

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/detention-may-become-death-sentence-for-vulnerable-detainees>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

COVID-19 has appeared in the United States massive immigrant detention system, which holds tens of thousands of immigrants in prison-like conditions that leave them vulnerable to the virus. On March 24, an immigrant who is detained in New Jersey tested positive for coronavirus.

Immediate action is needed to prevent the spread of this disease among other people in detention who cannot protect themselves.

Even under normal circumstances, imprisoning immigrants who are in deportation proceedings is cruel. People including those who may have legal standing to remain in the United States languish for weeks, months, or years. The majority have no legal representation. They are not allowed to hug their children.

Now, with the threat of COVID-19, detention may become a death sentence. Conditions inside detention facilities, where people are [crowded in close quarters](#) with limited access to soap and sanitizing agents, create high risk for rapid spread of this dangerous virus. That's why Vera created [guidance](#) for preventive and responsive measures that can protect those confined in the United States vast immigration detention system.

Medical care in immigrant detention facilities across the country has been widely criticized by [people in detention](#), [medical professionals](#), and [internal whistleblowers](#). Government [reports](#) describe dangerous overcrowding, deprivation, and unsanitary conditions. Human rights attorneys and advocates call the conditions in many facilities [inhumane](#).

Last year, after a surprise inspection, the Office of Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [reported](#) egregious food safety issues and facility conditions that endanger the health of people detained at the Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark. Last week, immigrants held there organized a hunger strike in response to a lack of basic sanitation measures that could help prevent the spread of highly contagious coronavirus. We are not criminals, read a [statement](#) publicized by The Bronx Defenders on March 17. We are here on a civil matter not criminal. We shouldn't have to stay locked up during [a] deadly pandemic.

Last year, U.S. Customs and Border Protection [dismissed](#) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation that migrants in border detention facilities be offered flu vaccinations. There is little expectation that such facilities, and others that detain immigrants across the country, can keep them safe during an outbreak of coronavirus.

To protect immigrants in detention, Vera calls on immigration officials to immediately release everyone from ICE custody, prioritizing anyone with vulnerabilities including those who are 55 years and older, pregnant, have serious chronic medical conditions, or are housed in units that restrict their access to medical care. This would represent a return to more humane policies of the past, when few immigrants were held in prison-like conditions as they waited for the chance to prove their legal status.

Here is a [link](#) to Vera's full list of recommendations to stop the spread of coronavirus in vulnerable immigrant populations.

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