

Chicago's Jail Is Top U.S. Hot Spot as Virus Spreads Behind Bars

At least 1,324 confirmed coronavirus cases are tied to prisons and jails across the United States, according to data tracked by The Times, including at least 32 deaths.

By **Timothy Williams and Danielle Ivory**

Published April 8, 2020 Updated April 23, 2020

It started small. On March 23, two inmates in the sprawling Cook County jail, one of the nation's largest, were placed in isolation cells after testing positive for the coronavirus. In a little over two weeks, the virus exploded behind bars, infecting more than 350 people.

The jail in Chicago is now the nation's largest-known source of coronavirus infections, according to data compiled by The New York Times, with more confirmed cases than the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt, a nursing home in Kirkland, Wash., or the cluster centered on New Rochelle, N.Y.

The Cook County Sheriff's Office, which operates the jail, said Wednesday that 238 inmates and 115 staff members had tested positive for the virus. But those figures most likely downplay the actual problem, the jail acknowledged, because the vast majority of the jail's 4,500 inmates have not been tested.

"This has been a difficult time for everyone," said Thomas J. Dart, the county sheriff, who has decided to stay away from his wife and children because he fears spreading the virus to them.

Sheriff Dart has established a quarantine area for inmates who have tested positive, and another to monitor those showing symptoms. The most serious cases — about 17 on Wednesday — have been admitted to hospitals. One jail inmate has died of what officials believe is complications from the coronavirus, although the medical examiner's office has not yet determined an official cause of death.

"I'm confident we're going to get through this," Sheriff Dart said, "but I could really use some more definition about how long the virus can last in an environment like this."

Latest Updates: The Coronavirus Outbreak >

Updated 21m ago

- [Top U.S. health officials update Congress on vaccine development and distribution plans.](#)
- [Indoor dining in N.Y.C. will return with limits on Sept. 30, Cuomo says.](#)
- [As drugmakers pledge to thoroughly vet vaccines, one company pauses its trials for a safety review.](#)

More live coverage: **Markets**

The ballooning outbreak at the jail, southwest of downtown Chicago, appears to confirm the fears of many health officials, who warned that America's overcrowded and unsanitary prisons and jails would likely be a significant source of the virus's spread.

The New York Times has identified at least 1,324 confirmed coronavirus cases tied to U.S. prisons and jails, including at least 32 deaths. Those numbers are most likely a vast undercount, because some state and local agencies have not released information, and others, including the federal Bureau of Prisons, which has had 337 positive cases and eight deaths, are not testing everyone who falls ill.

Concerns about the virus's spread have prompted authorities across the country to release thousands of inmates, many of whom were awaiting trial or serving time for nonviolent crimes. But those measures have not prevented a dizzying pace of infection among a population in which social distancing is virtually impossible and access to soap and water is not guaranteed.

The rapid transmission has left prisons across the nation in a heightened state of fear, tension and mistrust. Some facilities have placed inmates with fevers in solitary confinement, while some federal prisons and certain state facilities have kept prisoners locked inside their cells for more than 22 hours a day to restrict movement and possible transmission. Still others are shipping prisoners who test positive to hastily established microprisons.

But the greatest concern might be in facilities where little has been done to stop the virus's spread.

CORONAVIRUS SCHOOLS BRIEFING: *It's back to school — or is it?*

[Sign Up](#)

"I'm worried sick. If I get this, I'm dead," said Thomas Balsiger, 67, an inmate at the La Tuna federal prison in Texas who has a history of coronary heart disease. He said there are too few protections in place for inmates, and that guards do not always wear masks.

"This is outright reckless endangerment," he said.

The Times has identified at least 41 clusters of two or more coronavirus cases centered on prisons or jails. In addition to Cook County, other large clusters include the Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson, Mich., which is tied to more than 100 cases; the Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Ill., linked to more than 90 cases; and the Federal Medical Center in Butner, N.C., where at least 58 inmates and staff have tested positive.

In New York City, which has borne the brunt of the U.S. outbreak, more than half of the jail population had been quarantined by Wednesday as the virus continued to spread through the jails on Rikers Island and in neighboring boroughs. The Department of Correction said 287 inmates, 441 correction staff and 75 health care workers had tested positive, and nearly 1,600 inmates had been released to try to reduce the toll.

The disease has killed seven correction employees and one detainee in New York. More than 10 percent of correction officers have had to quarantine themselves.

In Chicago, Sheriff Dart acknowledged that his attempts to halt the proliferation of the virus, including the release of several hundred inmates charged with or convicted of nonviolent crimes, had failed.

About 86 percent of the jail's remaining inmates are being held on charges related to violent crimes, he said. "We have very little wiggle room."

Sheriff Dart said he had also overridden longstanding rules forbidding hand sanitizer, which has a high alcohol content, among inmates and had ensured that there was sufficient soap and bleach for cleaning.

Some inmates and family members say the sheriff's efforts have not been enough. On Tuesday, in the midst of a ban on gatherings in Chicago, protesters drove around the jail, honking horns and demanding the release of their loved ones.

Advocates and family members have filed a federal lawsuit seeking the early release of older Cook County inmates and those who have chronic medical conditions like respiratory illnesses and diabetes, which may make them particularly vulnerable to the virus.

Similar suits are being filed across the country. On Monday, the A.C.L.U. sought the release of inmates at the Oakdale federal prison in Louisiana who are at a higher risk of serious illness or death from the virus. The Oregon Justice Resource Center filed a federal class-action lawsuit accusing the state's Department of Corrections of ignoring the public health threat. And on Wednesday, the A.C.L.U. announced that it was seeking an emergency order to force a sheriff in Colorado to comply with social distancing for all high-risk people in the Weld County jail.

Jodi Zils Gagne, an inmate at the federal prison camp in Danbury, Conn., said she had not had symptoms of the virus, but was concerned she may be vulnerable because she has multiple sclerosis. Danbury's prison complex currently has at least 46 cases among inmates and employees.

Ms. Zils Gagne, who was convicted in a fraud case, has asked for release from the prison facility, based on her medical condition. She recently wrote in an email, "I have a motion before my judge, and I am hoping she will see that I do not deserve a death sentence."

Last week, the judge denied her request.

Jan Ransom and Adeel Hassan contributed reporting.