



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 27

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The pandemic inside African and Latin American prisons

Persons deprived of their liberty, such as those in prisons and other detention centers, are a population group considered to be at high risk during the pandemic. According to the *International Drug Policy Consortium* (IDPC, 2020) it is evident that one of the situations that makes them vulnerable is the fact that these people tend to live in prolonged conditions of confinement and overcrowding. This makes it impossible to comply with the recommendation of physical distancing, which is essential to combat the spread of the virus. Moreover, the maintenance of good sanitary hygiene and access to adequate health systems are often limited in these facilities.

In addition to the above, according to the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC, 2020), in prisons without local circulation of the virus, the risk of its introduction may be associated with newly admitted persons, prison staff, service providers and visitors. This is why, in addition to the recommendations provided by the *World Health Organization* (WHO), UNODC has recommended, among other things: decongesting prison cells and improving sanitation where possible; maintaining access of inmates to the open air as much as possible; providing alternatives to visits such as phone calls or video calls, in case visits are suspended.

For its part, the *Pan American Health Organization* (PAHO, 2020) has made some additional recommendations: ensure that the human rights of persons in the custody of prison authorities are respected; separate the most at-risk prisoners from others in the most effective and least disruptive manner possible; consider the increased need for emotional and psychological support for prisoners, as well as the need for transparency in sharing information about the disease; and ensure a gender-sensitive approach in addressing the covid-19 emergency in prisons and other places of detention.

Certainly, most Latin American and African prisons are far from being able to comply with the recommendations proposed by different entities. According to the *Inter-American Development Bank* (IDB) in Latin America and the Caribbean there are 262 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants, while in Africa and Asia this figure is 97, in Europe 187 and in Oceania 157 (IDB, 2020). In addition, the average overcrowding in Latin American prisons is 64%. Specifically, in both El Salvador and Guatemala, overcrowding has reached 233% and in Haiti this figure has reached 354%. Moreover, 20% of Latin American inmates do not have sufficient access to drinking water, only 37% of them have soap, 58% do not have a bed to sleep on, and 29% do not receive medical attention.

African prisons are known for their overcrowding, for providing poor nutrition to inmates, for having a high rate of disease, and for the violation of human rights in general (Muntingh,

2020). Regarding overcrowding, in countries such as Uganda and Zambia there is an average of three people occupying space that was originally designed for one. Another worrying situation in this region is the number of inmates who are deprived of their liberty without a trial and without a conviction, that is, being presumed innocent. Specifically in Southern and East African countries, one in three prisoners is in such a situation. Particularly in Rwanda, this affects 57% of prisoners.

From what has been said above, it is evident that overcrowding and overpopulation are two major problems in African and Latin American detention centers. Although attempts have been made to prevent the virus from entering prisons, the reality is that it spread rapidly and uncontrollably as soon as a case was registered. According to Uganda's *Daily Motion* newspaper, Amuru prison was closed after 153 inmates were detected with covid-19. According to the newspaper *La Jornada*, in the Ciudad del Este prison in Paraguay, 400 people were infected in just one month. In Brazil, the number of infected prisoners increased by 134% in just one month, according to the newspaper *O Globo*. By July, in the prisons of Bogotá, Colombia, there were more than 1,700 confirmed cases, according to the newspaper *El Tiempo*. Also in Panama, according to the newspaper *El Universo*, there were very high infection rates in different prisons in the country. In a prison in the town of Santiago 313 of its 503 prisoners contracted the virus, in the prison of the city of Penonomé 92% of the inmates tested positive for the coronavirus and in the prison of Chipré more than half of the prisoners were infected.

In several prisons, inmates have taken advantage of this situation to denounce the poor sanitary conditions in which they live and the little medical attention they receive. A concrete example is the case of the department of Cochabamba in Bolivia, where there were synchronized riots in four of its most populated prisons as a result of the death of a prisoner, according to the newspaper *La Jornada*. The inmates denounced that there are no doctors or medicines inside the prisons, and that no one has carried out the necessary tests to know if they have the virus or not, not even after many of them showed symptoms.

Visits were suspended in almost all prisons in both Africa and Latin America. Although, as previously mentioned, there have been recommendations to replace them with video calls, most of them do not have the resources to carry them out. A striking counterexample is the case of Colombian prisons. According to the newspaper *El Tiempo*, the *National Penitentiary and Prison Institute* (INPEC) has managed to make more than 85,000 virtual calls in prisons throughout the country. These video calls usually last around 15 minutes and are aimed at reducing the levels of stress and anxiety suffered by prisoners as a result of the new restrictions.

To combat overcrowding in prisons, the *WHO* recommended the early release of certain inmates (Muntingh, 2020). This idea was celebrated and implemented in several African and some Latin American countries. In Ethiopia, more than 1,560 convicts were released, 38 of whom were women, whose crimes did not include murder, rape or human trafficking, as explained by the *Borkena* newspaper. According to the *Anadolu Agency* news agency, in Malawi, where prisons are at triple capacity, almost 500 inmates were released with the President's pardon. In Nigeria, where prisons also hold three times more inmates than they

should, according to the *Daily Trust newspaper*, more than 7,700 inmates were released from 39 prisons. In Uganda, more than 2,600 convicts with minor charges, such as unruly behavior or vagrancy, were released, according to the *Daily Monitor newspaper*. Also in Togo, according to *Togo Presse*, more than 1,000 prisoners on similar charges have been released. In Ecuador, more than 800 convicts were released, according to the daily *Primicias*. Almost half of them were being held for alimony debts.

In conclusion, it is evident that Latin American and African prisons are far from being able to cope with such a pandemic, when the basic recommendations to avoid contagion have been precisely the weakest points of these establishments. They are characterized by high overcrowding and overpopulation, limited access to drinking water and sanitation, as well as poor medical care and high malnutrition rates. All these shortcomings caused the virus to spread rapidly and uncontrollably in the prisons where it entered. One of the two main measures taken in this regard was the suspension of visits, which in most cases could not be replaced by virtual calls. The second major measure was the release of a large number of inmates. This was celebrated and carried out in many countries of the Global South, especially on the African continent. It is clear once again that prevention measures for the spread of covid-19 must be region-specific and contextualized. In other words, they cannot be globalized or generalized, since not all countries have the same resources and capabilities.

References:

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The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>