

December 2020 Update

More than 1.3 million people in the U.S. are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, and COVID-19 has created significant problems for correctional facilities. One of the greatest challenges is the inability of incarcerated people to maintain safe social distancing because of their confinement in small shared spaces. As of mid-August, correctional facilities represented 19 of the top 20 clusters of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S. By Sept. 1, UCLA's COVID-19 data project had reported more than 155,000 COVID-19 cases and more than 1,000 deaths among people working and housed in state and federal prisons.

This report updates a previous [study of COVID-19's impacts on prisons](#) authored by [Kevin Schnepel](#), an assistant professor of economics at Simon Fraser University. The update, based on data through November 13, 2020, found that COVID-19 case rates in prisons continue to outpace those outside prisons. Confirmed case rates in prisons were 3.7 times the national rate, with 12 of every 100 people in prison infected with or recovering from COVID-19, compared with three in 100 U.S. residents. That disparity ratio is similar to the 4.1 figure reported in August.

Findings

- The COVID-19 death rate in prison is similar to the August figure: twice (2.1 times) that of the general population, after adjusting for the age, sex, and race/ethnicity of incarcerated individuals. That finding, however, masks wide differences among states. Five states – Arkansas, Delaware, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Oregon – report prison death rates more than seven times higher than rates for their general state population, while 14 states have prison death rates below those for the non-incarcerated.
- As of Nov. 13, state and federal prisons reported 1,412 COVID-19 deaths among incarcerated individuals. That is 721 deaths (51%) *in excess* of the number expected given mortality rates for individuals of a similar age, gender, and race/ethnicity outside prison.
- Overall, 12.7% of people in prison have confirmed COVID-19 cases, compared with 3.4% of the general population. Three states, South Dakota, Arkansas and Kansas, report that more than 40% of their prison populations have been infected. But some states with high COVID-19 case rates, such as South Dakota, do not have similarly high death rates.

- Several of the states with the highest prison COVID-19 mortality rates exhibited sharp increases in deaths relative to statewide totals in October and early November. Overall, the total number of prison deaths in excess of national mortality rates continues to increase, indicating that COVID-19's disproportionate impact behind bars is not abating.

[Read the Report](#)