising, considering that Australia has the largest landmass size and population (N = 25 million) among all countries in the Oceanic region (Australian Population [LIVE], 2020).

Despite that Aboriginal Australians comprise only 3.3% of Australia's total population, they are 11.6 times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Aboriginal Australians



Figure 1. Oceania's largest prison system. *Australia is ranked 43rd in the world's top 50 largest prison systems (World Prison Brief, 2020).

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In December of 2019, the rate of incarceration among Aboriginal Australians was 2,536 per 100,000 individuals, while non-Aboriginal Australians were imprisoned at a rate of 218 per 100,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Therefore, general concerns have been raised regarding the disproportionate number of Aboriginal inmates (many of which have pre-existing health issues) represented within Australian correctional populations. More specifically, attention has been drawn to the potentially detrimental effect of disproportionate representation on Aboriginal inmates, such that they are at higher-risk of contracting COVID-19, among an already vulnerable population (Waight, 2020).

Through March and June of 2020, Australia reported zero cases among inmates nationwide (Wahlquist, 2020). However, there were reported cases among prison staff, which triggered scares among inmate populations. For example, in late April, though ultimately testing negative for COVID-19, 20 inmates were quarantined for 14 days after a prison staff worker in Brisbane tested positive (Layt & Lynch, 2020). Nevertheless, governments in South Australia, Queensland, and Western Australia took precautionary measures and prepared to manage the threat. By late March, correctional facilities in New South Wales and Queensland temporarily suspended all prison visits and equipped inmates with the tools necessary (e.g., computer tablets) to conduct video calls in lieu of in-person visitations (Doneman, 2020; Wahlquist, 2020). By March, if not having already instituted visitation bans, regions had – at minimum – adopted policies that highly discouraged members of the community with suspected infections or exposure to the virus from entering custodial settings (Wahlquist, 2020). Correctional staff members were also subjected to screening (e.g., temperatures were taken to detect fevers) prior to entering correctional facilities (Doneman, 2020).

New South Wales was the first Australian state to introduce legislation, ratified on March 25th, that would enable certain inmates to be released in order to relieve overcrowding among its prison population (Searle, 2020). Serving a similar purpose, eligible remand inmates in Queensland were encouraged to apply to the courts to be granted parole, bail, or even discharge (Doneman, 2020). Prisons throughout Australia had reported decreases in incarceration rates between February and June (Gleeson, 2020). New South Wales's Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reported releasing 1,508 inmates between the months of March and May, while Corrections Victoria released data that its prisons experienced a 13% population decrease between February and June (Gleeson, 2020). Lawyers and advocates have conveyed that the pandemic has helped illuminate preexisting flaws within Australia's prison system, such as the sheer number of inmates that are incarcerated due to minor charges. Conversely, the pandemic has also demonstrated that decreasing the prison population is feasible and has the potential to be informed by current circumstances in the long term (Gleeson, 2020).

On July 17, 2020, coronavirus entered Melbourne's Metropolitan Remand Center, when an inmate tested positive after being swabbed upon arrival (Chapman, 2020). According to a Department of Justice and Community Safety spokesperson, the inmate underwent a 14-day protective quarantine period in an isolated part of the prison to contain the virus (Chapman, 2020). On July 21st, 2020, six Victorian prisons were placed on lockdown after a guard at Ravenhall Correctional Center tested positive for the virus (Visontay & Wahlquist, 2020). Simultaneously, Victoria reported 374 new cases in the community to add to roughly 2,700 already-active cases and 3 COVID-19-related deaths in a 24-hour

period (Visontay & Wahlquist, 2020). At the Malmsbury Youth Justice Facility, an incoming youth offender tested positive in late July, which prompted a lockdown.

More recently, on August 8th, 2020, Brisbane Youth Detention Center in Queensland went on lockdown when a positive case was identified among a 77-year-old prison supervisor (Kleyn, 2020). Nearly 130 inmates and over 500 staff members underwent testing. While no cases have been reported among the youth, through tracing, at least 6 more reported cases were connected to the prison supervisor (Rendall, 2020). In late August, a prison staff worker in Queensland tested positive, spurring the lockdown of 12 Queensland correctional facilities (Daoud & Barnsley, 2020). The Victorian attorney general confirmed in late August that a combined total of at least 50 inmates and prison staff had tested positive in Victoria since the start of the pandemic, 23 of which were adult inmates, 6 of which were prison staff workers, 19 were juvenile inmates, and 5 were juveniles being supervised in the community (Kolovos, 2020).

COVID-19 outbreaks in New Zealand

Relative to other countries in the world, New Zealand has demonstrated great success in preventing and containing COVID-19 in its prisons and the broader community. Not only has the government successfully achieved more than 100 days without a reported case of the virus, there has also yet to be a single reported case among inmates within correctional facilities and only two positive cases among prison staff (Block, 2020; Godin, 2020). The government has approached its prison population with the same tenacity as it has the community. Mitigation strategies were executed swiftly and effectively, which can be largely attributed to public buy-in and support of measures in place, such as a nationwide lockdown (Shepherd, 2020). Among its prison population, various mitigation strategies have been implemented, including widespread dissemination of information regarding COVID-19 and the importance of taking health and safety precautions among inmates and staff (Adair, 2020), the use of personal protective equipment and the implementation of health screenings for prison staff (Boshier, 2020), a 14-day isolation period for newly admitted inmates (RNZ, 2020), and suspension of visitation in the initial stages of the pandemic (RNZ, 2020).

COVID-19 outbreaks in other countries in Oceania

Other countries in Oceania such as Papua New Guinea (N = 424) and Fiji (N = 28) have reported very few total COVID-19 cases as of late August (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020), and no cases among inmates to our knowledge. Regardless, vigilant and preventative measures within prison settings have been taken. In Papua New Guinea, a small number of low-risk offenders⁴ were released to reduce overcrowding (Graue, 2020), while Fiji closed its doors to all visitors, supplementing with remote conferencing (United Nations in the Pacific, *in press*).

Concluding comments

Our review has highlighted an important point: even islandic countries are susceptible to COVID-19, both in the community and prison systems alike. However, the prevalence rates

are lower in this region than the rest of the world, at least as of this point in time (September, 2020). Unfortunately, this may not last. The reported rates of COVID-19 in both the community and in prisons do appear to be on the rise, despite some fairly aggressive mitigation strategies employed in Australia and New Zealand.⁵

Notes

1. As of August 27, 2020.
2. As of August 27, 2020.
3. This number is based on data reported in March of 2020.
4. Low-risk is in reference to the nature of the crime for which the inmates were incarcerated.
5. See the country-specific reports for both countries included in this volume.

Disclosure statement

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