

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN PRISONS

Last updated 6 May 2020 (originally published 27 March 2020)

Purpose:

To compare the response of different countries to the COVID-19 pandemic in prisons and provide links to guidance from international bodies on best practice responses.

1. Countries' responses:

United Kingdom

24 March: Prison visits have been temporarily cancelled. The [Ministry of Justice](#) stated:

Secure phone handsets will be given to prisoners at 55 jails. This will enable the approved use of 900 locked SIM card handsets, allowing risk-assessed prisoners to speak to a small number of pre-authorised contacts. The phones will not have internet access.

Strict measures will ensure the phones are not misused with calls being time-limited and monitored closely. Additionally, handsets will include measures to prevent non-secure SIM cards being used.

The phones will also give access to support services to reduce the risk of self-harm. Currently, more than 50 prisons have in-cell telephones. Video calls are also being trialled at six pilot sites.

25 March: The government is [considering releasing some prisoners](#) to ease pressures. About 10% of the prison workforce were off work self-isolating or ill on 24 March. 13 inmates have tested positive for coronavirus in 9 prisons. Inmates are being confined to their cells for 23 hours a day. Protective masks have been delivered to staff and the ban on hand sanitiser in prisons lifted.

26 March: The first British prisoner (an 84-year-old male) [died of COVID-19](#). The Prison Governors Association [called for the release](#) of some prisoners as the combination of overcrowding, prisoner lockdown and staff shortages is causing unprecedented pressure.

27 March: [A second prisoner died](#) after contracting COVID-19. He had been receiving end-of-life care for an underlying health condition prior to being tested positive for COVID-19.

31 March: The Ministry of Justice announced that pregnant women in custody who do not pose a high risk of harm to the public will be [temporarily released from prison](#). Prisoners in Mother and Baby Units meeting the same risk assessment will also be released with their children.

4 April: The Ministry of Justice announced that risk-assessed prisoners within two months of their release date will be [temporarily released from prison](#). They will be electronically monitored to enforce the requirement to stay at home.

5 April: [Two staff members](#) at London's Pentonville prison died after suffering COVID-19 symptoms.

6 April: [Two more prisoners have died](#) of COVID-19, bringing the total number of prisoners who have died to five. 107 prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19 as of 5 April.

9 April: The [Ministry of Justice announced](#) that work was beginning to install the first of 500 temporary single occupancy cells designed to increase space in prisons and help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

14 April: 207 prisoners in 57 jails have tested positive with [13 suspected COVID-19 related deaths](#).

28 April: The [Prisons and Probation Minister](#) reported that new modelling indicates jails are successfully limiting deaths and the transmission of COVID-19 using the approach of 'compartmentalisation'. The prison population has been reduced by almost 3,000 over a seven-week period.

29 April: A recently closed youth custody site in Kent was [reopened](#) to hold up to 70 adult prisoners. Over 300 of the planned 500 temporary, single occupancy cells have been delivered.

Canada

20 March: A correctional officer at Toronto South Detention Centre [tested positive](#) for COVID-19.

24 March: Visits from the public and volunteers, work release and temporary absences from prisons (unless medically necessary) have been suspended. The cost of telephone calls has been waived for inmates and [video visitation is available](#).

1 April: Guards at an Ottawa jail [refused to work](#) due to a lack of COVID-9 screening of those going inside the institution.

23 April: Correctional Services Canada reports [193 positive tests and 1 death](#) across their federal correctional institutions.

24 April: The [Office of the Correctional Investigator reported](#) that there are close to 400 inmates under some form of medical isolation. Time out of cell for those under medical isolation is limited to just 20 minutes per day. The OCI also reported that there 'appears to be an overall spike in incidents involving unusual or non-compliant inmate behavior at a number of sites'.

4 May: Correctional Services Canada report [290 positive tests and 2 deaths](#) across their federal correctional institutions.

Note: the Canada OPCAT Project [COVID-19: Deprivation of Liberty Information Corner](#) is regularly updated with Canadian and international COVID-19 news.

United States

Note: This section only contains information about federal prisons in the US. For individual state responses see the [Prison Policy Initiative](#) and [The Marshall Project](#).

13 March: The federal Bureau of Prisons [suspended social visits](#) for 30 days. Inmates are allowed 500 telephone minutes per month (previously 300). Legal visits are also suspended for 30 days with case-by-case accommodation being made at the local levels and confidential legal calls being allowed. All inmate facility transfers are suspended for 30 days, with some exceptions. New inmates will still be admitted but are screened.

28 March: An inmate at Federal Correctional Institution Oakdale I, Louisiana [died from COVID-19](#).

30 March: 28 inmates in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and 24 staff have [tested positive](#).

7 April: There are 241 federal inmates and 73 Federal Bureau of Prisons staff have tested positive and 8 federal inmates have [died](#).

5 May: 2066 federal inmates and 359 staff have tested positive for COVID-19 nationwide. There have been [42 federal inmate deaths](#).

New Zealand

23 March: All private and volunteer visits, release to work activities and other non-essential movements in and out of prison sites has been [temporarily suspended](#). All prisoners will be supplied with a \$5 phonecard each week, more phones are being placed in residential units and they are increasing the use of inbound emails that can be printed and given to prisoners.

29 March: [All new prisoners are housed separately](#) from the existing prison population for the first 14 days. All face-to-face visits have been suspended and lawyers are to contact their clients by telephone or email.

6 April: The [prison guards' union](#) reported that prisoners are confined to their cells for 20-23 hours a day in most jails to manage physical distancing. The Department of Corrections confirmed prisoners had increased lockdown hours but no prison had a policy of 23-hours lockdowns.

21 April: New Zealand will be moving to [Alert Level 3](#) on Monday 27 April. Some rehabilitation interventions for prisoners with an intensive need will be reintroduced where they can be carried out remotely. There will be increased facilitation of less-urgent health services.

1 May: There remain [no confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19 among prisoners in any New Zealand prison.

Scotland

24 March: [Visits were suspended](#). Prisoners are provided with £2.50 per week on their phone balance and the weekly £1 TV rental fee has been suspended. Only those who work in essential services e.g. laundry, catering and cleaning, will continue to attend work. Those unable to work will continue to be paid their full wage.

2 April: Almost a quarter of the Scottish Prison Service staff were [absent from work](#).

17 April: The Scottish Government and Scottish Prison Service announced that they [intend to introduce mobile phones](#) in Scotland's prisons to maintain contact between prisoners and their families. There would be security restrictions on these phones, including monitoring of calls. Security, technical and legal issues need to be resolved before they can be rolled out.

5 May: 31 individuals are self-isolating across nine establishments, one of whom has [tested positive](#) for COVID-19.

Ireland

27 March: All physical [family visits were ceased](#), and prisons are moving to video calls. The Irish Prison Service has [asked retired prison staff to register their interest](#) in temporarily returning to work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Note: For an overview of measures taken by other countries, see [Prison Insider](#). For articles about other countries, see the [APT Information Hub](#).

2. Guidance from international bodies:

- World Health Organization, [Preparedness, prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention: Interim guidance](#), 15 March 2020
- Penal Reform International, [Coronavirus: Healthcare and human rights of people in prison, Briefing Note](#), 16 March 2020
- European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), [Statement of principles relating to the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty in the context of the coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), 20 March 2020
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 “rampaging through places of detention”- Bachelet](#), 25 March 2020
- Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, [Advice of the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture to States Parties and National Preventive Mechanisms relating to the Coronavirus Pandemic](#), 25 March 2020
- World Health Organization, [Frequently asked questions about prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons and other places of detention](#)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [Position Paper: COVID-19 preparedness and responses in prisons](#), 31 March 2020
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (OHCHR & WHO), [Interim Guidance- COVID-19: Focus in Persons Deprived of their Liberty](#), March 2020
- Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [Statement on the coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic and economic, social and cultural rights](#), adopted 6 April 2020
- International Committee of the Red Cross, [COVID-19: Preparedness and response in detention](#), 7 April 2020- includes sensitisation and training videos on COVID-19 for staff, detainees and visitors
- UN Institute for Training and Research, [COVID-19 Preparedness and Responses in Places of Detention: Information Package](#)
- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, [Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of their Liberty](#)
- OMCT SOS-Torture Network, [Building Our Response on COVID-19 and Detention: OMCT Guidance brief to the SOS-Torture Network and partner organizations](#), 15 April 2020
- United Nation, [COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together](#), April 2020
- Human Rights Committee, [Statement on derogations from the Covenant in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic](#), adopted 24 April 2020
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [Protecting Children Deprived of Liberty During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)