

US Bureau of Prisons implements 14-day national lockdown as coronavirus pandemic takes hold

Sam Dalton
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On Tuesday the United States Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) announced a 14-day national lockdown in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 among inmates in the federal incarceration system. The lockdown will affect about 170,000 prisoners, a small fraction of the 2.3 million imprisoned in the United States, most of them in prisons run by state governments and controlled by the governors.

The death of another inmate at the Oakdale Federal Correctional Institution in Louisiana was confirmed Wednesday, taking the total of deaths among those incarcerated at the prison to three. Nine inmates at the prison have tested positive and 32 more are exhibiting symptoms. The situation is so bad in Oakdale that the BOP has stopped testing for coronavirus and is assuming that anyone with symptoms has the disease.

The two-week lockdown order is part of a shift to Phase Five of the BOP's Pandemic Plan. Phase Four was only implemented on March 26, when the US death toll was already 578. Details of the heightened vulnerability of prisoners to infection and death from COVID-19 and the deadly implications of the continuing delayed release of non-violent prisoners can found here .

The nature of the lockdown is particularly concerning. The measures will leave prisoners isolated in individual cells for at least 23 hours a day. One prisoner's mother quoted her son's description of the new conditions on Twitter, "We are confined to our units. Staff must serve us our meals, take our laundry, give us our meds, deliver our commissary (if they feel like doing commissary)."

Prisoners at state and local facilities are equally at risk. At the infamous Rikers Island jail, run by the New York City Department of Correction, there are 184 confirmed cases among inmates and more than 137 staff members have been infected. The city's jails have an infection rate of nearly 4 percent. Hundreds more prisoners and prison workers have tested positive for the virus across the country. The chaos engulfing the penal system, the lack of testing, and orders

encouraging staff to remain silent on the effects of COVID-19 crisis mean these numbers are likely much higher.

A health care worker at Rikers Island told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "When prisoners are allowed out to use washroom facilities, 50 people are sharing one toilet. Soap isn't guaranteed, they aren't allowed hand sanitizer, it is true that people have smeared feces and there is regular flooding. It is totally unsanitary."

A public statement by a group called Formerly Incarcerated Prison Experts stressed, "Inhumane solitary confinement is not to be confused with medical isolation or quarantine. ... unsanitary conditions are even worse in cells designed for complete isolation." Lockdown measures will only worsen sanitary conditions for inmates.

On February 28, a statement from the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner warned, "These dehumanizing conditions of detention, sometimes euphemistically referred to as "segregation," "secure housing," the "hole" or "lockdown," are routinely used by US correctional facilities."

Solitary confinement is recognized as a form of torture by the United Nations and medical professionals. In *Psychology Today*, J. Wesley Boyd M.D., Ph.D., wrote, "Let's call it for what it is: Placing prisoners in solitary confinement is tantamount to torture and it needs to stop." On any given day, around 61,000 people are in solitary confinement in the federal and state prisons. The effect this has on prisoners is often catastrophic. For example, in Texas the suicide rate among those who have spent time in solitary confinement is five times high than the average.

The confinement of individuals, many of whom are likely already infected, in conditions where their health will further deteriorate, is no solution to the acute outbreak of the coronavirus in prisons. Furthermore, despite this confinement, prisoners and prison workers continue to be at heightened risk of infection due to failure of administrators

to provide basic personal protective equipment (PPE). Ultimately, the lockdown measures will only result in an increased number of deaths among the prison population and the further degradation of prisoners' mental health.

Many of those facing the possibility of infection are innocent individuals held in jail for inability to reach bail while awaiting trial or non-violent criminals, whose already draconian convictions for poverty and petty crimes are effectively being transformed into death sentences. This tragedy is the logical conclusion of the decades-long effort to criminalize poverty in the US justice system.

Prisoners who require services involving human-to-human contact are likely to be adversely affected by the measures, despite the BOP's announcement declaring, "to the extent practicable, inmates should still have access to programs and services that are offered under normal operating procedures."

A health worker at Rikers Island gave the WSWS a list of Correctional Health Service programs that have been canceled since March 18. These include screening for HIV and HCV, hepatitis C treatment and methadone treatment. Methadone is a drug used to treat recovering heroin addicts. Without access to methadone these individuals are at risk of death.

Similar measures have also been extended to juvenile detention centers (JDC) across the US. Sampson Kelly, a school administrator at a JDC in New Orleans described the worries of her pupils to *Newsweek*, "They're worried about being left behind. They're an afterthought. I think in the efforts to slow down the virus and be responsible, we just said, 'Kids, stay home,' but no one thought about our kids." Despite initial claims that youth were effectively provided immunity from COVID-19, the threat to young people is becoming ever more apparent. Last week a 17-year-old died in California, while on March 31 it was reported that a 13-year-old child in the UK died from the virus.

The BOP's announcement of the lockdown came one day after inmates at Rikers Island were offered \$6 per hour, a fortune by prison labor standards, and PPE to work as gravediggers on Hart Island. PPE is otherwise unavailable for prisoners. This is not the first time prison labor has been exploited by New York state authorities in response to this crisis. On March 9, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo bragged about the production of hand sanitizer for Corcraft by prisoners at Rikers Island who make as little as \$0.16 per hour. Due to the product's alcohol content, prisoners are still unable to use hand sanitizer to protect themselves anywhere in the US.

That prisoners, one of the most vulnerable layers of society, are paid insultingly low wages and blackmailed with the offer of lifesaving PPE to perform vital social functions

in times of acute crisis, shows that the capitalist system's response is incapable of extending beyond its requisite exploitation of labor.

Every prisoner and worker must be given PPE and tested immediately to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Those who pose no threat to others and test negative for the virus should be released immediately. Those who are positive should be placed in quarantine with adequate sanitation, access to communication and assured release when they cease to be contagious.

Regardless of legal status, every remaining and released inmate should be ensured access to high quality health care. Those inmates who have been released should be assured housing and the provision of food. Critical programs must be reinstated with full PPE provided to both prisoners and prison workers. These necessary measures must be accompanied by the wider demands of the working class.

The resources exist to achieve these measures. As Wall Street and big corporations enjoy trillion-dollar bailouts, all claims that neither money nor resources are available to ensure basic social rights to prisoners should be rejected as lies. In a total indictment of the capitalist system, the failure to take these measures earlier has already led to preventable deaths of prisoners and prison workers and has increased the likelihood of the disease spreading to their family and friends. Every hour of delay will undoubtedly be paid for by more.

The barbarity of the US prison system, which confines more people than any country in the world, is a morbid yardstick of the wider decay of capitalism in the epoch of imperialism. Only a government by and for the working class guided by a socialist perspective can assure prisoners' basic social rights. The mistreatment and hyperexploitation of society's most vulnerable has only intensified during the COVID-19 crisis.



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