

US juvenile detention centers record 474 COVID-19 cases

Sam Dalton
25 May 2020

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is the highest authority overseeing juvenile detention in the United States. It describes its mission as “Enhancing safety. Ensuring accountability. Empowering youth.” In reality, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, the facilities overseen by the authority, the majority of which are privately owned, are continuing the senseless brutalization of children and allowing them to be exposed to COVID-19 and a plethora of adjacent issues that risks seriously impacting their long-term health.

According to prisonpolicy.org at least 48,000 individuals under the age of 18 are currently in correctional facilities. The vast majority of incarcerated youth are from a working-class background, with around two-thirds of offenders also relying on the child welfare system. Forty percent of youth who are incarcerated before their 18th birthday are in adult prisons by the age of 25. It is also the case that the poorest inmates are the most likely to re-offend.

Mirroring conditions in adult prisons, COVID-19 has spread rapidly through juvenile detention centers. According to sentencingproject.org, as of May 22 there were 474 cases among detained youth across the US, and 561 confirmed cases among staff. These numbers are huge underestimations of the virus’s true spread. While some states, such as New Jersey, claim to have tested all of its detained youth, the majority of states have not even nominally promised to address the deadly consequences of the contagion of the virus through their populations of incarcerated minors.

As the WSWWS reported on May 13, as more becomes known about the disease, initial declarations that youth face no risk from infection were proven reckless and incorrect. The disease is linked to an inflammatory syndrome similar to Kawasaki disease and can cause sepsis among younger patients. At least five children in

New York have died from these conditions following diagnosis with COVID-19.

In a study of 48 children and young adults admitted to intensive care units in the US and Canada for COVID-19, 20 percent experienced organ failure. The study’s co-author, Rutgers professor Lawrence C. Kleinman, stated, “The idea that COVID-19 is sparing of young people is just false.” Two of the children featured in the study died.

More than 500 of incarcerated children in the US are 12 years old or younger, while over 4,500 of under-18s locked up are actually incarcerated in adult facilities. Child inmates typically reside in large groups, with 60 percent of incarcerated youth in large facilities designed for over 50 inmates. This only increases the risk of infection from the virus. Two-thirds of youth incarcerations are “long-term,” meaning that individuals spend over a month at a facility, and nearly 10 percent are held for over a year. The turnover of young inmates, just like at regular prisons and jails, means these facilities act as vectors for the disease’s spread in the community.

The largest recorded outbreak has been in the juvenile detention center of Cook County Jail in the Chicago area. At least 14 cases have been confirmed among detained minors, including one in the general youth prison population on May 23. This means the majority of the center’s inmates have been exposed to a positive individual. There have also been 21 confirmed cases amongst employees at the center.

The juvenile detention center at the jail is part of a wider system at the location, which now has the highest infection rate of any defined population in the US, bypassing Rikers Island in New York in late April. Over 500 prisoners at the facility have tested positive, with at least seven dying. Despite the outbreak at least 4,200 inmates, including minors, remain in the prison.

Even in states that have claimed to address the situation facing incarcerated children there has been little action.

For example, in mid-April, both Maryland's highest court and Pennsylvania's Supreme Court denied emergency petitions to release inmates under 18 years old. At the end of April 27, just 200 youth inmates were released from incarceration facilities in the state, leaving 456 still locked up. The same pattern of hollow executive and court orders has plagued the US adult inmate population.

Even before the crisis, the conditions facing young inmates were particularly brutal. In a report, the Juvenile Law Center (JLC) stated that child inmates are often subjected to solitary confinement, a punishment that is recognized as a form of torture by the United Nations. Under the cover of social distancing, such measures have become increasingly prevalent in regular prisons, meaning the same is likely true of youth detention facilities.

Other measures implemented in the name of tackling the virus, such as the banning of family visits and restriction of phone calls, have led to further isolation from human contact. This is particularly damaging for children who are at sensitive periods of their social development. Furthermore, their academic progress, greatly hindered by incarceration before the crisis, will be further undermined by the indefinite postponement of all educational services throughout juvenile detention centers.

During the crisis, child prisoners will continue to face invasive and physically abusive measures such as strip searches, shackling and chemical sprays. The JLC describes the effects of these conditions, "These abusive practices cause physical injuries, emotional trauma and psychological harm, and interrupt healthy development." According to a 2016 Harvard study, since 2011, 13 states have violent and abusive conditions that are clearly documented.

Sexual abuse is also widespread in juvenile detention facilities. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2012 one in eight incarcerated young people reported sexual abuse by center staff or other inmates. The JLC report continues, "Youth in prison also face physical and sexual violence, compounding the trauma imposed by their isolation and separation from their families, friends and communities." Similarly, the Harvard report concluded that "Maltreatment is endemic and widespread."

The cost of housing incarcerated children is also extortionate. The annual cost of locking up one child is \$88,000, almost 10 times the yearly average expenditure per child in public schools. According to the National Juvenile Justice Center, nearly half of all youth detention

facilities are privately run. States' willingness to pay these exorbitant costs is a reflection of the influence private prison contractors have over bourgeois political authorities. Meanwhile, local police forces happily play their part by supplying a steady stream of inmates for which the taxpayer can be charged.

As is the case among adults, minorities are also targeted for arrest and incarcerated at higher rates. For example, American Indians comprise 3 percent of all incarcerated girls, and 1.5 percent of all incarcerated boys, despite making up less than 1 percent of the US child population. Black children under 18 are also more likely to be tried in adult courts than their counterparts. The cultivation of chauvinistic attitudes toward marginalized minorities among law enforcement is a crucial component of the effort to maintain a high inflow of inmates to ensure that private juvenile detention facilities remain profitable.

The continued brutalization of incarcerated youth, whose crimes are a product of dire social conditions and, for want of a better term, the inability to know better, is senseless. Rather than rehabilitation, admittance to a youth detention center is more likely to condemn a child to abuse and a lifetime of poverty and incarceration. The COVID-19 crisis has only further exposed this barbarous reality.

The primary cause of the brutalization of working-class youth and the conditions in juvenile detention centers is subordination of the justice system to the drive for profit that is endemic to the capitalist system. The fight against the brutal detention of all prisoners cannot be divorced from the struggle against the international profit system as a whole.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact