



Letter to the Editor

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



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Covid-19
Prisons
Detention centers
Prisoner

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 centers. Zimbabwe has a total of 46 main prisons that are overcrowded and without adequate running water, hand sanitizers, and face 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 the use of video and audio technology to minimize visitors to inmates.

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 the introduction of a 30-day level 4 national lockdown effected on January 5, 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 tap 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 main prisons with an official holding capacity of 17 000 inmates although the actual number of inmates in the prison 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 4208 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 that were designed to hold 16 people were currently housing more than 40 individuals each with inmates sleeping 30cm apart[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 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 have 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].

Declaration of competing interest

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.

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

Received 19 January 2021; Accepted 27 January 2021

Available online 5 February 2021

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