



“Mind the Gap” in reporting the outdated statistics

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Dear Editor,

Close cooperation between researchers and policy-makers to find the specific health needs of communities, would lead to taking evidence-based decisions in addressing communities' health problems. Publication errors, like reporting outdated statistics are among the key factors that influence effectiveness of such decisions.

During the data collection process for a global systematic review on HIV/AIDS in prisons, we came across a paper entitled “Implementing Methadone Maintenance Treatment in Prisons in Malaysia” (1) written by Wickersham *et al.* as a lesson from the field which had been published in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* in 2013. This paper is written in a perfect scientific style, and discusses an interesting less-researched area: substance use in prison. However, in this paper the authors have used outdated statistics and attributed these data to the today's Malaysia. Here, we comment on the debating statistics report in the setting and approach section of the above-mentioned manuscript.

First, number of the prisoners and the rate of incarceration per 100,000 were reported as 43,000 and 174, respectively. Although the authors have cited no reference for their report, it seems that these numbers are derived from the World Prison Population list of the International Center for Prison Studies (ICPS), published in 2005 (2). It should be noted that ICPS has updated the list of worldwide prison population four times in 2007 (3), 2009 (4), 2011 (5), and 2013 (6). Based on the ICPS reports, at the time of the publication of Wickersham's paper, there were 39,144 prisoners in Malaysia and the imprisonment rate was estimated to be 132 per 100,000 in this country. However, even if we suppose that the Wickersham's manuscript is written in 2012, the authors could use the ninth edition report published in 2011 and mention 38,387 prisoners and an imprisonment rate of 138 per 100,000 as the most updated statistics.

Second, the prevalence of HIV among Malaysian prisoners was reported as 6% in this paper. Wickersham *et al.* has obtained this prevalence from a study, which has got it from a systematic review (7). It seems that this rate has originally been calculated by Ng *et al.* published in 1999 in *International Journal of STDs and AIDS* (8). This indicates that the authors

have reported prevalence from 14 years prior to publication of their paper, and attributed this to the today's Malaysia using the simple present tense in their writing. A more thorough search would reveal a more recent prevalence of HIV among prisoners in Malaysia (9).

As the researchers, we are responsible for whatever we report and it should be considered that our reports might influence the reliability of the global estimations, and consequently lead to improper decisions taken by the policy-makers. Besides, this is the audience/readers right to be aware of the latest/updated reports.

Even if the authors do not have access to the updated statistics, we strongly suggest them to mention the year of the statistics to keep away the reader from misinforming, as well as to avoid using simple present tense in their writing.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

BM drafted the manuscript and all authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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