

# COVID-19: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT IN GHANA



Briefing Note #7, July 2020

## The impact of COVID-19 in Ghana's Prisons and Correctional Centers

### Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on socio-economic systems globally. However, it has also provided an opportunity for the restructuring of systems around the world to improve the quality of human life. For example, massive investments are being made to improve healthcare systems globally. Again, there has been an increase in healthcare awareness creation and the institution of new legislations or policy directives to curb the spread of the virus among communities. Special attention needs to be given to confined populations, such as those in prisons and other correctional facilities.

This note seeks to draw attention to the risks COVID-19 poses to prisons and correctional facilities for which physical distancing is often not an option due to overcrowding. The situation in these settings is further worsened by the weaker health profile of prison populations. This will require the urgent introduction of evidence-based COVID-19 prevention and control measures in prisons to protect those inside and outside of prison, in compliance with the UN minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners.

COVID-19 prevention and control measures alone may prove insufficient for many prison systems plagued by overcrowding and other systemic challenges. The extraordinary risk that COVID-19 poses to prison settings brings to the fore the urgent need to address prison overcrowding, by limiting imprisonment to a measure of last resort, and making sure that the duty of care that States assume when depriving individuals of their liberty is respected.

### Highlights

- COVID-19 prevention and control measures alone may prove insufficient for many prison systems plagued by overcrowding and other systemic challenges.
- A large-scale testing of prisoners and prison staff would be necessary, to identify the status of the prison population, as well as to check the spread of the virus through isolation and treatment.
- The provision of personal protective equipment (such as coveralls, facemasks, gloves, thermometer guns etc) to prison service will significantly curb the spread of the virus in and outside prisons.
- Particularly under crowded confinement situations, hygiene protocols (such as the regular washing of hands, hand sanitization, good cough and sneeze etiquettes, frequent washing of hands under running water, etc.) need to be rigorously adhered to by prisoners, prison staff and visitors.
- In reviewing current legislation, non-custodial sentences (such as fines, community service, probation, parole, etc) as outlined in the draft Prison Service Bill should be introduced to help reduce the overcrowding of Ghana's prisons and the risk of quick spread of pandemics. Additionally, alternatives to pre-trial detentions should also be considered to ease prisons congestion.
- It is also important to consider in future, the possibility of expanding prison facilities to meet healthier international and UN accommodation standards for the prison population.

Currently, [many countries](#) have recorded [COVID-19 cases in prisons](#) and different measures are being put in place to minimize the spread of the pandemic. Ghana was also reported to have [recorded ten cases in a police cell at Ashaiman](#), a suburb of Accra, in mid-March, when samples were taken for testing. This number may have increased significantly, with the country having registered 17,741 positive cases and 112 deaths as of 30th June.

## The overcrowding situation in Ghana’s Prisons and the spread of COVID-19

The Ghana Prisons Service is the state institution responsible for the management and maintenance of the prison system. According to the Prisons Service Act, 1972 (NRCD 46), the functions of the Service are to ensure the safe custody and welfare of prisoners and to undertake their reformation and rehabilitation whenever practicable. NRCD 46 has, since its enactment, been the main applicable law under which the Service has operated.

Criminal activities are on the upsurge with increasing sophistication in the way crimes are committed. Owing to the absence of alternative sentencing, most perpetrators arrested and tried, end up in prison. As shown by the figures in Table 1 below, it appears that the overcrowding situation is worsening, and this may hinder the efficiency of reform and rehabilitation measures for the prisoners, which is part of the mandate of the Service.

A new legal framework, which will stand the test of time, has been advocated to empower the Service to meet the demands of changing developments in correctional service delivery to meet international standards. To this end, the Prisons Service has, in collaboration with the Office of the Attorney-General, drafted a new bill with provisions of alternative/non-custodial sentencing to help reduce overcrowding in the prisons. This is a welcome development.

However, until the passage of this bill, and with the added threat of the massive spread of COVID 19, there is the need for swift measures to reduce overcrowding, improve prison health service delivery and curb the spread of the virus. Steps have been taken in this direction. Pursuant to Article 72 (1) of the 1992 Constitution, the President of Ghana acting on the recommendation of the Prisons Service Council and in consultation with the Council of State, granted pardon to eight hundred and eight (808) convicted prisoners. Although this is a step in the right direction, the prisons are still densely populated and require further strategic interventions to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in all Ghanaian prisons.

## Some Recommendations

### Short-term measures

**Screening of prisoners and prison staff for COVID-19:** A large-scale testing of prisoners and prison staff would be necessary, to identify the status of the prison population, as well as to check the spread of the virus through isolation and treatment.

**Provision of Personal Protective Equipment:** The provision of personal protective equipment (such as coveralls, facemasks, gloves, thermometer guns etc) to prison service will significantly curb the spread of the virus in and outside prisons.

**Observing personal Hygiene:** Particularly under crowded confinement situations, hygiene protocols (such as the regular washing of hands, hand sanitization, good cough and sneeze etiquettes, frequent washing of hands under running water, etc.) need to be rigorously adhered to by prisoners, prison staff and visitors. Constant education of the prison population on personal hygiene and the provision of “Veronica” buckets and hand sanitizers at strategic locations is also essential.

Table 1.: Statistics on Ghana’s Prisons Population

|                                        | 2010   | 2011   | 2012   | 2013   | 2014   | 2015   | 2016   | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   | Average |
|----------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| <b>Average Daily Population</b>        | 13,507 | 13,396 | 13,487 | 13,908 | 14,599 | 14,355 | 14,368 | 14,846 | 14,467 | 15,463 | 14,240  |
| <b>Official Daily Prisons Capacity</b> | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945  | 9,945   |
| <b>Occupancy Levels</b>                | 135.8% | 134.7% | 135.6% | 139.8% | 146.8% | 144.3% | 144.5% | 149.3% | 145.5% | 155.5% | 143.2%  |

## Medium to long term measures

Alternatives to imprisonment sentences and pre-trial detention: In reviewing current legislation, non-custodial sentences (such as fines, community service, probation, parole, etc) as outlined in the draft Prison Service Bill should be introduced to help reduce the overcrowding of Ghana’s prisons and the risk of quick spread of pandemics. This will be particularly relevant in case of minor offences, including those of a non-violent and non-sexual nature. Additionally, alternatives to pre-trial detentions should also be considered to ease prisons congestion.

Expansion of prisons facilities: It is also important to consider in future, the possibility of expanding prison facilities to meet healthier international and UN accommodation standards for the prison population.

## Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 - its mode of transmission, rate of spread, and death toll (with no vaccine in sight) - poses a serious threat of rapid spread among the prison population, prison staff and their respective families and communities. Cramped accommodation, poor hygiene and ventilation are factors that may facilitate the spread of the COVID-19 virus in prisons settings. Therefore, ensuring that all preventive measures and existing treatment are extended to the prison population will greatly help to curb transmission in the community, by making the fight against COVID-19 more comprehensive and effective.



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Ghanaian Correction Advisors demonstrating a vegetable garden to Prison officials in Kuajok, South Sudan

