

# Equal Justice Initiative

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/nearly-half-of-south-dakota-prison-population-tests-positive-for-covid-19/>

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11.02.20

Jameson Annex of the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Nearly half of the 3,347 people incarcerated in South Dakotas prison system have tested positive for Covid-19, according to ABC News, which [reported](#) on data from the states department of corrections.

[Incarcerated people](#) face heightened risks of contracting Covid-19 and becoming seriously ill. Social distancing is impossible for people confined in overcrowded prison dormitories with shared toilets and showers, and in many facilities, people have reported being unable to access masks, hand sanitizer, and even soap.

As a result, many of the largest outbreaks in the country are linked to correctional facilities. Incarcerated people are vulnerable to severe cases of the coronavirus, mainly because older adults make up a larger share of the prison population than people under 25. Older people in prison are more likely to be in poor health and have limited access to quality medical care, which increases the risk of death from Covid-19.

South Dakotas department of corrections is doing mass testing in all of its correctional facilities, secretary of corrections Mike Leidholt [told](#) ABC News. He said that those who test positive are being quarantined, and all inmates and staff are wearing masks.

But South Dakotas daily infections, hospitalizations, testing positivity rate, and deaths are all on the rise across the state. Prison officials have cut off prisoners access to work programs and volunteer opportunities and denied them in-person visits, but prison staff still enter and leave prison facilities.

This idea that a correctional facility can be cordoned off and sealed doesnt reflect reality, Leo Beletsky, a professor of law and health sciences at Northeastern University, [told](#) ABC. Thats magical thinking.

Like [most states](#), South Dakota has failed to take the step that experts recommend to stop the spread of Covid-19 inside prisonsreleasing incarcerated people who are not a risk to public safety or are elderly or infirm.

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122 Commerce Street Montgomery, AL 36104 [\(334\) 269-1803](tel:(334)269-1803) [\[emailprotected\]](#)

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