

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/there-are-good-and-bad-ways-decrease-jail-populations>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Ohio has one of the largest combined jail and prison populations in the country. (Jail is where people are held pretrial or serve time for misdemeanors, while prisons are where people serve time for felonies.) Pre-pandemic, on any given day, over 70,000 individuals were held behind bars, with around 50,000 people in prison, and around 20,000 people in jail. **This mass incarceration is devastating to individuals, families, and communities under normal circumstances, but during this pandemic, Ohio's choice to incarcerate has become deadly.**

Those held behind bars are often denied the opportunity to socially distance and practice good hygiene, the two keys to increase likelihood of staying healthy. This problem is exacerbated because jails and prisons in Ohio tend to be significantly overpopulated. Devastatingly, appropriate action was not taken to safeguard those held in Ohio prisons. As of May 29, over 71 prisoners have died along with four staff members. Their deaths were a policy choice. Governor DeWine, Director Acton, and Director Chambers-Smith chose not to take appropriate action to decarcerate our prisons, and as a direct result, people lost their lives. Fortunately, many local jails in Ohio did not follow suit. Across the state, judges, sheriffs, and prosecutors worked together to rapidly decrease their local jail populations in order to keep prisoners, staff, and their greater communities safe.

While these stakeholders should be applauded for their life-saving fast action, it's important to recognize that some decarceration measures are better than others. Unfortunately, some of the measures used will ultimately create significant harm down the line, like offering more opportunities for coerced plea deals. Other decarceration measures are just good policies that should be permanently adopted after the pandemic, which would help level jail populations and ameliorate the need for future emergency depopulation efforts.

Ohio can and should be the best version of itself even without a crisis. This pandemic spurred stakeholders into action, but we need to apply pressure to make sure these same stakeholders do not resort back to their old, regressive ways. The good decarceration practices below should be seen as a guide to good policies that could and should become our new normal.

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