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INTRODUCTION



Introduction to Special Issue

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Introduction

The following special issue of *Victims & Offenders* addresses three critical questions about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in corrections systems:

- (1) How extensive were COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons, jails, and community corrections systems globally?
- (2) How did governments respond to the COVID-19 outbreaks in their corrections systems?
- (3) How likely is it that the short-term mitigation strategies implemented by governments will result in long-term changes in corrections policies?

The authors of the articles included in this volume provide preliminary answers to each of these questions, but it is clear from the research presented here that there is much that we simply do not know about both the extent of the problem and the effectiveness of various front-end, in-prison, and back-end mitigation strategies designed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 within prisons and jails while protecting the health (physical, mental) of inmates and staff. The articles included here also highlight the lack of information currently available about community corrections systems globally, which made it difficult to provide an assessment on (1) the extent of COVID-19 outbreaks in the *community corrections* system globally, (2) the types of mitigation strategies employed in community corrections, and (3) the effectiveness of these mitigation strategies.

To prepare for the next phase of this pandemic and/or the inevitable *next* public health crisis, several of the authors included in this volume¹ recommend that we immediately commence an aggressive global research agenda that – when completed – will provide the research evidence that governments desperately need, focusing on two basic questions:

- (1) Did the mitigation strategies used in each country reduce the spread of the infection in the corrections system (both in prisons and jails, and in community corrections)?
- (2) Did the corrections-focused mitigation strategies used in each country have an adverse impact on either public health or public safety?

Without conducting the research needed to answer these two questions, it will be impossible to offer advice to governments looking to develop evidence-based policies and practices, both in the short term and the long term.

Organization of the special issue

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, the *Victims & Offenders* editorial team followed the news reports describing the movement of virus from one global region to the next. During this same initial period, we began to hear disturbing reports by watchdog groups about major outbreaks of the virus in prisons and jails in each global region. These reports were often at odds with official statements offered by corrections officials in many of these countries, who – at least initially – either minimized the extent of the problem in their facilities or presented data to support their contention that they had the problem under control. However, the available data – provided by government leaders and corrections officials in many countries to support these statements – were often incomplete, with little information provided on testing levels, testing rates, the number of positive tests, hospitalizations, and deaths in prisons and jails.

Not surprisingly, skepticism was voiced by many observers regarding the transparency of the official reports and the narratives being presented for public consumption by governments in several countries, including those countries with the world's largest prison systems: USA, China, Brazil, Russia, and India. Over half of the global prison population is housed in these five countries. We decided initially that we needed to examine the response to COVID-19 outbreaks in these five countries in a special issue of this journal, but we quickly expanded our group of target countries to include countries with the 50 largest prison and jail systems, following a strategy that two members of the editorial team recently employed to examine the expansion of the private prison industry globally (Byrne et al., 2019). We should note here that over 90% of the global prison population resides in these top 50 countries. We also decided to solicit profiles from some of the smaller countries in each global region, to increase regional representation and assess whether “size matters” when mitigation strategies are developed and implemented.

We contacted country-level experts in each global region in mid-June, 2020, and asked them if they could provide an initial assessment of the extent of the problem in their country's corrections system, and then describe the initial mitigation strategies being used to address the problem. Our country-level experts include international corrections experts, individuals on our journal's international editorial board with expertise in their country's corrections system, members of the global community corrections initiative identified as country-level experts (www.globccci.org), and academic researchers we identified because of their knowledge of a particular country's corrections system, their access to data on both the extent of COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons, jails, and/or community corrections systems, and their knowledge of the front-end, in-prison, and back-end mitigation strategies being used to address the problem in their country. Because of the importance of providing an accurate and timely global snapshot, we set deadlines for submission aggressively (mid-August, 2020).²

The following special issue includes three articles examining the global impact of the COVID-19 outbreaks, six regional overviews, and twenty-seven country-specific reviews, including reviews targeting 21 of the 50 largest prison systems globally. We think you will agree that the issue is an excellent resource for those researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the general public interested in knowing more about the nature and extent of the COVID-19 outbreaks in corrections systems globally, and about the diversity of responses developed and implemented by governments from each global region that is detailed in these country-level reviews.

One final note: we include a list of global COVID-19 corrections-focused resources below (see Table 1). These resource links provide the latest available data on the continued spread of the pandemic globally, the recommendations of major international organizations regarding best practices, and a variety of region-specific resources.

Table 1. Global resources: responding to COVID-19 in corrections.

Global Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Correctional and detention facilities: Plan, prepare, and respond (*Worldwide*)
- CDC – Interim guidance on the management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in correctional and detention facilities (*Worldwide*)
- CDC – Toolkit for correctional and detention facilities (*Worldwide*)
- Global Community Corrections Initiative – Resources for the Global Community Corrections Initiative (*Worldwide*)
- Harm Reduction International – COVID-19, prisons and drug policy (*Worldwide*)
- Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) – Interim Guidance COVID-19: Focus on persons deprived of their liberty (*Worldwide*)
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – COVID-19: Preparedness and response in detention
- International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA) – COVID-19 resources (*Worldwide*)
- International Drug Policy Consortium: A global network promoting objective and open debate on drug policy (IDPC) – Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Resources and information (*Worldwide*)
- Penal Reform International (PRI) – Coronavirus: Preventing harm and human rights violations in criminal justice systems (*Worldwide*)
- The United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) – Advice of the subcommittee on prevention of torture to states parties and national preventive mechanisms relating to the coronavirus pandemic (adopted on 25th March 2020) (*Worldwide*)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): UNODC updates (*Worldwide*)
- World Health Organization: Regional Office for Europe – Prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention (*Worldwide*)
- World Prison Brief (WPB) & Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research (ICPR) – International news and guidance on COVID-19 and prisons (*Worldwide*)

Europe

- Center for Crime & Justice Studies: European Prison Observatory – COVID-19 in European countries: Tracking preparedness, prevention, & control (*Europe*)
- EUROPRIS: Promoting Professional Prison Practice – Prevention measures in European prisons (*Europe*)
- Innovative Prison Systems (IPS) – COVID-19 pandemic response: Fighting the invisible threat in prisons (*Europe and North America*)
- Royal Colleges of Psychiatrists – COVID-19: Secure hospital and criminal justice settings (*United Kingdom*)

North America

- American Correctional Association (ACA) – Coronavirus COVID-19 resources and information (*United States*)
- Beyond Prisons – COVID-19 resources for incarcerated people (*United States*)
- Correctional Service Canada – COVID-19 preparedness and plans (*Canada*)
- Council on Criminal Justice: The National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice – Impact report: COVID-19 and prisons (September 2, 2020) (*United States*)
- National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) – COVID-19 Coronavirus: What you need to know in corrections (*United States*)
- NCCHC – Study of COVID-19 in correctional facilities (*United States*)
- National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) – COVID-19 in U.S. prisons and jails (*United States*)
- NCSL – Criminal Justice System responses to COVID-19 (*United States*)
- Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) – Five ways the criminal justice system could slow the pandemic (*United States*)
- PPI – Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (*United States*)
- Prisonology – COVID-19 resources related to Federal Bureau of Prisons response (*United States*)
- The COVID Prison Project – The COVID Prison Project tracks data and policy across the country to monitor COVID-19 in correctional facilities (*United States + Puerto Rico*)
- The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine – Academies study will examine COVID-19 in correctional facilities and strategies for decarceration (*United States*)

South/Latin America

- United Nations – Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean (*Latin America & the Caribbean*)

Africa

- Journal of Human Rights Practice (Muntingh) – Africa, prisons, and COVID-19 (*Africa*)

Asia

- International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) – COVID-19: Prisons and detention in Southeast Asia (*Asia*)

Oceania

- Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) – Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreaks in correctional and detention facilities (*Australia*)
 - Government of New South Wales (NSW) – Community corrections COVID-safe roadmap (*Australia*)
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Notes

1. See, the overview articles by Nowotny and Piquero (this volume), Heard (this volume), and Byrne, et al., (this volume).
2. We had hoped to include additional countries from both the Asian and African regions, but the very short timeframe for submission, and the lack of available data needed to complete the review, made finding qualified experts a challenge. We addressed this problem by conducting our own global overview targeting the countries with the largest prison systems globally, providing region-specific overviews, and adding selected country-specific reviews where needed. These articles are authored or coauthored by the co-editors (Byrne and Hummer) and associate editor (Kras) of the journal.

Reference

Byrne, J., Kras, K., & Marmolejo, L. (2019). International perspectives on the privatization of corrections. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 18(2), 477–503.