

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/states-should-prioritize-incarcerated-people-for-covid-19-vaccine-distribution>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Incarcerated people are no less valuable than the staff of America's jails and prisons. Yet some decision makers are moving to create an inhumane hierarchy of COVID-19 vaccine distribution that excludes them, even though they are especially vulnerable.

Documents [reveal](#) that the Federal Bureau of Prisons system plans to give its initial supply of vaccines to its staff. Some state leaders say they will exclude incarcerated people from their vaccine priority groups, in violation of CDC recommendations that people who live and work in congregate settings ought to be vaccinated first.

These irrational plans are emblematic of how America often treats imprisoned people as less than human and unworthy of basic safety and dignity. Only six states have prioritized people in prison as phase one recipients of the vaccine. Yet, the 2.3 million people who are incarcerated across the United States are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 because they are housed in crowded quarters with no power to social distance and limited access to masks and hygiene products. Many of these people are held simply because they cannot afford bail: in our nation's jails, more than [450,000 people](#) have not been convicted of any crime.

At the beginning of the pandemic, [medical experts recommended](#) vast reductions in the number of people confined in jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some efforts were made, but they fell far short of what was needed to prevent unnecessary suffering and death among incarcerated populations, a disproportionate number of whom are Black and Latinx. As vaccines become available, the country should not repeat its mistakes of malign neglect.

Incarcerated people sickened by COVID-19 vastly outnumber sickened staff. In the [federal prison system](#), for example, more than 21,000 incarcerated people have tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered, and 146 have died. By comparison, 2,043 staff have tested positive, and two have died. As of [December 2](#), there have been 224,397 COVID-19 cases among people in American prisons, and 1,534 have died. Providing vaccines to corrections officers while leaving incarcerated people vulnerable does not make sense from a public health perspective or a human one.

The [American Medical Association](#) has called for vaccines to be given to both incarcerated people and employees in jails, prisons, and detention facilities. The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security placed incarcerated people as a [priority group](#) in its proposed framework for vaccine allocation and distribution.

States, which have until Friday to finalize COVID-19 vaccine distribution plans, should follow the advice of these medical experts. Correctional facilities are consistently among the biggest COVID-19 clusters in the United States. Unless the United States prioritizes vaccines for people who are incarcerated, COVID-19 will continue to spread through jails, prisons, and detention centers. And staff who go in and out of the facilities each day will carry the deadly virus home to their families and their communities, causing it to spread beyond jail and prison walls.

As the pandemic has swept through the United States, it is more clear than ever that mass incarceration is both a moral and public health hazard. As vaccines become available, the people who are most at risk, including those who are incarcerated, should receive priority protection from this deadly virus.

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