

With private prison outbreak, Tennessee county leads US in per capita COVID-19 cases

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Two Tennessee counties, home to large prisons, have become epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

Trousdale County is currently number one in the county for COVID-19 cases based on population, according to Associated Press. The county has 1,363 confirmed infections because of the CoreCivic Trousdale Turner Correctional Center where almost 1,299 of 2,444 inmates and 50 workers have tested positive for the virus.

Only 13 cases to date in Trousdale County are not related to the prison.

Elsewhere in the state, Bledsoe County is currently fifth in the nation due to the Bledsoe County Correctional Complex, which accounts for 586 confirmed cases out of 604 prisoners tested, according to a county report. The complex of three prisons houses 2,539 prisoners and is operated by the Tennessee Department of Corrections.

There have been two prisoner deaths at the Trousdale facility and one at the Bledsoe County facility, according to news reports. Prison officials told the media that, remarkably, nearly all the Trousdale inmates completed 14 days of isolation without becoming ill.

Many find such figures impossible to believe.

In late March, when the *Nashville Scene* spoke to “Susan” who had a friend at the Trousdale facility, she correctly anticipated the pandemic’s impact at the prison even though there had not been a documented and reported case in the county.

“They can’t even handle a common cold, let alone a pandemic,” she said of prison officials.

The *Nashville Scene* reported that many prisoners were reluctant to report any symptoms to prison officials and that the state was slow to begin testing prisoners and prison staff. There are approximately 30,000 people currently in the state’s prison system, all of whom are at high risk of infection.

The mother of a man incarcerated at the Trousdale

facility made a moving post on the *Nashville Scene* website, noting, “the covid out break is gross negligence by Gov Bill Lee, TDOC and Core Civic. my son is at Trousdale and they have been on lock down and no visits from outside for more than 8 weeks. ... The perfect cover up by the sate [sic] to have us all believe 1200 plus inmates in one spot were asymptomatic. Core Civic is a private for profit prison, if 500 men die, the state will send them 500 more.”

A recent study by the ACLU predicts an additional 100,000 deaths in the US prison system alone if the country’s massive population is not significantly reduced.

Trousdale County, in north-middle Tennessee, has a population of about 9,500 and is geographically the smallest county in the state, with about 117 square miles (303 square kilometers). The annual median household income is \$53,000, and nearly 20 percent of the population live in poverty.

The CoreCivic prison was built on the site of what was to be the Hartsville Nuclear Power Plant, begun with land acquisitions in 1964 of 1,900 acres (220 ha), and closed uncompleted in 1984.

Bledsoe County, in southeast Tennessee, has a population of about 13,000 and a median household income of about \$43,000, and 27 percent of residents scrape by below the poverty line.

Poor, rural counties have often been Tennessee’s dumping grounds for everything from prisons to badly or unregulated landfills and hazardous waste businesses, often the only sources of full or auxiliary employment other than farming.

In her essay, “Building a Prison Economy in Rural America,” public policy researcher Tracy Huling observed that “there are more prisoners than farmers in some swaths of the United States.”

Huling also explained that starting in the 1990s, new prisons and jails appeared in rural areas at a rate of about

one every 15 days.

Wherever the for-profit prisons locate, corruption and misery follow like obedient dogs.

The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) was created in 1983 with the aid of investments from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Vanderbilt University and Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) founder Jack Massey.

Now called CoreCivic and with revenues of almost \$2 billion, the corporation operates some 65 state and federal correctional and detention facilities with a 90,000-prisoner capacity in 19 states and the District of Columbia.

Growing into a multibillion-dollar corporation, it has left a wake of prisoner abuses, poor pay and benefits, scandals, deaths and riots. No abuse was too small to overlook or inflict on prisoners and staff alike. A good example took place in Tennessee's capital.

In July 2017, prisoners and employees at the Nashville/Davidson County Jail had to resort to federal lawsuits to expose that CoreCivic had failed to respond to a chronic scabies outbreak in the city jail.

Scabies is an infestation of tiny mites that burrow into the skin and lay eggs, which leads to an “angry” rash and intense itching. The mites that cause highly contagious scabies can be killed with simple treatment, but CoreCivic preferred saving money to providing relief to inmates, jail workers, courthouse workers and their families.

This all occurred one year after the CCA board of directors—tired of carrying around the name CCA and its association with prisoner abuse for profit—decided in 2016 on rebranding its ugly but profitable business to the more palatable CoreCivic. In that same year, the Obama administration approved a no-bid \$1 billion contract to the corporation to detain Central American asylum seekers.



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