



Release People from Prison and Jail

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If America is going to “flatten the curve,” we must reduce our jail and prison populations as quickly and comprehensively as we have emptied our schools, shuttered our parks, and closed our sports stadiums. We have shut down social gatherings, but we have left thousands of jail and prison facilities (more than 7,000 across the United States) running with incarcerated people spending 24 hours a day crowded into spaces with barely 6-inches, let alone 6-feet, between themselves and their neighbors. Hand sanitizer is forbidden in prison (because it contains alcohol), soap is costly, and dozens of prisoners often share one bathroom or sink. Moreover, prisons and jails are full of people at high risk for pandemic infection: elderly prisoners make up one-tenth of the U.S. prison population, and prisoners tend to have higher rates of pre-existing physical and mental health conditions than non-prisoners. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of correctional officers and healthcare providers go in and out of these facilities every day, with few of the protections (temperature checks, protective equipment) healthcare providers in hospitals have. These prison-based providers, then, experience heightened infection risks themselves and carry these risks back into their communities every hour of every day.

If leaving people in prisons and jails is dangerous, releasing them has few costs and many benefits. Unlike children out of school, adults released from incarceration can take care of themselves. And their former caretakers – healthcare providers and correctional officers alike – can turn attention to providing critical health and social services desperately needed elsewhere. Empty prison beds, already designed to control and segregate sub-populations from each other, could readily be converted into additional hospital and nursing beds for infected patients. Letting prisoners go is no more drastic or dangerous than any of the other pandemic response measures; where criminal justice populations have been reduced, crime rates have remained stable, or even decreased. Laws in every state already make provisions for these kinds of emergency release measures, prioritizing proven policies for protecting populations from infectious disease. America’s jails and prisons are as critical to our COVID-19 pandemic response as our hospitals.