US prisons begin release of inmates after COVID-19 pandemic engulfs system

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On Monday the official total of positive COVID-19 cases in New York City prisons rose to 167 prisoners, 114 staff and 23 prison healthcare workers. The infamous Rikers Island, with a population of 4,740, now has the highest infection rate of any defined population globally, at almost 3 percent. Rikers' infection rate is almost 10 times more than New York City as a whole, which has an infection rate of 0.357 percent, according to the Legal Aid Society.

Given the scarcity of testing, the true case numbers are undoubtedly much higher. At least two prison workers have died in New York.

COVID-19 has spread throughout the prisons nationally. Cook County Jail in Illinois, as of March 29, had 101 cases among inmates and 12 among staff. March 29 also saw the first confirmed death of a federal prisoner from the disease, a 49-year-old inmate in Louisiana.

The spread of the virus and the first deaths within the prison system have prompted the release of prisoners across the United States. According to Mayor Bill de Blasio, New York City has released over 1,000 prisoners, lowering the number of incarcerated people in the city to fewer than 5,000 for the first time since 1949. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, whose state has 78 COVID-19 positive inmates at the time of this writing, signed an executive order calling for the immediate release of nonviolent prisoners.

The Los Angeles County sheriff's office has ordered similar measures and California Governor Gavin Newsom has ordered a stop to new prison admissions. New Jersey has also released over 1,000 inmates. Prisoners who are being released are not being tested for the virus.

These measures are haphazard and, in most cases, too little, too late. An acute outbreak of COVID-19 across US prisons is already taking place. Hundreds, if not thousands, of prisoners and prison staff will die as the result of the incompetence and negligence of the ruling class. Kelsey Kauffman, the director of education at Indiana Women's Prison, stated that the failure to release inmates earlier "may be considered one of the great public health tragedies of our time."

Although the New York City prison system is the epicenter of the crisis, the highly infectious nature of the disease and its uncontrolled spread through the national prison system, with its population of over 2 million people, mean this will become a national catastrophe.

Since the beginning of the outbreak in the US in January, countless warnings from prison and medical professionals about the dangers of inaction have been ignored. On March 6, the Prison Policy Initiative called for wide-ranging releases throughout the US. On March 15, the World Health Organization wrote, "Efforts to control COVID-19 in the community are likely to fail if strong infection prevention and control measures, adequate testing, treatment and care are not carried out." New York only began releasing prisoners in very small numbers on March 20, and most remain behind bars. The continuing failure to expand these measures will result in many more deaths.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the vulnerability of the prison population to infectious diseases had shown that a catastrophe was possible without strong corrective measures. Numerous outbreaks of meningitis, syphilis and tuberculosis have occurred in many US prisons since 2000. A 2011 paper, "The Rise of Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) in U.S. Correctional Populations," stated, "Strategies that focused on increased awareness, early detection and appropriate management, enhanced hygiene, and maintenance of a clean environment have proven successful in containing clusters and outbreaks."

The crowded and unsanitary conditions of prisons allow infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, to spread rapidly. Jimmy, a recently released inmate from Rikers Prison, told the *New York Times*: "You're on top of one another no matter what you do. There's no ventilation. If anything is floating, everybody gets it." He went on to say he had seen dormitories and holding pens with feces smeared across the walls. Official guidance instructing prisoners to keep at least 3 feet apart is impossible to follow. Fifty inmates typically share the same toilet, only three telephones and continue to eat together on cramped tables. In most US jailhouses, beds

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are typically less than 24 inches apart.

Prisoners have more underlying health conditions than the overall population, meaning that infection is more likely to be deadly. State and federal prisoners are 12 times more likely to have suffered from tuberculosis than the general population and three times more like to suffer from HIV/AIDS. Prison populations also suffer from increased rates of diabetes, hypertension and asthma.

The rapid spread of infection among a less healthy population means that the majority of cases requiring hospitalization and ventilators will come in a short period, putting additional strain on already under-resourced hospitals and healthcare workers. Again, this will increase the number of deaths.

Prison staff are also at increased risk of infection. Contrary to reports from New York City authorities, prison workers have not received promised personal protective equipment. A public health practitioner who works at Rikers Island told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “When I came to administer tests there were no masks and no gloves although I was told they would be provided. All the correctional officers that come in are in one line and not socially distanced. People are desperate to work as they need the money, so they do not want to admit if they do have symptoms nor take sick time. We are just having these tests to say they are testing; they aren’t doing anything to stop the spread.” These unprotected workers are at heightened risk of not only infecting themselves, but also their families when they return home.

Amy, a nurse whose son is currently in a New York state prison for a parole violation, told the WSWS: “My son has asthma and is a smoker. He got 18 months for missing curfew. In the prison he is regularly in a crowded cafeteria and has no access to hand sanitizer. He told me it is spreading like wildfire in there. We are waiting to see if he gets released, but there are so many vulnerable and sick people with him. I am really concerned about them; their lives could end in five minutes.”

Compounding the health crisis in the prisons, all New York City facilities will have various services curtailed due to the pandemic, including creative art therapy, access to caseworkers, age-based screenings for sexually transmitted infections, a program to combat intimate partner violence and new methadone treatments.

The rapid influx and outflow of prisoners through the national system mean prisons act as launching points for the disease’s spread through the wider population. Last year an estimated 10.6 million people cycled through American prisons.

The release of prisoners has incited a barrage of “law-and-order” demagogy from sections of the political establishment. In response to releases, US Attorney General William Barr stated, “Many inmates will be safer in Bureau of Prisons facilities where population is controlled and there is ready access to doctors and medical care.” These words, which ignore the mass privatization of prison healthcare in the past two decades and chronic shortages this has entailed, are facilitating potentially thousands of preventable deaths.

The entire political establishment, Republican and Democrat alike, is culpable in this disaster. Their shocking incompetence and callousness are not accidental or the product of ignorance. The delay in the release of prisoners, despite calls from the medical and prison community weeks ago, is an expression of their subservience to Wall Street, and particularly the corporations who benefit from the plentiful supply of hyper-exploited prison labor across the US. Indeed, it is the case that hundreds of thousands of innocent and nonviolent inmates are still behind bars under conditions where prisons are deadly breeding grounds for the pandemic.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the frontrunner for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, played a leading role in enacting multiple “crime bills” that have dramatically expanded the number of people imprisoned in the US.

The American prison system was in a deep crisis before the rapid spread of COVID-19. No society in human history has incarcerated as many of its own citizens as the United States. The COVID-19 outbreak—and the threat it poses to millions of lives in the prison system—is not just an act of nature, but the product of decades of the conscious subordination of correctional facilities to the profits of major corporations, leading to mass incarceration under atrocious prison conditions.

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