

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Crowded conditions have turned jails and prisons into epidemic engines.

A new study from researchers at Northwestern University and the World Bank found that millions of Covid-19 cases and tens of thousands of deaths could have been prevented by reducing jail populations.

The U.S. has long had the world's highest incarceration rate. It has also reported more Covid-19 cases and deaths than any other country, NPR [reports](#), even though it has less than 5% of the global population. Research published last week in the journal [JAMA Network Open](#), shows the two are directly connected.

[Jails and prisons](#) in the U.S. have acted as infectious disease incubators during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a [summary](#) of the study from Northwestern. Due to overcrowded conditions in which social distancing is impossible, inadequate healthcare, and lack of access to supplies like soap and masks, [more than 661,000](#) incarcerated people and staff have been infected with coronavirus as of April 16, 2021, and at least 2,990 have died, [according to](#) The New York Times.

Jails in the U.S. currently [house](#) about 650,000 people every day on average, and most of them spend only short periods of time in jail before they are released. The weekly turnover rate in jail populations is 55%. Analyzing data from 1,605 counties, the researchers found that the movement of people in and out of jails has fueled the spread of Covid-19 to surrounding communities.

The high rate at which people are cycled between communities and unnecessary short-term stays in jails is creating epidemiologic pumps that drive more and more infections in both jails and communities, study author Dr. Eric Reinhart of the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine [explained](#).

Dr. Eric Reinhart, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

Public health experts, advocates, family members, and [prosecutors](#) have called on corrections officials to stop jailing people for minor offenses and to release medically vulnerable people and those who pose no public safety threat.

Had jails heeded those calls and reduced jail populations by an estimated 80%, that level of decarceration would have been associated with a 2% reduction in daily Covid-19 case growth rates, which translates to the [prevention of millions of cases](#).

Related Resource

Incarcerated people are infected by the coronavirus at a rate more than five times higher than the nation's overall rate.

In a [related study](#), researchers found that the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black and Hispanic communities is related to racial disparities in policing and incarceration.

They found that people cycling through the Cook County Jail in March 2020 could be linked to 13% of all Covid-19 cases in Chicago, and because 90% of the jail population is Black or Hispanic, this impact was much higher among Black and Hispanic communities.

Black and Latino neighborhoods endure the highest rates of policing and incarceration, so when jails amplify disease in communities, this especially affects these groups, Dr. Reinhart [said](#).

The study is the first to show that decarceration is associated with community-wide public health benefits. Dr. Reinhart hopes the research will give weight to the argument for reducing the number of people in jails to address the Covid-19 pandemic.

If we can immediately stop jailing people for minor alleged offenses and begin building a national decarceration program to end mass incarceration, he [said](#), these changes will protect us from COVID-19 now and will also benefit long-term U.S. public health and

pandemic preparedness.

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