

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/leaders-must-act-now-to-reduce-covid-19-behind-bars>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

We can combat COVID-19 in state and federal prisons, local jails, and immigrant detention centers to protect all people and save countless lives, but it requires immediate and decisive action by federal, state, and local government officials.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, 63-year-old Ronnie Lauderdale was incarcerated at FMC Lexington in Kentucky, a federal facility that houses people requiring care for existing medical conditions. Many of these conditions like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease place residents at high risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing severe symptoms.

Locked in a setting where social distancing is impossible and personal protective equipment (PPE) scarce, [Ronnie explained how the virus quickly took hold](#). Almost as soon as they'd heard about COVID-19 in the outside community, 60 incarcerated people in Ronnie's wing of the prison including Ronnie had contracted the virus. Several died, including some people who never received medical care.

Ronnie's story, and that of FMC Lexington, is not unique. There have been [more than 250,000](#) coronavirus cases and at least 1,450 known deaths in jails and prisons, and the [rates in ICE detention centers](#) are similarly stark. Undoubtedly, these figures are an undercount of the actual human toll.

The crowded and congregate nature of jails, prisons, and detention centers poses a unique threat for the infection and spread of COVID-19. Outbreaks in correctional facilities lead directly to [community spread](#), endangering incarcerated people, corrections staff, and loved ones in the community.

Vera joined the recent [American Election Eve Poll](#), conducted by Latino Decisions, the African American Research Collaborative, Asian American Decisions, and the National Congress of American Indians, to poll voters on their priorities. Unsurprisingly, Americans rated tackling the COVID-19 crisis the single most critical issue for the next administration. And voters overwhelmingly support implementing a public health strategy that benefits both citizens and non-citizens alike. There is also widespread support for decarceration: [more than two-thirds of all voters](#) agreed that the government should take action to reduce the number of people behind bars.

We can combat COVID-19 in state and federal prisons, local jails, and immigrant detention centers to protect all people and save countless lives, but it requires immediate and decisive action by federal, state, and local government officials.

Our leaders, including the incoming Biden-Harris administration, must reduce the number of people behind bars by endorsing policies to stop conducting immigration raids, making needless arrests, and seeking detention and incarceration as the default. They must champion pretrial reform, release people early from jail and prison sentences, and use the power of clemency. To stem the spread of COVID-19 for people who remain incarcerated, government officials must stop transferring people in custody between facilities and provide PPE to everyone. Finally, they must plan correctional operations to manage for social distancing, not social isolation or punishment. Each of these steps can reduce the spread of COVID-19 among incarcerated and detained people, as well as the people who work in these facilities and, by extension, in communities nationwide.

Taking action now will make a real difference in the lives of the 2.3 million people behind bars today.

Before falling ill with COVID-19, Ronnie had petitioned for compassionate release. His request was granted, and he was allowed to return home less than two weeks after recovering from COVID-19. It's time for government leaders to give others that same chance.

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