



UNODC

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

*Special Event at the 14th United Nations Congress
on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice*

The impact of COVID-19 in prison settings - Mitigating risks and “building back better” –

Wednesday, 10 March 2021, 9.00 – 10.30 am
Conference Room A



More than 11 million people, including three million pre-trial detainees, are currently held in prisons across the globe. Prison overcrowding, which continues to affect a solid majority of Member States worldwide, constitutes an acute global human rights, health and security crisis. Together with poor prison conditions and the prevalent neglect of prison services, this has caused prisons to be a weak link in many criminal justice systems.



Unsurprisingly, prison settings have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to be at a severe risk of amplified transmissions and explosive outbreaks of the disease. Together with the introduction of highly restricted prison regimes, the continued application of the *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* has come under stress, with severe implications for the health, safety and security of prisoners as well as prison officers.



The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in prison settings has shown what happens when prison services that are already overburdened and ill-equipped are confronted with additional health or other crises. Addressing the challenges associated with incarceration and moving towards long-term prison and penal reform should therefore be a key part of the effort to “build back better” from the pandemic.

The objective of this high-level event will be to take stock of factors that have rendered prisons vulnerable to the pandemic in the first place; to examine current measures put in place to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 in prisons; and to provide a forum to “re-think” the current use of imprisonment with a view to address underlying chronic shortcomings.

This high-level event is organized by UNODC’s Division for Operations, in coordination with the Vienna-based Group of Friends of the Nelson Mandela Rules. High-level policymakers and senior representatives from prison services and relevant organizations will discuss both the unprecedented challenges which COVID-19 has created for prison management as well as related implications for future reform efforts.