

Health Conditions and the Spread of COVID-19 in Prisons and Jails Op-Ed

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Incarcerated people are infected by the coronavirus at a rate five times higher than the national average, according to the Equal Justice Initiative. The rate of death of prison residents with the coronavirus is significantly higher at 39 deaths per 100,000 compared to the national average 29 deaths per 100,000. This is mainly due to health conditions and hygiene issues, understaffing, and overcrowding in prisons and jails. In an ideal carceral environment, everyone who has symptoms would be tested and those who are positive would be confined immediately to not risk viral spread. Also, everyone would receive effective PPE (personal protective equipment) and an appropriate amount of antibacterial personal cleaning items such as hand sanitizer and soap. And, everyone would be able to appropriately distance from others. However, prisons in the US are unable to provide many of the needed protective measures to residents that the public takes for granted. Therefore, anyone coming in close contact with a prison during the pandemic is at more of a risk to contract the coronavirus.

When we take a closer look into these incarcerated populations, we can see that they have limited resources to things such as soap and no access to things like hand sanitizer largely due to the restriction of alcohol in these environments and limited resources to purchase additional protective items. Also, we must address the quality of healthcare in these facilities because it is often the bare minimum along with understaffing and turnover among medical and correctional personnel. When we combine these things within a locale inhabited by a large number of residents and staff in small, confined spaces, it is not surprising COVID spreads and infects so many.

Lack of Access to Disease Prevention Items

“When Lauren Johnson reached for a squirt of hand sanitizer on her way out of the doctor’s office, she regretted it immediately. In the Central Texas prison where she was housed, alcohol-based hand sanitizer was against the rules—and the on-duty officer was quick to let her know it. ‘He screamed at me,’ she said. Then, she said, he wrote her up and she lost her recreation and phone privileges for 10 days” (The Marshall Project, 2020). This is only one account of the treatment of one incarcerated person in a facility of many. This also was from a time before coronavirus, but this doesn’t mean any rules have changed, hand sanitizer is still contraband in prisons and jails. This is due to its high percentage of alcohol because in the past carceral residents were able to separate the gel from the alcohol to make a stronger prison wine. This could possibly be acceptable, if not for the limits and restrictions placed on alcohol in prisons and jails.

The National Institute for Jail Operations website, Standard I01.03.02, which refers to personal hygiene items that are issued to inmates, states that items such as soap are issued to residents free of charge, however if a resident needs additional soap, they would have to pay for it. This seems to be a pretty common practice in prisons and jails and seems reasonable to an extent, however, until you are informed of all the things the incarcerated individuals use their soap for. The first thing their soap is used for is to wash their hands and their bodies. Then, because residents are not supplied shampoo and deodorant, they must use their soap to fulfill

these needs, too. Add an infectious virus in the mix and people are trying to wash their hands and face more frequently than ever. Along with this, not all facilities supply incarcerated persons with soap since the coronavirus began (Brennan Center for Justice, 2020). Most now require residents to pay for all soap, and the pandemic increased commissary prices due to the demand for these sanitary products.

Medical Access: Understaffing and Overcrowding

There are generally not enough medical personnel in prison and jail environments. With coronavirus and the constant flow of residents getting sick and/or tested these staff have been stretched to their limits. Even with some carceral systems releasing certain residents at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, many prison and jail remain overcrowded, and if not, the space to ensure adequate social distancing is just not possible. Additionally, within any carceral system people are constantly coming and going from the facility with a staff turnover rate of around 55%. According to the CDC's Guide for People Living in Prisons or Jails, if you were near someone with COVID-19 you should be tested and immediately quarantined. What if you are unable to be quarantined or even tested due to overcrowding in your prison or jail? This happens often in these facilities due to the lack of space to hold residents who are pending results or have tested positive for the virus. In a perfect world you would keep these groups separate, however due to overcrowding this is not an option. This overcrowding causes residents awaiting results to be quarantined with residents that have tested positive for the virus. This creates a strange phenomenon in which even if a resident's tests results come back negative, they could have contracted the virus during their quarantine. What frequently happens in these cases is that they return back to the general population and spread the virus to others, unknowingly.

One option is to institute a release program so that each facility is able to get the pandemic under better control. However, the public is largely hesitant when speaking about incarcerated individuals receiving any sympathy or mercy. "These are individuals who steal, rape, and kill being let out again into the community" one might say. This is an irrational thought because individuals who would be released are those that would pose little to no threat to the community such as elderly and non-violent offenders. These individuals could be released on parole or probation for the remainder of their sentence, or their sentence could simply be deferred till after the pandemic is under control.

Another option is vaccinate all residents as quickly as possible. According to a Prison Policy Initiative article published in May 2021, only just around half of residents in carceral facilities were vaccinated in the country. Even though residents are around four to five times more likely to contract the coronavirus, they have not been prioritized during this stage of the vaccine roll out. Because individuals who are immune compromised are prioritized, I feel it is only natural to prioritize carceral residents as well. However, they are not only eleven states have a vaccination level of 70% or more and four states have a vaccination level of 20% or less for these carceral populations. Along with this only 48% of the country's prison staff have been administered their first dose of the vaccine. The vaccine is integral in preventing the spread of disease and states are not prioritizing this enough. However, this is only possible on a large scale in prison environments not as much in jail environments due to the large turnover of residents and staff daily.

One might oppose these options saying that the process may be expensive to administer vaccines to all inmates or to institute a proper release program. However, these options are less costly in the grand scheme of things. According to the Vera Institute of Justice the average resident is housed for \$31,000 a year, however the number ranges in different states. In comparison to a resident placed on parole, “The average per capita cost of parole was \$1,547 or \$4.24 per day” (Collier). Which is significantly less costly than a sentence inside of a facility. Also considering the other option of vaccinations, it is much less costly to administer a two-dose vaccine than to house a resident with the virus and along with providing costly testing for residents thinking they have contracted the coronavirus. It will also improve the pressure on medical staff because there will be less residents frequenting the clinic worried about contracting the virus.

If this poor disease management and endangering of both staff and residents bothers you, you can contribute to this cause by raising awareness of this topic on your social media. Bringing attention to this may influence your state legislation to push for more hasty vaccinations of carceral residents. You can also help the cause by donating to organizations such as the Marshall Project (www.themarshallproject.org) as a great way to help incarcerated individuals struggling through the pandemic. Bringing awareness to this topic is the most beneficial, people forget that the incarcerated individuals are also mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and, in fact humans. They are people just like you and me and deserve a right to live through this horrible pandemic.

Resources

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