



May 20, 2020

Dear Senator:

Following last week's passage in the U.S. House of Representatives of the *Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act* (HEROES Act), a historic relief package targeted at addressing the many harms wrought by COVID-19, and as the Senate considers future legislation to address the impact of COVID-19, we urge you to include measures that will protect those facing outside harm as a result of the pandemic: people in immigration detention and communities at heightened risk of gun violence.

Amnesty International is the world's largest grassroots human rights organization, comprising a global support base of millions of individual members, supporters, and activists in more than 150 countries and territories. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Amnesty International USA has launched "RightsNow," a campaign calling on President Trump and Congress to center human rights in the United States' COVID-19 response. Two urgent demands of this campaign include freeing people at risk of COVID-19 in immigration detention and increasing funding for vital community programs that work to prevent gun violence.

Immigration Detention

Currently, tens of thousands of people, including hundreds of families with children and thousands of asylum-seekers, are languishing in tinderbox-like conditions in detention facilities operated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), where social distancing is impossible, and soap and sanitizer come at a steep premium. Public health experts predict that, unless ICE drastically reduces the numbers of detained immigrants in its care, anywhere from 72 percent to nearly 100 percent of detainees in many ICE facilities could contract COVID-19, endangering their health and lives and overwhelming hospital capacity.

ICE has a well-documented history of medical abuse and neglect. Since the onset of the pandemic, ICE facilities have failed to provide detainees with sufficient soap and sanitizer, neglected to facilitate social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within crowded facilities, and continued to transfer detainees between facilities at grave risk to their health. ICE has continually refused to reduce its population to the level necessary to prevent potential massive spread.

In the face of ICE's inaction, **Senators must use their power to direct ICE to release detained immigrants** in the name of public health and human rights. Amnesty International USA calls on the Senate to include in its next supplemental COVID-19

package the provisions of the Federal Immigrant Release for Safety and Security Together (FIRST) Act, sponsored by Senator Cory Booker, which provides urgent and critical restrictions on immigration detention and enforcement during this unprecedented national public health emergency. Specifically, the Senate must prioritize:

- Language **mandating the release** of all individuals who are detained for solely migratory-related reasons, including individuals subject to mandatory detention (Sections 3 and 4 of the FIRST Act)
- Language **limiting ICE enforcement actions**, including at sensitive locations (Section 5 of the FIRST Act)
- Language **mandating the free provision of soap, sanitizer, and telephonic communications** while individuals remain in immigration detention (Section 6 of the FIRST Act; Section 191205 of the HEROES Act)

Preventing Gun Violence

Communities require increased support for gun violence intervention and prevention programs, focused on interrupting cycles of violence, as well as increased funding for direct services including mentorship to individuals at high risk of engaging in gun violence. These cost-effective programs have proven to be highly effective at reducing gun violence and saving lives. With sustained investment into these programs, the U.S. can make inroads to reducing gun violence in all communities.

Unfortunately, community-level firearm violence in the U.S. disproportionately impacts communities of color, particularly young black men. The causes of gun violence in communities of color are multi-faceted and informed by deep-seated issues around poverty and systemic discrimination. Further, firearm violence also causes a range of health problems throughout the affected community, increasing the burden on under-resourced services. Finally, victims of firearm violence and their partners and wider families often lack access to adequate psychological and physical care and proper follow-up to address these issues. Tackling entrenched firearm violence is a complex problem and requires community solutions.

Research indicates that sustained funding for evidence-based projects, tailored for specific local contexts, and working in partnership with the affected communities, can achieve significant and long-lasting reductions in firearm violence. The situation for life-saving community violence prevention organizations is even more dire in the wake of COVID-19. Many local programs are critically endangered from a lack of resources at a time when they are combatting not only gun violence, but also the spread of COVID-19 within their communities. Outreach workers on the front lines are continuing to prevent shootings while also educating their neighborhoods on important COVID-19 public health precautions. Many community-based violence intervention programs also rely on public spaces and transportation to reach at-risk youth in distant areas. Because of COVID-19, these community organizations have had to cut staff, programming, and outreach, drastically affecting their ability to curb gun violence.

The U.S. has a duty to take positive action to address gun violence, especially where models exist that could reduce it while making a long term and life-changing impact on systemically disenfranchised communities. To do this the Senate should:

- Appropriate at least \$150 million to community gun violence prevention and intervention programs for immediate use in Fiscal Year 2020 and establish similar levels of funding in future appropriations cycles.
- Pass legislation which supports regularized funding and implementation of evidence-based violence prevention and intervention programs annually, including passing the Break the Cycle of Violence Act (S. 2671).
- Establish a comprehensive strategy aimed at reducing gun violence, particularly in communities of color.

For further information on our recommendations regarding immigration detention, please contact Charanya Krishnaswami, Americas Advocacy Director, at ckrishna@aiusa.org. For further information on our recommendations regarding gun violence prevention, please contact Ryan Mace, Senior Policy Adviser, at rmace@aiusa.org.

Sincerely,



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