Why Prisoners Are More Likely to Die of COVID-19

Tight living spaces, lack of protective gear and preexisting health conditions may account for the higher death rate in prisons.

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Compared with the general population, inmates experience an almost sixfold greater risk of contracting COVID-19 as well as a threefold higher risk of dying of the severe respiratory condition, suggest new findings published in the journal JAMA by researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

For the recent study, scientists counted the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths between March 31 and June 6 for federal and state prisoners and the general population. Incidents for each group were counted separately.

Results showed that while there were 42,107 coronavirus cases and 510 deaths among 1,295,285 million prisoners, there were 1,920,904 million coronavirus cases and more than 95,608 deaths among the general population.

The rate of cases in prisons was 3,251 per 100,000 residents, compared with 587 cases per 100,000 in the general population. Furthermore, there were 39 deaths per 100,000 among those incarcerated versus 29 deaths per 100,000 Americans not living in confinement. Additionally, COVID-19 cases in prisons increased by 8.3% per day, compared to 3.4% in the general population.

Scientists suggested that because some prisons don't report cases and others aren't even testing inmates, these numbers might be even higher.

Researchers believe close confinement, limited access to personal protective equipment and high rates of preexisting respiratory and cardiovascular conditions may explain why COVID-19 spreads so quickly in jails, prisons and other correctional facilities.

Some of these often overcrowded facilities may be old and outdated institutions, such as California's San Quentin Prison, where an ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 reportedly affected more than 2,000 people that led to at least 10 deaths. Previous findings show that many prisons lack quality health care and are known to be more conducive to the spread of highly infectious

diseases.

“Prisoners have a right to adequate protection of their health while incarcerated,” said Brendan Saloner, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Health and Policy Management at the Bloomberg School and the study’s lead author. “The reality of these findings shows that we aren’t coming anywhere close to meeting their basic needs. Ultimately, it creates a dangerous situation for the inmates, prison staff, the communities that prisons are located in and in our overall effort to contain the crisis.”

For related coverage, read “Emergency: Outbreaks in Prison” and “Over 150 Health Experts Urge Cuomo to Release Prisoners at Risk for COVID-19.”

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