

Cook County Jail most crowded jail in the US

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Worsening social conditions in the Chicago area—due to unemployment, underemployment and federal and state budget cuts, in addition to an increase in aggressive policing—has the number of Chicago area inmates being held in Cook County Jail on a daily basis at its highest levels in six years.

With the daily number of detainees exceeding 10,000, the highest totals since 2007, Chicago is now home to the most populated single-site jail in the United States. In addition to the increase in jail population, inmates are held in Cook County jail about 20 percent longer than they were five years ago, due to the increased number of cases being moved through the courts.

The increase in number and social composition of those held in Cook County jail reflects the rise of social inequality in the city.

Mandatory sentencing for felony drug charges and a recent police crackdown in Chicago's poorer neighborhoods has contributed to Cook County jail admissions rising. With a legal system unable to process more cases due to the state's continuing budgetary woes, the population of Cook County Jail largely consists of detainees awaiting trial. According to the Cook County Sheriff's office, approximately 5 percent of detainees have been awaiting trial for more than two years. Seventy percent of current inmates are in jail for nonviolent offenses.

Of the more than 10,000 detainees held on a daily basis, greater than 2,000 suffer from mental illness and other health problems. In many cases, when a judge finds a detainee unfit to stand trial due to mental illness, the inmate is detained in Cook County jail for extended periods simply because no beds are available in state mental health treatment centers.

At Cermak Health Services, the county-run hospital on the jail grounds where inmates deemed to be suffering most severely from mental illness receive treatment, some patients sleep on mattresses on the

floor of the hospital.

The sharp increase in the number of individuals suffering from mental illness in the Cook County Jail population is the direct result of the 2012 closing of six Chicago-area mental health facilities—half of all of Chicago's mental health clinics—as well as the Tinley Park Mental Health Center. The destruction of these basic services has spotlighted the role of Cook County Jail in warehousing thousands of people suffering from mental illness who no longer have access to treatment.

Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart remarked, "We're sort of the receptacle of every conceivable problem in society here, and now the most convenient one for them to dump on us is the mentally ill."

Judges and attorneys have been moving criminal cases through the system with greater rapidity. A 2012 study conducted by the county's Justice Advisory Council found no hearing before a judge in Central Bond Court lasted more than three minutes, a de facto measure of the county's legal system. More than 700 pending cases in Central Bond Court are at least two years old, in addition to the dozens of new felony cases processed on a daily basis. These crudely brief and likewise anti-democratic hearings result in a legal system unable to adequately assess a defendant's situation.

Poverty is a significant contributor to the overcrowding problem. Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle said on publication of the 2012 study, "Bonds are set to protect the community and ensure the defendant appears for his or her trial. However, too many individuals facing nonviolent charges remain in custody, because they can't pay a low bail."

In March of this year, Cook County jail was just eight inmates away from full capacity. In an attempt to prevent the jail population exceeding its 10,150-inmate capacity, 324 detainees are housed at six other Illinois

jails, where Cook County Jail has rented beds and transported inmates.

Last year, 62,573 people went to jail in Cook County—approximately 1.2 percent of the entire county's population.



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