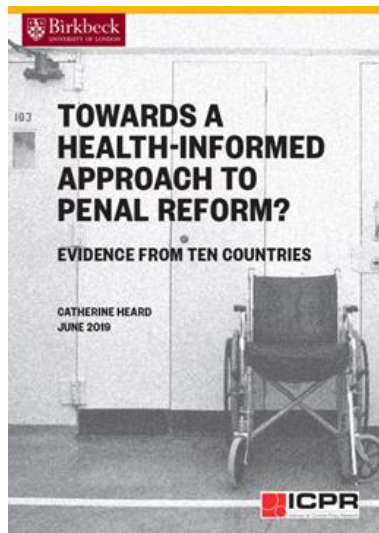


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New report warns of public health risks from prison overcrowding and lack of adequate healthcare



The Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) has gathered disturbing evidence from across the five continents of the health impacts of growing levels of prison overcrowding.

With first-hand descriptions from people who have endured the misery of cramped, unsafe, disease-ridden prisons, this report reveals how overcrowded, unhealthy prison environments now blight the justice systems of many countries, with serious consequences for public health and community safety.

A new report, *Towards a health-informed approach to penal reform? Evidence from ten countries*, is published today by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR), at Birkbeck, University of London. The report, by Catherine Heard (Director of ICPR's World Prison Research Programme), examines the effects of failed penal policies through the lens of health.

Drawing on ICPR's unique [World Prison Brief](#) database and research in ten countries across all five continents, the report highlights the serious public health risks caused by today's unprecedented levels of prison overcrowding worldwide.

Recent surges in prisoner numbers across much of the world have produced a global prison population of well over 11 million; and chronically overcrowded, under-resourced prisons. These are prisons, the report argues, in which health problems proliferate – particularly as regards communicable diseases, mental illness, substance misuse and increased risk of violence, self-harm and suicide. Severe risks to health are posed not only to prisoners but also to staff, the families of prisoners and staff, and wider communities.

The report features personal accounts from people who have experienced incarceration in overcrowded prisons in England, Thailand, Kenya, South Africa and Brazil. Their harrowing descriptions attest to the damage that prison so often causes to inmates' physical and mental health – damage that can last years beyond their actual sentence. Prisoners describe:

- being unable to access medication and treatment, even for serious conditions like diabetes, tuberculosis and HIV
- continual hunger, weight loss, sickness, self-harm and deaths in custody

- babies and children, imprisoned with their mothers, regularly falling ill with diarrhoea, cholera and skin diseases
- lack of opportunity for exercise, causing frustration and violence
- endemic drug use, with more prisoners picking up habits than becoming clean while inside
- sleeplessness, anxiety, confusion and fear, persisting long after release.

Two themes are central to the report, each amply illustrated by evidence from this widely diverse group of countries.

First, prison populations bear a far greater burden of mental and physical health problems than general populations. People who enter custody are largely drawn from the poorest and most marginalised sections of society – communities that often have disproportionate levels of health problems, due to socio-economic and health inequalities. And it is all too easy for people with mental health conditions, drug or alcohol dependency, or other vulnerabilities to be propelled into the criminal justice system and custody, when their needs would be better addressed through health-led interventions.

Secondly, prison environments tend to exacerbate existing health problems and often give rise to new ones. This happens as a result of poor material conditions, a lack of healthcare, the availability of illicit drugs, social and psychological stresses, violence and mistreatment.

The report concludes by calling for a reduction in prisoner numbers overall, as an essential first step to improving conditions and increasing access to healthcare and treatment. A key part of this is reducing the numbers of people with mental health conditions who enter custody. For the reduced prison populations that remain, there must be proper access to healthcare, screening and treatment; health and wellbeing should be promoted; and harm reduction measures put in place to minimise risks to the health of prisoners, staff and the wider public.

Catherine Heard, Director of ICPR's World Prison Research Programme and the author of the report, said:

'Overcrowded prisons are struggling to provide even basic levels of healthcare to the people in their custody, many of whom come from backgrounds of extreme health inequality and social marginalisation. It will take political courage to call time on our over-reliance on prison and accept that other approaches, focused on tackling social injustice and health inequality, are more likely to reduce crime. The rewards will be safer societies and better public health.'

Dr Luca Falqui, health programme manager for the International Committee of the Red Cross, has welcomed the report, saying:

'This important new report reveals the strikingly high prevalence of health problems in prison populations. Imprisonment usually exacerbates physical and mental health conditions. We cannot expect repeated contacts with police, courts and prisons to rehabilitate society's most vulnerable; instead, we need continuity of care and integration of services to ensure a health-informed approach to penal reform.'

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Author contact details

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2. The Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)

The Institute for Criminal Policy Research is based at the Law School of Birkbeck, University of London. ICPR conducts policy-oriented, academically-grounded research on all aspects of the criminal justice system. ICPR's work on this report forms part of the ICPR World Prison Research Programme, directed by the report's author, Catherine Heard. Further details of ICPR's research are available at <http://www.icpr.org.uk/>. The Open Society Foundations and other organizations provide financial support for ICPR's World Prison Research Programme.

3. The World Prison Brief

The statistical data in the report are sourced from the World Prison Brief, compiled by Roy Walmsley and hosted and published by ICPR. This unique and internationally renowned online database contains a wealth of information on prisons and the use of imprisonment in 226 independent countries and dependent territories around the world. It includes information on: the total number of prisoners held and the prison population rate per 100,000 of the national population in each jurisdiction; proportions of women, pre-trial, foreign national and juvenile prisoners; occupancy levels and prison population trends. It can be accessed at <http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief>.

4. The wider project: *Understanding and reducing the use imprisonment in ten countries*

Working with the NGO Fair Trials, the law firm Clifford Chance, and a global network of NGOs, academics and legal practitioners, ICPR is conducting an innovative international project, *Understanding and reducing the use of imprisonment in ten countries*. The project aims to:

- provide a detailed understanding of how imprisonment is used and the scope for reducing it
- highlight the harms of excessive use of imprisonment, and
- identify and disseminate effective measures to reduce the resort to imprisonment.

The project has two components: (1) Research and analysis to understand what drives states' use of imprisonment; and (2) Policy development to devise measures for reducing it. The countries being studied are:

- Kenya and South Africa in **Africa**
- Brazil and the United States in the **Americas**
- India and Thailand in **Asia**
- England and Wales, Hungary and the Netherlands in **Europe**
- Australia in **Oceania**

All ten of the countries have experienced the negative effects of over-use of imprisonment, and all have lessons to impart about what issues need to be tackled if prisoner numbers are to come down – and stay down. The project's first report (Jacobson J, Heard C and Fair H

(2017) *Prison: Evidence of its use and over-use from around the world*, London: Institute for Criminal Policy Research and Fair Trials) presented brief accounts of the ten countries' recent patterns of imprisonment. The report can be accessed here:
http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/global_imprisonment_web2c.pdf

5. Birkbeck, University of London

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