

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/covid-19-cases-increasing-dramatically-in-prisons/>

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06.24.20

[Protestors demonstrated](#) to raise awareness about the spread of Covid-19 inside Ohio's Marion Correctional Institution.

Coronavirus cases have risen sharply in prisons and jails across the country in recent weeks, jeopardizing the health and safety of thousands of vulnerable people.

According to data [collected](#) by The New York Times, the number of incarcerated people known to be infected with Covid-19 has doubled during the past month to more than 68,000. Deaths have risen by 73% since mid-May. The [five largest known clusters](#) of the virus in the U.S. to date have been inside correctional institutions.

And these numbers could continue to escalate. In recent weeks, demonstrations across the country have led to [more than 9,000 arrests](#). Protestors from Los Angeles to Dallas to New York have reported [dangerous detention conditions](#), including long periods restrained in cramped communal spaces where social distancing is impossible.

The Times [reports](#) that the spread of Covid-19 in prisons and jails has been facilitated by corrections officials' inconsistent response to testing and care for incarcerated people and staff. In contrast with cruise ships, nursing homes, and meat processing plants that closed down and implemented compulsory testing in response to outbreaks, testing has been extremely limited inside most prisons.

Prison systems in Illinois, Mississippi, and Alabama have tested fewer than 2.5% of incarcerated people. New York has tested about 3% of its 40,000 incarcerated people and more than 40% tested positive, the Times reports.

California has tested one in six of its 114,000 incarcerated people statewide, but has done mass testing at only a handful of facilities where infections have been found, according to the Times. At one of those, the California Institution for Men in Chino, nearly 875 people tested positive and 13 have died. People incarcerated in California prisons told reporters that prison staff have sometimes refused to test them, even after they showed symptoms consistent with Covid-19.

We have really no true idea of how bad the problem is because most places are not yet testing the way they should, Dr. Homer Venters, former chief medical officer for the New York City jail system, told the Times. I think a lot of times some of the operational challenges of either not having adequate quarantine policies or adequate medical isolation policies are so vexing that places simply decide that they can just throw up their hands.

According to the Times database, prisons that have conducted mass testing have found that about one in seven inmates have tested positive for the virus. In Texas, the number of infected prisoners and staff has more than quadrupled to 7,900 in the three weeks since the state committed to test every incarcerated person.

The nation's prisons and jails are especially vulnerable to the coronavirus because they are often overcrowded and unsanitary, social distancing is impractical or impossible, bathrooms and day rooms are shared by hundreds of inmates, and access to soap, cleaning supplies, and PPE is extremely limited. Many incarcerated people are 60 or older, and many suffer from respiratory illnesses or heart conditions that put them at risk of developing severe cases of Covid-19.

Tags:

[Prison Conditions](#)

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