



# Covid-19 vaccine in prison: a not-to-be-missed opportunity to promote access to vaccination in adolescents

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Covid-19 vaccination campaigns for adolescents have been taking place in many countries for some months.<sup>1 2</sup> The WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on immunisation have called for vaccine prioritisation within countries to take into account the needs of those groups that, due to underlying social, ethnic, geographic, or biomedical factors, are at greater risk of getting infected or suffering most severe consequences from covid-19.<sup>3</sup> Since the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is considerably higher in prisons and detention facilities than elsewhere, adolescents who are detained in juvenile institutions should be prioritised for vaccination.<sup>4</sup>

Detained adolescents often come from marginalised groups of society with a considerable burden of ill health rooted in poverty and discrimination, and with limited access to healthcare.<sup>5</sup> The benefits of vaccinating adolescents in juvenile institutions include the direct benefits to their health and the indirect benefit of reducing onward transmission of SARS-CoV-2 within the prison community, including among prison staff, and in the community they belong. Furthermore, the implementation of the covid-19 vaccine in juvenile institutions is essential to upholding the principle of equity of care and to guarantee the right to health for those deprived of liberty, leaving no one behind.<sup>6</sup>

Covid-19 vaccination can also offer an opportunity to promote access to integrated care for detained adolescents, including other vaccinations and preventive services. Among adolescents transiting the juvenile prison system, a combination of age, risky health-related behaviours, and overcrowded living conditions, contribute to increased vulnerability to vaccine-preventable diseases such as pertussis, human papillomavirus, hepatitis B, meningococcal disease, and others.<sup>7</sup> Prison facilities offer the possibility to provide vaccination services to these adolescents, who may not otherwise engage with or have access to preventive health services.

Some of the main challenges towards vaccinating adolescents detained in juvenile institutions include: lack of attention paid to children/adolescents in detention; low perception of their health risk; the absence or suboptimal link between healthcare provision and information systems in detention facilities and in the community; obtaining consent for vaccination from their parents or legal guardians.<sup>8</sup> The latter barrier has been overcome mainly through two strategies: either the director of the institution takes the role of the legal guardian of the detained adolescents, or the detained minors directly express their consent to be vaccinated.

For most adolescents, a prison stay is a transitional period in their lives; therefore, coordination between

the prison facility and community healthcare services is essential to ensure accurate and timely monitoring of dose administration and completed vaccination schedules. The lack of efficient monitoring systems and integrated prison community immunisation information systems fails to effectively ensure that people receive the full course of vaccinations, and only a single dose. In the case of the covid-19 vaccine, it may prevent adolescents from acquiring an immunisation passport. In many countries, an immunisation passport is now required to travel and participate in social, public, and economic activities; therefore, to prevent existing societal inequalities and marginalisation being exacerbated, it should be made available and accessible to all, including adolescents in prisons.<sup>9</sup>

Universal access to vaccines throughout the life course is a regional and global objective.<sup>10</sup> Ensuring access to covid-19 vaccines in juvenile facilities represents an opportunity to set up, test, and implement tailored vaccination services that could be extended beyond the current pandemic, in order to improve health inequities, enhance preparedness, and protect public health.

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