



Department of Justice



Office of Justice Programs

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BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS
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MORE THAN 374,000 PERSONS HELD IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN 2020–21

WASHINGTON — State and federal correctional facilities performed 4,816,400 viral tests for COVID-19 on persons in prison from the beginning of March 2020 to the end of February 2021. Of these tests, 396,300 (8.2%) were positive for COVID-19, representing 374,400 unique infected persons in state and federal prisons.

The infection rate in prisons during this 12-month period was 219 per 1,000 state prisoners at risk of exposure to COVID-19 and 298 per 1,000 federal prisoners at risk of exposure. (Total prisoners at risk of exposure to COVID-19 is equal to the number of persons in state or federal prison custody at the end of February 2020 plus those admitted in the following 12 months.) Staff in state correctional facilities had an infection rate of 269 per 1,000 staff, while those working in Federal Bureau of Prisons facilities had a rate of 188 per 1,000.

Almost 2,500 persons held in state and federal prisons died of COVID-19-related causes from March 2020 to February 2021. Whites accounted for 44% of COVID-19-related deaths in prisons, while blacks accounted for 34%. Eighty-three percent of COVID-19-related deaths in state and federal prisons occurred in persons age 55 or older.

The number of persons in the custody of state, federal, or privately operated prisons under state or federal contract decreased more than 16% during the 12-month BJS COVID-19 study period. The prison population declined by 157,500 persons during the first 6 months (through the end of August 2020) and by 58,300 in the last 6 months (through the end of February 2021). Twenty-four states released a total of 37,700 persons from prison on an expedited basis (earlier than scheduled) from March 2020 to February 2021.

State and federal prisons had a crude mortality rate (unadjusted for sex, race or ethnicity, or age) of 1.5 COVID-19-related deaths per 1,000 prisoners from the end of February 2020 to the end of February 2021. During that time, a total of 196 correctional staff in state and federal prisons died as a result of COVID-19, a crude mortality rate of 0.5 deaths per 1,000 correctional staff members.

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Impact of COVID-19 on State and Federal Prisons, March 2020–February 2021 (NCJ 304500) was written by BJS statistician E. Ann Carson, Ph.D.; Melissa Nadel, Ph.D., of Abt Associates; and Gerry Gaes, Ph.D., Independent Consultant to Abt Associates. The report, related documents and additional information about BJS’s statistical publications and programs are available on the BJS website at bjs.ojp.gov.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice is the principal federal agency responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating reliable statistics on crime and criminal justice in the United States. Alexis R. Piquero is the director.

The Office of Justice Programs provides federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance and other resources to improve the nation’s capacity to prevent and reduce crime, advance racial equity in the administration of justice, assist victims and enhance the rule of law. More information about OJP and its components can be found at www.ojp.gov.

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