

COVID-19 cases surge 340 percent among ICE detainees in one week

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According to the most recent federal data, an estimated 1,254 people currently held in US immigrant detention centers have tested positive for COVID-19, an increase of 340 percent from a week earlier.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is presently detaining 22,142 people, of which 285 were in isolation or being monitored after testing positive for coronavirus as of January 3. This figure jumped by more than four times after multiple outbreaks were reported at ICE jails in Texas and Arizona, according to ICE's website.

The Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes City, Texas, reported the largest outbreak with 135 people testing positive. The La Palma Correctional Facility in Eloy, Arizona, and the South Texas Family Residential Center also reported 95 and 50 confirmed cases, respectively.

In 2020, researchers using ICE's detainee population data from its 111 facilities determined that once COVID-19 enters a facility, 72 percent of the detainees would be infected within three months, based on optimistic circumstances. Using estimates based on higher transmissibility, researchers found that the entire inmate population would be infected within the same time period.

Given that the Omicron variant is more contagious than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus, it is likely that the recent surge in infections is related. However, authorities have not commented on how many cases are indeed the result of Omicron infections.

Since the start of 2022, the number of infections among immigrants detained by ICE has increased by 520 percent bringing the total to 1,776 immigrants being monitored or isolated due to the virus. The number of infected is currently 8 percent of the total number of detained immigrants being held by ICE.

According to ICE's data, more than 32,000 immigrants have been infected in detention centers since the start of the pandemic in early 2020 with 11 coronavirus-related deaths.

Unpublished ICE data obtained by CBS News revealed that 48,246 detainees received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose. The agency began to offer a booster shot in late November and as of January 5, 671 detainees have received it. Most immigrants in ICE custody do not stay long enough to warrant a booster shot because the average stay is about a month, according to ICE.

The agency has not revealed how many immigrants in custody are currently vaccinated but did say that the number of detainees who have received at least one dose has more than doubled since August 2021. However, the 48,246 vaccinated detainees only account for one-third of the 141,000 immigrants who have entered ICE custody after July 2021, when the agency received its first allotment of federal vaccines for detainees.

Prior to this, ICE relied on state and local vaccine distributors to inoculate a limited number of immigrant detainees. According to ICE records, 37.6 percent of immigrants offered the vaccine have refused it. Public health advocates point out that skepticism of vaccines and miseducation have prompted some to refuse the vaccine.

In addition, lawyers across the country have fought for some detainees to be released on health grounds, with conditions ranging from inflammatory bowel syndrome and diabetes to post-traumatic stress syndrome, all of which have been denied by ICE because of detainees' criminal histories.

It was revealed by documents provided to lawyers in a federal court case that there were 5,200 immigrants in

ICE detention since late December whose health issues or age put them at a higher risk of becoming very sick or dying if they contracted COVID-19.

Around 76 percent of ICE's 22,000 detainees do not have criminal records and many have been transferred from custody.

While the Biden administration has publicly backed away from some of the more nakedly cruel immigration practices of the Trump era, conditions and medical services at ICE jails and facilities remain poor. A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General report from September 2021 found that inspected ICE facilities did not follow all coronavirus mitigation rules.

Meanwhile, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has not been systematically providing coronavirus testing or vaccination to immigrants in its custody by arguing that its facilities are designed only for short-term custody.

Not until last month did CBP begin offering vaccines to a limited number of migrants in the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" policy started by Trump and recently resumed by Biden, which forces migrants to wait in Mexico for their asylum hearings.



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