



Each year on December 10th, we celebrate Human Rights Day, which commemorates the day in 1948 — 72 years ago — that the United Nations adopted the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR). This year's theme is “Recover Better: Stand Up for Human Rights,” which recognizes the importance of ensuring human rights as we recover from the devastating impact of COVID-19. But Human Rights Day is also a reminder of the need to create opportunities for all and to address issues of inequality, exclusion and discrimination.

This **Did You Know Newsletter** highlights recent, noteworthy issues around the world where human rights intersect with behavioral health and social justice.

In light of this year's theme, we also invite you to view the #Together4Action2020 webinar “[Framing Global Mental Health: Policy and Practice through a Human Rights Lens](#)” presented by this year's [Max Hayman Award](#) Winner, Sofia Gruskin, in September 2020.

Civil Unrest

Globally, we've seen an increase in civil unrest in 2020, partly fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic. A new [analysis](#) identified “37 countries that will face major spikes in unrest during the second half of this year, driven by a painful post-pandemic economic recovery that will inflame existing public anger with governments.” Countries like the U.S., Chile, Nigeria, and Ethiopia are among a few that are a part of a “perfect storm” of COVID-19, economic turbulence, and long time structural problems that have not gone away.

- The U.S. has seen Black Lives Matter protests resurge during the pandemic. These protests have become the catalyst to [policy change](#) like Breonna's Law, with Virginia being the third state to pass a law banning no-knock warrants.

- During the pandemic, Chile's civil unrest has resulted in a [historic victory](#) for the Chileans after an overwhelming majority voted to rewrite their country's constitution.
- Ethiopia erupted in [protests](#) at the end of June after a popular singer and leading anti-government voice, Hachalu Hundessa, was shot and killed. At least 166 deaths were reported, but with government-mandated internet blackouts intended to quell uprisings, it was difficult for human rights groups to track the extent of the violence. A few months later, at the beginning of November, fighting broke out between the [Tigray](#) People's Liberation Front and the Ethiopian federal government. Still ongoing, the conflict has displaced a million Ethiopians and left even more without electricity, running water, communications or banking.
- A youth-led movement in Nigeria is demanding the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, known as [SARS](#), a notoriously corrupt police unit. In light of the country's youth's national outcry, the Nigerian government promised to commit to changes, but their response so far has only reinforced the views of protesters.

Justice Reform

The Ethics of Clinical Trials

In 1978, clinical research in correctional facilities was banned in response to decades of unethical studies that exploited the prison population. Restrictions remain, but in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many believe [it's time to reevaluate the regulations](#). Correctional facilities have difficulty minimizing exposure and spread of respiratory illnesses, and they have seen a COVID-19 case rate that is 5.5 times that of the general population. Those who are incarcerated are three times more likely to suffer other chronic health issues, such as diabetes and heart disease, increasing the likelihood of death if they contract COVID-19. Despite this, those in prison are not given the option to participate in clinical vaccine trials. Now may be the time to revisit this, taking necessary precautions to guard human rights and avoid exploitation.

See also: A [conversation on the ethics](#) of vaccine trials in prisons from *Science Magazine*.

Break the Chains

In October 2020, Human Rights Watch [launched a worldwide coalition](#) of organizations committed to [#breakthechains](#) of imprisoned or shackled people due to mental illness. The group seeks to advocate for and advance public policy and global practices to end human rights abuses, stigma, and discrimination against people with mental health conditions globally. View the more in-depth 56-page report [here](#).

Voting Rights

California's [Proposition 17 passed](#) in the latest election, restoring voting rights to people as soon as they're released from prison, even while on parole or probation. California now joins sixteen other states in allowing people who have been recently released from prison to vote.

What about the more than 745,000 people currently in jail in the U.S. awaiting trial? Despite most maintaining their voting rights, the majority did not vote in this last election. Many didn't know they could – or even how to go about it. The Marshall Project advocates for "[unlocking the vote](#)" in jails, asserting that the lack of transparency and action in the criminal justice system to help those in jail to vote is a form of voter suppression.

Immigration

U.S. - Mexico Border

As of December 2020, parents of [628 children](#), separated from their families at the border as part of the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy, cannot be found, according to a recent [court filing](#). Although the "zero tolerance" policy only ran from April to June 2018, it had been operating under a pilot program since 2017. Thousands of migrant families were separated, most of them under the pilot.

In June 2018, in response to a [suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#), the government was ordered to reunite all migrant families within 30 days. While thousands of families were reunified within weeks, [nearly 300 of these children's parents](#) are believed to have been removed from the U.S. after their children were taken away. Given the destructive effects of family separation, there's an urgent need to prioritize family reunification. President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to create a task force to reunite all migrant families separated "[on his first day as President.](#)"

Forced Sterilization of ICE Detainees

A [September whistleblower report](#), filed on behalf of a former employee, claims that an outside doctor allegedly performed unnecessary hysterectomies without consent on women being held by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia. The current U.S. Immigration detention policies violate human rights standards and echo severe healthcare provision concerns for detained immigrants.

The Opioid Crisis during COVID-19: U.S. and Canada

Amid ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic and drug-related overdose deaths have grown exponentially in the U.S. and Canada. These challenges highlight the need for a more proactive and coordinate approach focused on evidence-based, public health solutions. Learn more [here](#).

Housing Insecurity and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an economic crisis resulting in pay cuts and furloughs for millions of Americans, making it difficult to cover rent and other necessities. The Center for Economic and Policy Research documents that [roughly one-third of renters and one-in-six homeowners](#) reported housing insecurity in the early months of the pandemic. Combining data on renter- and owner- occupied households reveals that [racial and ethnic minority households are disproportionately affected](#) and have a much higher probability of experiencing housing insecurity – widening the U.S. health equity gap even further.

As a result, the CDC issued a [nationwide eviction moratorium](#) that expires at the end of the year. With this date approaching, many cities are preparing for a [surge in homelessness](#) starting in January 2021, which will likely result in overcrowded homeless shelters and increased rates of COVID-19 transmission. Although the problem of housing insecurity and homelessness is not new, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing conditions and disparities. Thus, more federal and local efforts are needed to address the critical needs of people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.