

Nearly 70,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases in US prisons

Sam Dalton
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According to new research from the UCLA COVID-19 Behind Bars project, the death rate in US prisons is 39 deaths per 100,000, as opposed to 29 per 100,000 in the wider population. When age-adjusted for the disproportionately young US prison population, inmates are three times more likely to die from the virus than the population as a whole.

According to the project, as of July 15, there have been over 68,900 confirmed infections across prisons in the US and at least 675 deaths. Reflecting the trend of a nation-wide resurgence of the virus following the criminal bipartisan reopening campaign, this figure is over double the 29,251 cases reported on May 29.

Testing has also been criminally inadequate. Just 382,749 of the over 2.3 million inmates in the US criminal justice system have been tested since the beginning of the pandemic. In crowded and unsanitary prison and jail conditions, where social distancing is near-impossible, without every single prisoner being tested regularly the true extent of the virus' spread cannot be known.

The latest tally has been collected from individual reports by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) on both jails and prisons at county, state and federal levels. Given the agency's reputation for opaque statistics, accusations of undercounting, and recorded instances of information suppression at both state and federal levels throughout the pandemic, it is likely the current infection rate and death toll are significant undercounts.

For many states, data for prisons has not been made available by the BOP. This includes Texas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Mississippi. All of these states have seen record daily new infections in the past two weeks. The BOP has also not released any data on deaths for prisons in New York and Massachusetts, states which have suffered 32,516 and 15,736 deaths

respectively.

Many of the most intense outbreaks in prisons have been in states experiencing a resurgence of the virus.

In California, where the daily confirmed infections exceeded 10,000 on July 8, Terminal Island prison has had ten deaths. An intense outbreak at the infamous San Quentin prison in Northern California has led to 2,032 confirmed cases and at least eleven deaths. At the California Institution for Men in Chino there have been 949 confirmed cases and seventeen deaths; the largest official death toll of any single incarceration facility in the country.

In Florida, where hospitals are now turning away ambulances due to a flood of COVID-19 patients, there are at least 2,632 prisoners infected. Exposing the influence of the deadly reopening campaign on prisons, the number of prison staff infected has doubled in just the last month to 885. Due to the increasing number of infected prison staff on quarantine, those left are being asked to work twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. While this number includes a large number of prison guards, it also includes social workers who provide vital services for the well-being of the inmates.

In North Carolina, which has had around 2,000 newly confirmed cases every day this week, Butner Low prison has had 677 infections and 16 deaths, while another adjoined facility, Butner Medium, has had 214 infections and at least nine deaths.

Federal prison facilities have also been hit hard. At the Elkton Federal Correctional Institution in Ohio, there have been nine deaths. This is the location where prisoners leaked harrowing footage documenting inmates struggling for breath and the construction of a temporary morgue. Following this leak, in what is still an unexplained episode, the National Guard were sent in to deal with a COVID-19 medical emergency. At

another federal facility in Fort Worth, Texas, there have been twelve deaths from the coronavirus.

In Houston, a lawsuit has also been taken out against a for-profit facility run by the Geo Group. The facility's management has been accused of threatening to discipline prisoners if they call health agencies to seek information on the virus and of covering up at least three COVID-19 deaths. Geo Group runs prisons and mental health institutions in the US, UK, South Africa and Australia and has an annual revenue of \$2.4 billion. In the US alone it manages 95,000 beds in prisons or halfway houses.

Since the onset of a federal prison lockdown on March 31, which was later followed by similar restrictions in state prisons and jails, inmates have lived in conditions of solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. Limitations on phone access and family visits have also left prisoners unable to communicate with the outside world.

There have been exceptions to this blackout, however. For example, in late June images were posed on Twitter that showed prisoners at Bradley County jail in Tennessee, holding up signs to cell exterior windows. One read, "Nobody is given underwear, socks, or bras! Women bleeding on themselves! Denied medical attention." While another read, "Fourteen-day quarantine, no tests, no masks, no way to communicate with outside or family. No court dates." The only response of the Bradley County's Sheriff's Office was to board up the windows. According to the BOP, there have been four COVID-19 deaths in Tennessee prisons.

The accelerating outbreak in prisons and jails is a product of two intersecting crimes of the American ruling class. The first is the broader reopening campaign, the deadly toll of which is beginning to be seen most acutely in California, Arizona, Texas and Florida. The second is the failure to enact a mass release of non-violent and elderly prisoners to allow for social distancing to limit the exposure of at-risk prisoners to the virus. Despite well-publicized executive orders from many state governors and US Attorney General William Barr, mass releases never actually happened.

In practice the treatment of the most vulnerable prisoners has been quite the opposite. In New York, last month 96 aging inmates were transferred to the Adirondack Correctional Facility, two hours from the

Canadian border. Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that the plan was implemented to protect the inmates from the virus. However, on July 8, one prisoner tested positive. Now they are many hours further away from their families and at high risk of infection and death. Given the virus' decimation of elderly populations in care homes in New York earlier this year, it is probable that large numbers of elderly prisoners will die from COVID-19.

In truth, the vast majority of prisoners who will die as a result of the latest national surge should have been released months ago. Indeed, many of them should not have been incarcerated in the first place.

The consequences of the criminal failure to enact a mass release are not just borne by prisoners themselves, however. Prisons also act as vectors for the spread of the disease in the wider population. An ACLU study published in April estimated that a failure to release inmates and implement effective measures within prisons would lead to a further 99,000 deaths in the US population at large. That figure assumes strict social distancing, tracing and testing to contain the virus. In the absence of such measures the study predicts 188,000 extra deaths.

Despite the advice of scientists and prison advocates, who have published clear step-by-step guidance to politicians since lockdowns began in March, no meaningful action has been taken to protect prisoners or the wider population from the virus. In line with the wider COVID-19 response, inaction in prisons was a conscious decision taken by Democratic and Republican politicians on behalf of the profit interests of the ruling class. For this they have the blood of hundreds of individuals on their hands.



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