

Additional Evidence for the Women and Equalities Committee on the impact of Coronavirus on BAME people

10/07/2020

Introduction

We are a group of specialist organisations with a longstanding interest in improving outcomes Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, in the criminal justice system. We welcome the chance to provide evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee in addition to the evidence submitted to the inquiry on the *Unequal Impact: coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics* earlier this year.

Although we recognise that this sub-inquiry is not looking specifically at the impact on BAME¹ people in the prison system, these groups represents part of our community who are overrepresented across the criminal justice system, and the impact of Coronavirus in prison has significant impact on them and their families. In light of the recent developments, we would like to bring this new evidence to your attention. Our submission relates to the experiences of BAME prison leavers and families of serving prisoners in England and Wales only. Where relevant we refer to our publications and reports by other organisations.

- 1. Factors that made BAME communities vulnerable to the effects of the virus, for example living in overcrowded housing, health inequality, deprivation;**
- 2. The impact of the pandemic on BAME communities, for example higher death rates, exposure to the virus;**

Over a quarter (27%) of the prison population, 22 619 people, are from a minority ethnic group. Underlying health conditions, prevalent among this group, make them more susceptible to Covid-19 in prisons, which have been a flashpoint in the battle against the virus across the world. The extend of the impact of Covid-19 on BAME prisoners and staff remains unknown as the official figures published by the MoJ does not include ethnicity breakdown of those who died and tested positive of Covid-19.

The recent data on Covid-19 related deaths in the community and in adult social care² both of which indicate overrepresentation of people from ethnic minorities. Prisons are particularly volatile places and those in their care, families and charities working with and representing people from minority ethnic communities, are anxious about the level of impact of Covid-19 in prison settings.

In the latest published document² for the period to 19 June, there had been a total of 44 deaths among HMPPS service users suspected to be due to Covid-19 and there have been a total of 510 symptomatic prisoners or children that tested positive for Covid-19, of which 500 were prisoners and 10 were children.

Data relating to the deaths of prison and probation officers is included in Office for National Statistics but does not identify this group as a separate category. However, HMPPS states that this data will be subsequently released in HMPPS Workforce Statistics release in August alongside Covid-19 related staff sickness data.

It has been sixteen weeks since the lockdown has been introduced on 23rd March. Many prisoners and their families still live through those restrictions which has enormous impact on their mental health and wellbeing. The lack of transparency from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) around Covid-19 related cases of death and serious illness adds further stress on their overall disappointment.

We have been working with ethnic minority communities in prison and outside during Covid-19, often being the first line of questioning from them about the missing data and the lack of accountability around Covid-19 in the criminal justice system.

Given also that Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) have not yet responded to our previous call for the publication of this data, we must yet again remind the importance of transparency about disproportionately severe impact of Covid-19 on BAME prisoners and staff and identify concrete actions for rectifying the underlying causes of it. Without such information, as we can now see, no plan is in place in prisons that gives confidence to families and BAME charities on how the prison service is going to protect lives of people disproportionately impacted by this terrible disease. Many of these families and practitioners have been themselves affected by the devastated impact of Coronavirus and in the context of ongoing events around structural racism, this lack of information heightens frustration and may damage already fragile trust in the authorities.

People are still dying or left with health implications due to Covid-19. It affects all of us not at the same level. BAME prisoners, their families and prison leavers are affected more than others both physically and emotionally. We want to see that the authorities recognise this disproportional impact and adequately respond to it by undertaking equality impact assessments on procedures in relation to this group.

Given the nature of the virus and the risk of a second wave we urge the Committee to call for:

- *Publication of the ethnicity data of those affected by Coronavirus in prisons.*
- *Appropriate risk assessments for BAME staff and prisoners.*
- *Clear action plan of how the needs of these groups will be identified and met.*
- Improved data collection for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller ethnic groups.

Signatories:

Ipswich & Suffolk Council for Racial Equality

Spark 2 Life

Project 507

The Traveller Movement

The Zahid Mubarek Trust

¹ We use the term 'BAME' to refer to communities with shared languages, cultures, religions, and practices including Gypsy, Roma and Irish Travellers. This is consistent with the terminology used in the Lammy review, by criminal justice agencies and most stakeholders that work in or around the criminal justice system. However, we recognise that this shorthand does not sufficiently reflect the diversity of those who would fall under this umbrella label.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-covid-19-statistics>

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/datasets/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales>

³The Care Quality Commission (CQC) published its second [COVID-19 Insight](#) report