IMUN 2025 Research Report

Human Rights Council Issue #4: The Question of Reforming Prison Infrastructure and Providing Adequate Healthcare to Prisoners

Prisoners and guards in all parts of the world are in danger due to outdated prison infrastructure, and a lack of support for prisoners. With 11.7 million people incarcerated globally, a significant percentage of the population is affected by policies made by the United Nations to address problems with incarceration. Recently, issues relating to overcrowding threaten to overwhelm LEDCs. Currently, 29% of countries are operating at 100-150% capacity, and 18% at greater than 150% capacity (UNODC, Data Matters). Overcrowded prisons are a strain on public infrastructure, and harmful not just for the prisoners, but those running them as well. They serve as a breeding ground for disease and can quickly turn a correctional facility into an underfunded hospital. But risks to prisons are present in MEDCs as well; in the United States and Canada, there are around 600 prisoners per 100,000 population, and only around 50 in Southeast Asia (UNODC, Data Matters). These kinds of disparities can serve as a real roadblock for societal growth, and a large percentage of incarcerated individuals doesn't necessarily lead to a reduction in crime long-term. With such a high crime rate, and so many deteriorating jailing systems, it is imperative that the United Nations works with governments around the world to provide lasting solutions to these glaringly unavoidable problems.

The United Nations has attempted to address these issues in the past. In 1955, the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders adopted the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, enshrining basic rights for prisoners. These rights most importantly included basic accommodations, medical services, and some

degree of contact with the outside world (UNODC, Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners). While they did help in small ways, the lives of most incarcerated individuals did not change. Violations of the documents were incredibly widespread, and accommodations for prisoners did not improve. In 2015, the UNGA revised the document and provided it with a new name: The Nelson Mandela Rules. The additions to the document renewed its relevance, bringing it into the modern age. The revisions included a ban on solitary confinement for over 15 days, greater respect for human dignity, basic mental health support, and external inspections.

Even with these further improvements, problems remain. Recently, in El Salvador, large scale arrests have left the rights of many new prisoners ignored, and a large number of prisons in the country violate the Nelson Mandela Rules (Human Rights Watch declaration on prison conditions in El Salvador). In Russia, political dissenters are denied contact with their families, and repression takes center stage in the treatment of prisoners (Amnesty International). In the United States, inmates are: “Disproportionately drawn from the most disadvantaged parts of society. On average, State inmates have fewer than 11 years of schooling. They are also vastly disproportionately black and brown” (The New Untouchables Crime: Punishment and Race in America). Delegates should focus on concrete ways to impact prisoners’ lives, rather than continuing to permit ambiguous and weak international regulations. Healthcare should be a priority, as many are denied a healthy life, a right they retain while they are imprisoned. Changes can be made, but it will take dedication and cooperation.

Works Cited

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