

At least 735 COVID-19 deaths confirmed in US prison system

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As of July 28, throughout the US incarceration system, including all federal and state-run prisons and jails, at least 735 inmates have died from COVID-19 and there have been over 82,000 confirmed cases. On any day in the US, there are estimated to be 2.3 million incarcerated individuals.

Approximately 12,000 cases were added in the last week alone, a 16 percent increase from the total on July 21. This is nearly double the worst week during the April peak of the virus and an increase of nearly 10,000 compared to the week of June 16.

The exponential growth of the infection and death-rates in prisons is intimately tied to COVID-19's spread in the wider community. The states which have experienced the deadliest resurgences following deadly economic reopening overseen by Republican and Democratic governors have seen the highest number of deaths and infections in their prisons and jails.

In the last three days alone, as the state passed 450,000 infections overall, 10 inmates in Florida prisons died from COVID-19, bringing the state's total to 46 prisoner deaths. At the Columbia Correctional Institute in Lake City at least three men have died. The Florida Department of Corrections refused to publicly recognize any inmate deaths before a local medical examiner leaked them to the News Service of Florida. Cynthia Cooper, whose husband is incarcerated at the facility, told the *Tampa Bay Times*, "I never thought I'd see the day when I was afraid of something more than him just being in prison. But it's come to that."

The accelerating crisis in the state is a product of the criminal response of state authorities to the virus. Despite a population of over 96,000 inmates, statewide only 43,272 COVID-19 tests have been administered since the beginning of the pandemic. Furthermore, health and prison experts' recommendation that all non-

violent and at-risk criminals be immediately released has been ignored. On April 2, Republican Governor and Trump acolyte Ron DeSantis responded to desperate pleas to reduce the prison population to slow the virus' spread, stating, "I don't see how in a time of pandemic, where people are on edge already, [that] releasing felons in society would make a whole lot of sense."

The reluctance is undoubtedly tied to the profitability of Florida's prison labor. Every year, 3,500 inmates in the state perform unpaid work, logging 17.7 million hours in the last five years and generating around \$450 million in value according to the *Florida Times-Union*. This does not take into account the state's thousands-strong share of the US's "paid" prison workers who typically earn between \$0.14 and \$1.50 an hour.

In California, where there have now been over 475,000 confirmed coronavirus infections, prisons have also seen an intensifying death rate. The California Institute for Men in Chino has 1,047 confirmed cases and 19 deaths. While at the infamous San Quentin prison, at least 19 inmates have died from the virus, including 10 who were on death row. Despite Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's March 2019 moratorium on executions, the state has allowed the virus to do its dirty work.

In response to the outbreak at the prison, the state has converted a building at the prison into a 110-bed alternative care site. An external vendor has also been hired to give the prison a one-time deep clean. This is too little, too late. Of the prison's 3,800 inmates, 2,185 have tested positive for the virus.

The hardest hit section of the prison system in the country is in Texas, which has seen over 100 deaths at just state-run facilities. The state now has over 400,000 confirmed cases, and in recent days revised its death count up 12 percent after changing its reporting. The

federal prison at Fort Worth has also seen 12 deaths. State authorities continue to refuse to release more specific data on the numbers of deaths and infections at individual facilities.

Ohio, which now has at least 88,000 cases, is home to the Pickaway Correctional Institute, where 36 inmates have died from the virus. Also in the state, Marion Correction Institute has seen 13 deaths. Two other prisons in the state, Belmont Correctional Institute and Franklin Medical Center, have had over 10 deaths each. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP)-run Elkton Correction Institute, has also had 10 deaths. These deaths mostly occurred during the April/May peak. With the virus again surging in the state and daily cases now exceeding their April peak, a second spike in Ohio prison deaths is on the horizon.

Although the information coming out of prisons is often sparse due to heightened restrictions on visitation and phone access nationwide, it is clear that prisoners are beginning to fight back. On July 23, prisoners at the Whetstone Unit in Tucson, Arizona, staged a walkout following the spread of COVID-19 in the facility. At the Tucson facility, over 100 inmates have tested positive for the virus. Cases in the state surpassed 168,000 on Thursday.

In the past week, BOP facilities passed the grim milestone of 100 deaths. The federal prison system had over 129,000 inmates before the pandemic. Despite an order from Attorney General William Barr for the mass release of federal prisoners, the BOP has released just 7,000 inmates since the beginning of the pandemic. Similarly, well-publicized executive orders for prison releases from both Democratic and Republican governors have not resulted in necessary releases.

There are many reasons to believe the current figures are a huge underestimate of the actual toll of the virus. In one recorded incidence, a prison staff member died from COVID-related symptoms but was only tested post-mortem. Despite the positive result the death was not classified as a COVID-19 death. Across all facilities in the US, at least 59 prison staff have died from the virus.

There also seem to be huge statistical anomalies when states' prison death-rates are compared. It remains unclear how, for example, the gulf between the death rates of New York and New Jersey is so large. These two adjacent states were among the hardest hit during

the April/May peak, and while New Jersey has a death rate of 27 per 10,000 inmates, New York has just four per 10,000. This came despite Rikers Island Jail in New York City having the highest rate of infection for any defined population worldwide during April. Other states that were hit hard during the same period have death rates comparable to New Jersey; for example, Ohio and Michigan both have 18 deaths per 10,000 inmates.

The unabated spread of the virus in prisons is a violation of inmates' basic rights to quality medical care and freedom from cruel and unusual punishment. The vast majority of those incarcerated are non-violent and should never have seen the inside of a prison cell. Nonetheless, they now face a death sentence. The failure to take basic measures to fight against the virus in prisons has also allowed them to become vectors for the disease's spread, leading to an incalculable acceleration and expansion of community transmission throughout the US.

These deaths have no innocent explanation. They are a product of the ruling class' conscious subordination of human life to the profit system. In the case of prisons, the need for the continued incarceration of prison laborers, the use of prisons as a deterrent to keep the working class in check, and the deliberate decision to not provide adequate resources to combat the virus in prisons—as in the country at large—has led to otherwise preventable deaths. Without immediate emergency measures, thousands more lives both in and outside of prisons will be lost.



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