

Incarceration & COVID-19

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Incarceration & COVID-19 in the U.S.

More than [2.1 million people](#) are incarcerated in the U.S.; this is more people than [in any other country](#) and [over half](#) of these individuals are incarcerated for non-violent offenses. Incarcerated populations, correctional staff, and their families are at an especially increased risk to become infected with COVID-19, as the prison environment does not lend itself to be protective against illness. There have been over [78,500 cases of COVID-19](#) in the prison population. As of July 30, 2020, 766 prisoners have died because of COVID-19. Juveniles in detention centers are also contracting COVID-19; as of July 24, 2020, [1,310 juveniles have tested positive](#) in youth facilities and [1,550 staff in these facilities have tested positive](#).

Risks for justice-involved populations during COVID-19 are [well-documented](#). For example:

- 1) Jails and prisons are not equipped for social distancing due to [overcrowding](#) and [shared ventilation](#).
- 2) Justice-involved populations experience [poor sanitation, substandard health care, and a lack of adequate health care](#) supplies, including [hand sanitizer](#) due to its [alcohol content](#).

Despite [calls](#) for reducing the number of persons who are incarcerated during COVID-19, the release of individuals from prisons has [lagged behind](#) the pace of release from jails. COVID-19 compounds existing sanitation and health concerns in detention centers, jails, and prisons, making the need for action more critical than ever.

Recommendations for Policymakers to Consider

- Promote the collection and release of COVID-19 results of staff working in detention centers, jails, and prisons. 68% of states are not currently releasing staff COVID-19 rates. Correctional staff enter and exit facilities every day, which heightens the risk of transmitting COVID-19 to their families and the individuals they work with in the centers. As of July 30, 2020 there were [at least 17,476 positive COVID-19 cases among prison staff and 55 reported deaths among staff in states disclosing this data](#).
- Consider expanding the criteria required for transfer to home confinement to [reduce the risk of virus transmission in correctional facilities](#). Examples include the requirements to have completed at least 50% of one's sentence and reside in a low- or minimum-security facility.
- Support legislation to improve wait times on sentences court ordered to be reviewed (e.g., "[juvenile lifers](#)") and [regulate movement](#) within institutions.
- [Reduce costs of inmate medical services](#) during COVID-19, such as suspending co-payments.
- Encourage institutions to apply for [supplemental funds](#) to improve responses to COVID-19.
- [Create distinct, high-quality, quarantine areas](#) separate from solitary confinement.
- Improve access to [PPE](#) and [personal hygiene items](#), such as soap.
- Support [bail reform](#) during COVID-19 to ensure those awaiting trial are not incarcerated and placed at increased risk for COVID-19 solely due to their inability to pay bail.
- Encourage institutions to provide persons released with additional support to navigate [resources](#).



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