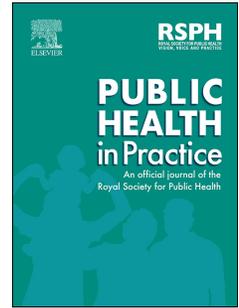


# Journal Pre-proof

Zimbabwe's prison facilities: Preparedness for institutional COVID-19 outbreaks

Solomon Mukwenha, Tafadzwa Dzinamarira, Munyaradzi P. Mapingure, Godfrey Musuka



PII: S2666-5352(21)00014-8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2021.100089>

Reference: PUHIP 100089

To appear in: *Public Health in Practice*

Received Date: 19 January 2021

Accepted Date: 27 January 2021

Please cite this article as: S. Mukwenha, T. Dzinamarira, M.P. Mapingure, G. Musuka, Zimbabwe's prison facilities: Preparedness for institutional COVID-19 outbreaks, *Public Health in Practice*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2021.100089>.

This is a PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that, during the production process, errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Royal Society for Public Health.

**Zimbabwe's prison facilities: Preparedness for institutional COVID-19 outbreaks**

Authors: Solomon Mukwenha<sup>1\*</sup>, Tafadzwa Dzinamarira<sup>2</sup>, Munyaradzi P. Mapingure<sup>1</sup>, Godfrey Musuka<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ICAP at Columbia University, Harare, Zimbabwe

<sup>2</sup> Department of Public Health Medicine, School of Nursing and Public Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 4001, South Africa

Corresponding author: Solomon Mukwenha, ICAP at Columbia University, 107 King George Avenue, Avondale Harare, [sm4803@cumc.columbia.edu](mailto:sm4803@cumc.columbia.edu)

**Abstract:**

Covid-19 cases and death are on the rise in Zimbabwe and other Southern African countries. This increase poses a major risk of outbreaks in institutions such as prisons and detention centres. Zimbabwe has a total of 46 prisons which are overcrowded and without adequate running water, hand sanitizers and masks for both prisoners and warden officers. Although the country has released some prisoners, it is still not enough to decongest the prisons and mitigate the Covid-19 risk. There is a need to further decongest the prisons, ensure facilities have adequate tap water and consider use of video and audio technology to minimize visitors to inmates.

**Keywords: Covid-19; Prisons; Detention centres; Prisoner**

As with the rest of southern Africa, Covid-19 cases and deaths continue to rise rapidly in Zimbabwe. The country is currently experiencing a Covid-19 resurgence that has prompted introduction of a 30 day level 4 national lockdown effected on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021 to try and contain the number of new cases(1).

The general increase in Covid-19 cases, comes with major risks for institutional outbreaks as community transmission rates soar. Of particular interest for this letter are the country's prisons and detention centers. Generally, Africa's prisons and detention centers always are characterized by overcrowding and poor conditions (2). The prisons and detentions centers are normally overcrowded, with no running water and squalor. They fall short of international standards in terms of hygiene practices and infection control (3). The prison and detention centers also do not have Covid-19 treatment facilities and the few Intensive Care Unit beds in all key hospitals are already overwhelmed by critically ill Covid-19 patients

To prevent Covid-19 contraction and spread, prisoners and prison officers are supposed to wear face masks, have easy access to running water, soap as necessary and live in good hygiene conditions with ample supply of hand sanitizers and provisions for social distancing. Zimbabwe has a total of 46 Prisons with an official holding capacity of 17 000 inmates although the actual number of inmates in the prison fluctuates is more than 22 000 well excess of capacity, especially if one takes into consideration the needs for social distancing in the current Covid era (3). The government of Zimbabwe acknowledged that the prisons are overcrowded between March and June 2020 during the first wave of Covid-19, the government released 4 208 prisoners to ease pressure at facilities but it was inadequate to allow adequate social distancing in prisons(3). Inmates detained at Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison have indicated that cells which were designed to hold 16 people were currently more than 40 people individuals each and inmates sleep 30cm apart in lice infested cells (4). This is a major public health risk not only due to Covid-19 but also other highly infectious diseases such as Tuberculosis. The situation was further compounded by the shortages of soaps, hand sanitizers and clean face masks to protect against Covid-19. One outbreak reported in July 2020, had at least 43 inmates and 23 prison officers testing positive for Covid-19 in one prison facility (4).

The Zimbabwe Prison and correctional services are perennially underfunded and has over years failed to meet the United Nations sets the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of

Prisoners (Mandela Rules) which requires all prisoners to be put in an accommodation that meets all requirements of health among them minimum floor space, heating and ventilation(5). Sanitary installations, bathing and shower installations should be available to enable prisoners to comply with the needs of nature in a clean and decent manner (5)

On 18 December, South Africa announced the detection of a new highly transmissible variant of SARS-CoV-2 which they named 501Y.V2, because of a N501Y mutation. It rapidly spread in 3 provinces namely Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal province. By 30 December, the 501Y.V2 variant from South Africa has been reported from four other countries(6). Although Zimbabwe has not yet reported the variant, it is highly likely that the variant is already circulating in Zimbabwe due to the high movement of people between the two countries and it poses a high risk if it infiltrates our prisons.

We implore authorities to set up measures to reduce the risk of Covid-19 spread in prison and detention facilities. Firstly, there is an urgent need to decongest the prisons by pardoning prisoners who committed minor offences. Secondly, the courts must provide non-custody sentences for minor offences and promote offenders to participate in community service instead of servicing prison terms. Thirdly, the government of Zimbabwe must invest in improved infrastructure to ensure that all prisons have adequate running water, hand sanitizers and masks to both prisoners and warden officers. Fourthly, there is need to support the use of technology such as audio and video conferencing between the inmates and their families to reduce physical contact between inmates and their visitors (7).

## References

1. Zimbabwe reintroduces national lockdown | eNCA [Internet]. [cited 2021 Jan 6]. Available from: <https://www.enca.com/news/zimbabwe-reintroduces-national-lockdown>
2. Muntingh LM. Africa, Prisons and COVID-19. *J Hum Rights Pract.* 2020;(August):284–92.
3. Prisoners in Zimbabwe at Grave Risk of Covid-19 Spread | Human Rights Watch [Internet]. [cited 2021 Jan 6]. Available from:

- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/29/prisoners-zimbabwe-grave-risk-covid-19-spread>
4. In Zimbabwe's overcrowded prisons, fear of COVID-19 spreads | Coronavirus pandemic News | Al Jazeera [Internet]. [cited 2021 Jan 6]. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/25/gg>
  5. Kleinig J. Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Prison Rights. 2018;2076(July 1957):407–20.
  6. WHO | SARS-CoV-2 Variants. WHO [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2021 Jan 7]; Available from: <http://www.who.int/csr/don/31-december-2020-sars-cov2-variants/en/>
  7. Of EO, Services C. EuroPris PO Box 13635 2501 EP The Hague Netherlands. 2020;1–4.

**Declaration of interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Journal Pre-proof