

US prisoner deaths rose more than 60 percent from 2019 to 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic

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Deaths of prison inmates increased over 60 percent in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic according to a new report by the UCLA School of Law's Behind Bars Data Project. Data acquired by the project, which in many cases exceeds the data reported on by states and prisons themselves, indicates that 6,182 imprisoned people died behind bars in 2020 compared to 4,240 in 2019, a 62 percent increase despite a 10 percent decline in the prison population.

This increase in prison mortality was led by 16 states which saw an increase in inmate deaths of more than 90 percent. Notable among these are Michigan, which saw a 130 percent increase with 131 more deaths in 2020 than in 2019, and New Jersey, which saw an increase of 142 percent with 47 more deaths than in 2019.

The collection and reporting of this data is a significant achievement that compiles invaluable information about the cost in life that the pandemic has taken on prison populations. Many states have stopped reporting publicly on COVID deaths and data on deaths in prisons can be difficult to acquire. The Bureau of Justice Statistics used to take detailed records of inmate deaths for monitoring of health and safety but stopped in 2019, leaving a large gap between the real numbers of inmate fatalities and the official figures reported by government agencies.

Missouri, a state with over 23,000 prison inmates, declined requests from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) to provide data on COVID deaths, and both Pennsylvania and Georgia claimed that they did not have or could not access data on COVID deaths in prisons to provide to the BJS. Additionally, no data was collected from privately run prisons operating under federal contracts, making accurate reporting on deaths

of incarcerated individuals virtually impossible.

The Behind Bars Data Project used a variety of methods, including extensive public record requests from state agencies, to collect their data at the facility level and make it available to the public, collecting data at a scale and accuracy that has not been available for years.

From this research the project was able to identify that 1,942 more deaths occurred in 2020 over 2019, a 47 percent increase in the total number of deaths. However, many jails and prisons released a limited number of inmates in response to the rapid spread of the virus, resulting in a 10 percent decrease in the total prison population in 2020. Adjusting for this change in population, the crude death rate rose 62 percent to 47 deaths per 10,000 inmates.

This is significantly higher than previous estimates of deaths for incarcerated individuals by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which has placed the death rate of inmates at 15 deaths per 10,000, and is nearly four times higher than the average 12.5 per 10,000 for the rest of the United States.

The driving cause of this increased death rate was the spread of COVID-19 through the country's overcrowded and unsanitary prisons. Nationally, federal prisons were 23 percent above capacity in 2020, with similar problems at the state level. In California, 24 of the state's 35 prisons exceeded 100 percent capacity.

Overcrowding allowed for COVID-19 to spread rapidly, with at least 641,890 infections and nearly 3,000 coronavirus deaths in US prisons as of February 17 according to The COVID Prison Project. The real figure is likely higher due to common problems with

the underreporting of case numbers and the dismantling of all COVID mitigation measures by the Biden administration.

When waves of infections made their way through prisons there was little public health infrastructure to deal with the outbreaks. Prior to the pandemic, illness was the cause of 79 percent of deaths among incarcerated people. A significant component of this is that prisons lack adequate medical services to care for patients, particularly the growing population of those over the age of 55, which has risen from 5.1 percent of prisoners in 2004 to 12.8 percent in 2016.

The care provided to inmates in prisons is so paltry that a federal court found in 2002 that California's state prison system provided such low quality medical care that it violated the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution barring "cruel and unusual punishment." The prison's medical system remains in an abysmal state more than 20 years after the court ruling. Such poor medical services are not uncommon among state and federal prisons in the United States.

The latest revelations about the extent of deaths caused by the pandemic in prisons are reflective of the criminal policy of malign neglect pursued by the Trump and Biden administrations and the ruling class as a whole. Sections of the population that are considered expendable—prisoners, the elderly, those with medical problems, and the working class as a whole—are allowed to be killed or maimed by a dangerous virus in order to keep the economy open and profits flowing.

The Behind Bars Data Project plans to continue its research for the next two years to bring data from 2021-2023 to the public. However, as of January 18 the project will no longer record data on deaths from COVID-19.



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