

COVID-19 infections skyrocket in American prisons

By Sam Dalton
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New data shows that there has been a rapid increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in US prisons since the middle of May. According to the *New York Times*, in the last month the number of confirmed cases among inmates has doubled to over 64,000. The number of confirmed deaths from COVID-19 in this population is currently 607. Additional data from The Marshall Project also shows that at least 9,180 prison staff have had COVID-19, with 38 deaths.

The actual toll of the outbreak is undoubtedly much higher. According to the latest numbers from the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, five and a half percent of confirmed coronavirus cases in the US have ended in death. If this mortality rate is extended to the prison population, the estimated number of deaths would be at least 3,500.

There have also been severe outbreaks across other parts of the US's huge web of incarceration facilities. According to The Sentencing Project, there have been 634 cases confirmed among juvenile detainees, while 716 youth prison staff have also tested positive. The COVID-19 Behind Bars tracking project shows that at least 2,067 detainees at immigrant detention camps have tested positive, with at least four deaths. However, many detention camps run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have not released any data since May 1, and some have not released any information on infections or deaths at all.

State and federal prisons have become the epicenters of the outbreak of the disease in the US. In fact, despite huge outbreaks at meatpacking plants, factories and care homes, the five largest known clusters of the coronavirus in the US are at incarceration facilities. Marion Correctional Facility has had the most acute outbreak with at least 2,429 cases. In April, Ohio's National Guard was called to the facility under the

pretense of assisting with the facility's COVID-19 response, nonetheless the outbreak has continued to intensify. Ten facilities across the country have over 1,000 inmate infections. As of June 18, federal prisons have an average infection rate of 116.17 per 1,000 compared to just 6.01 for the US population as a whole.

Since the first concerns about an outbreak of the virus in prisons were raised in late March, efforts to combat the pandemic, such as testing, inmate releases and lockdowns, have been implemented reluctantly and haphazardly. This has led to unnecessary deaths, increased rates of community transmission, and torturous conditions within prisons.

Testing has been almost non-existent in many states. Illinois, Mississippi and Alabama have tested less than two and a half percent of inmates. New York state, despite being the epicenter of the international pandemic in March and April, has only tested three percent of its prison population of 40,000. Forty percent of those tested in the state were positive. California, with an annual prison budget of \$12 billion, has only tested seven percent of its prison population.

On May 21, the WSWWS reported that only a handful of US prisoners had been released in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite highly publicized executive orders by governors and US Attorney General William Barr nominally authorizing mass releases.

Even with the low number of releases, police forces and the bourgeois media are conspiring to end the early release of non-violent criminals. In an interview given to NBC News, New York Police Department commissioner Dermot Shea claimed that of the 2,500 prisoners released from Rikers Island Jail, 250 have been re-arrested. These social crimes are primarily the product of the abject poverty experienced by released

prisoners, who are reentering society at a time of historic unemployment. The NBC report featured the case of one man who had been re-arrested for stealing a pair of socks.

Before the pandemic hit, on any given day 29,000 people were admitted to jail in the US. While this decreased slightly during the pandemic, this daily “churn” of thousands of inmates means jails have acted as vectors for the spread of COVID-19 throughout the country. The arrest of at least 11,000 people across the US since May 25 for protesting police violence has undoubtedly sharpened this effect. Many of those arrested were held overnight in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions.

Despite the rapid rise in infections both in and outside of prisons, many states are relaxing the restrictions put in place in response to the pandemic. With nearly 8,000 positive cases total, and at least 2,350 active cases as of June 18, Texas jails will restart the transfer of inmates to the state’s prison system on July 1. In late May, despite having the highest number of inmate deaths from the virus, Ohio prisons opened their doors for new transfers. Annette Chambers-Smith, head of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, justified the move in an interview stating, “when you reopen the community, you’re going to have more laws broken also.”

It is not the premature reopening of states across the US that will lead to more crime, but the malign neglect of the capitalist class that will lead to increasing crime rates. With no relief, high unemployment and record numbers of evictions, individuals across the US will face desperate circumstances. Figures such as Chambers-Smith and police chiefs like Shea will happily carry out the diktats of the state by brutalizing and exploiting society’s most vulnerable.

Another consequence of measures adopted in prisons across the US has been the increase of individuals in conditions of solitary confinement. Before the onset of the pandemic around 60,000 prisoners on any given day were in solitary confinement. Following a series of partial and full lockdowns in federal and state facilities, 300,000 prisoners in the US are currently in isolation, according to the Marshall Project.

Prison experts fear that these conditions might become the new normal following the pandemic. Judith Resnik, a specialist on solitary confinement at Yale

University Law School explained to NPR, “There is really a long legacy of many prisons — not all — but many prisons turning to solitary confinement, turning to lockdown in the face of other public health problems. So, there’s always a concern that once the system is sort of used to one mode of controlling people, that that will continue.”

Tens of thousands of lives are at risk without immediate measures to halt the rapid spread of the virus in prisons and to protect inmates. A campaign of rapid testing, tracing and quarantining must be put in place. Prison cells, cafeterias and shared spaces must be properly sanitized, and inmates must have access to adequate personal protective equipment. If prisoners do contract the virus their right to high-quality medical treatment must also be ensured. Where measures are taken to enforce social distancing, they must accommodate the needs of prisoners, including safe human interaction. Most significantly, those prisoners who are non-violent and test negative for the virus must be instantly released and provided with adequate financial support and housing.

In the last four decades of imperialist war, the use of methods of violence and repression by US forces abroad have become common place. The violent repression of peaceful protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd by militarized police are one sign these methods will increasingly be utilized at home against. The murderous neglect of the poorest sections of society during the COVID-19 pandemic, including over two million prisoners, is a continuation of the capitalist class’s policies of death, war and repression.

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