

# **The Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into coronavirus and its impact on people with protected characteristics**

## **Working Group on Race Equality in Prisons during Covid-19**

The Working Group of specialist organisations and academics was established by the Zahid Mubarek Trust in April 2020. The group focuses on race equality in prisons during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The current crisis has led to inequalities and injustice becoming more acute. Across the prison system will see both policies and practices developed and implemented quickly, often without independent oversight and accountability.

We recognise the emerging risk of disproportionate negative impact of this pandemic on minority ethnic communities and come together as a collective voice to ensure that decisions during COVID 19 do not result in more adverse treatment of and outcomes for Black and minority ethnic prisoners now and in the months to come.

This response focuses on the experience of minority ethnic prisoners and staff and is informed by our knowledge and our ongoing communication with people involved in the criminal justice system. As a group of specialist organisations and individuals, we are currently working on monitoring and reporting the impact of Covid-19 on race equality in prisons.

- 1. How people have been affected by the illness or the response to it.**
- 2. If there have been specific impacts on people with protected characteristics.**

Over a quarter (27%) of the prison population, 22,619 people, are from a minority ethnic group<sup>1</sup>. 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 latest figures from the MoJ (as of 17:00 on Sunday 26 April) show that 324 prisoners have tested positive for COVID-19 across 71 prisons and 296 prison staff have tested positive for COVID-19 across 59 prisons. By 20 April, 13 Covid-19 related deaths were reported in prisons<sup>2</sup>.

Whereas the regular stakeholder communication from the Ministry of Justice is welcome and helpful, there is no official update regarding the impact of the pandemic on protected characteristic groups in prisons. This lack of information raises concerns around the possibility of a disproportionately negative impact of Covid-19 on minority ethnic prisoners and staff. Although the pandemic doesn't discriminate along racial, ethnic or social-cultural lines, existing structural and racial disparities and inequalities may lead to some communities being affected more than others. Early data from the US, broken down by race, is alarming. As of early April, 72% of Covid-19 related deaths in Chicago were within the black community, despite it only representing one-third of the city's population.

Emerging evidence from the UK suggests that COVID-19 is having a disproportionate effect on people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Early analysis also

points to an overrepresentation of minority ethnic health and care professionals among coronavirus fatalities.

Professor Richard Coker, in the reports commissioned by the Prison Reform Trust and Howard League for Penal Reform, warned that the risk to prisoners and staff from exposure to the virus is “far, far greater” than the risks to individuals in the wider community. As the number of prisoners and staff affected by Covid-19 continues to rise, it is important that the MoJ / HMPPS continue to collect and publish the data on the impact of the pandemic on criminal justice practitioners and prisoners from minority ethnic backgrounds, as they remain overrepresented in the ‘at-risk’ groups in the UK.

There are additional concerns around the disproportionate negative impact of Covid-19 on women in the criminal justice system as well as in the community. Many women specialised organisations have raised concerns around additional vulnerability for women who may be ‘at risk’ whilst living in the community, especially those who are ‘forced’ to stay in households with a potential or known abuser under lockdown. This is causing problems for agencies trying to offer support whilst there is a lack of alternative emergency accommodation. We would like the Committee to consider the impact the children of women who also may witness more abuse/violence within their homes under lockdown conditions. The women groups also have concerns for homeless women and whilst actively working with partners to provide temporary accommodation, they are faced with many challenges in doing so. There is no ethnicity breakdown of women impacted by domestic abuse and/or the lack of support from the state agencies. We also hear from community centres that there has been a reduction of women accessing their advice services which are currently being delivered ‘virtually’ (telephone/online). This might be that their support needs cannot be met if they are required to remain in a home where the other residents/family members may not be aware of their previous engagement with services.

From a family perspective, some of BAME families have raised their concerns about underlying health matters that their loved ones were either suffering from prior to imprisonment or had developed whilst in custody. The families are concerned about the current isolation/shielding processes in prisons and also what the process would be for any potential hospitalisation. Many families are not receiving any formal communication about their loved ones, especially those with underlying medical conditions, leading to frustration and anxious concern.

**The Government has said current measures will be reviewed in three weeks’ time, and measures in the Coronavirus Bill be voted on again in 6 months’ time.**

- 1. What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks’ time;**
- 2. What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months’ time.**

We recognise the challenges the pandemic poses in respect of prisons and we accept that staff, including frontline workers and prison governors, are doing their best to manage these. We also recognise that greater transparency and accountability is necessary during these times. We propose that the government undertake the following changes and improvements in the weeks to come:

1. Ensure greater transparency in identifying and mitigating potential risks among minority ethnic prisoners and staff, particularly from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Regular updates from HMPPS should include an ethnicity breakdown of people affected across the prison and probation service. This data should be extended to ethnicity monitoring of early releases, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller
2. Ensure that the voices of those directly affected by the crisis are heard. Ongoing inquiries into the impact of Covid-19 should hear oral evidence from specialist organisations representing minority ethnic communities, both in general, and specifically in the criminal justice system.
3. Ensure that specialised women organisations, especially BAME-led community organisations, are given the meaningful opportunity to contribute to the review process of services and procedures targeting women in the criminal justice system and in the community.
4. Ensure that family support services receive adequate and updated information to be shared with their service-users.

#### **Members of the ZMT Working Group on Race Equality in Prisons:**

**Yvonne MacNamara, The Traveller Movement**  
**Diane Curry, Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS)**  
**Neena Samota, St. Mary's University**  
**Raheel Mohammed, Maslaha**  
**Patrick Williams, Manchester Metropolitan University**  
**Anne Dunn, The Zahid Mubarek Trust**  
**Khatuna Tsintsadze, The Zahid Mubarek Trust**

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200420-coronavirus-why-some-racial-groups-are-more-vulnerable>

<sup>3</sup>[http://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/COKER\\_Report\\_HL\\_PRT.pdf](http://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/COKER_Report_HL_PRT.pdf)