

Covid-19's Impact on People in Prison

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People who are incarcerated are at great risk of sickness and death as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and more must be done to release people who are imprisoned and are not a threat to public safety or are elderly or infirm. The inability to quarantine or practice social distancing, together with overcrowding, imperils the lives of many people incarcerated in jails and prisons.

Incarcerated people are infected by the coronavirus at a rate more than five times higher than the nation's overall rate. The death rate of inmates (39 deaths per 100,000) is also higher than the national rate (29 deaths per 100,000).

Nearly 160,000 incarcerated people and staff have been infected with coronavirus and at least 1,002 have died. While the number of deaths is increasing rapidly (it increased by about 40% over the past six weeks), it is likely even higher than the reported number because jails and prisons are conducting limited testing on incarcerated people. Many facilities won't test incarcerated people who die after showing symptoms of Covid-19.

The five largest outbreaks in the country are linked to correctional facilities, including Marion Correctional Institution, with 2,443 cases, Miami-Dade County Jail, with 2,099 cases, and Ohio's Pickaway Correctional Institution, with 1,791 cases. The largest known coronavirus cluster in the country is at California's San Quentin State Prison, where more than 2,600 incarcerated people and staff have been infected and 25 incarcerated people have died.

The virus is spreading rapidly in prisons and jails across the country, and the examples continue to mount. In Texas, when the state began testing every incarcerated person in June, the number of infected prisoners and staff more than quadrupled (to 7,900). By September 9, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported more than 21,000 positive cases and 145 deaths.

And nearly 60% of the 1,400 men incarcerated at Michigan's Lakeland Correctional Facility tested positive for Covid-19—that's at least 785 positive cases and 14 deaths. Lakeland is like hundreds of other prisons in America in its design and structure and the makeup of its incarcerated population. Located in Coldwater, it houses 1,403 people who have been sentenced to spend years, decades, or the rest of their lives in prison.

Many of these prisoners will die, as will thousands of other incarcerated people in the U.S. because of mass incarceration and our carceral policies. The pandemic has exposed serious problems with American incarceration that need to be addressed.

Overcrowding

At year-end 2018, the prison custody population in 25 states and the federal Bureau of Prisons had a total number of prisoners in custody that met or exceeded their minimum number of beds.

Because prisons have more people incarcerated than they were designed to hold, incarcerated

people are crammed into dorms and warehoused in rooms with bunks sometimes three beds high and only inches apart.

Social distancing is not an option under these conditions. And at Lakeland and many other prisons, it's impossible to quarantine large numbers of infected prisoners. As a result, the risk of infection for imprisoned people and correctional staff is extremely high.

Vulnerable Populations

After decades of extreme sentencing, older adults today make up a larger share of the state prison population than people age 18 to 24. Older people are at a higher risk of serious complications from Covid-19. Older people in prison are more likely to be in poor health and have limited access to quality medical services, which increases the risk of death in a public health crisis.

“Tough on crime” policies including three-strikes laws and truth-in-sentencing schemes have dramatically increased sentences for people convicted of felonies and significantly reduced eligibility for parole. Accordingly, the percentage of people in state prisons who are 55 and older more than tripled between 2000 and 2016—to nearly 150,000 older people incarcerated in state correctional facilities in 2016.

Generally, people in prison—where a lot of time is spent sitting around and food is typically poor quality—tend to be in worse health than those outside prison, The Lancet reports. Lack of access to quality medical care means that older people in prison suffer more often from chronic health conditions like hypertension, asthma, and diabetes that increase the risk of serious complications from the coronavirus.

Violence and Abuse

The Covid-19 crisis has reduced the number of correctional staff, and in many places states are unable to provide adequate security, which leads to more violence and abuse within jails and prisons.

In Alabama, which has the highest rate of prison homicide in the nation, two incarcerated men died violently in two different prisons in less than one week in March, and a third was killed in April. In June, 67-year-old Moses Knight became the 15th person murdered in an Alabama prison since the U.S. Department of Justice informed Alabama officials last year that the state's prison system “routinely violates the constitutional rights of prisoners” by failing to protect them from rampant violence and sexual abuse.

Jails

Jails are filled with people who have not been convicted of a crime, many of whom need medical care and social services that jails consistently fail to provide. Even without a public health crisis, too many people in jail are denied adequate medical care.

Cook County Jail in Chicago, one of the nation's largest jails, reported a rate of coronavirus infection that was higher than almost anywhere else in the country, with more than 1,018 people testing positive so far. Miami-Dade County Jail has the second-largest cluster of cases nationwide, with 2,443 cases.

A federal court ordered the Orange County Jail in Southern California to follow CDC guidelines to protect incarcerated people after the jail, which houses over 3,000 pretrial detainees and inmates, saw an increase of more than 300 confirmed cases in a little more than a month. Despite evidence that the jail misrepresented under oath the measures it was taking to combat the virus, the Supreme Court stayed the court order last week.