



# Impact of COVID-19 on State and Federal Prisons, March 2020–February 2021

SUMMARY | NCJ 304500

AUGUST 2022

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.

## Infection rates

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.

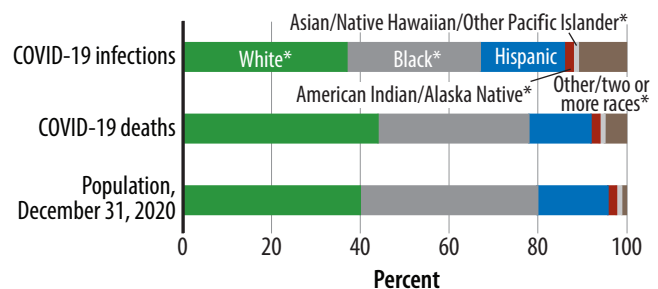
State and federal correctional authorities adopted a range of tactics to mitigate transmission of COVID-19, including quarantine of newly admitted persons, viral testing of persons before release, and suspension of familial and legal visits.

## COVID-19-related deaths

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 these COVID-19-related deaths in prisons, while blacks accounted for 34%. Eighty-three percent of these COVID-19-related deaths occurred in persons age 55 or older.

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. 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 staff.

## Percent of COVID-19 infections and deaths and 2020 yearend population of persons in the custody of state and federal prisons, by race or ethnicity March 1, 2020–February 28, 2021



Note: Includes positive results of viral COVID-19 tests and COVID-19-related deaths among persons held by state or federal correctional authorities in government and privately operated prisons, regardless of sentence status or length. Race/ethnicity data are derived from administrative records and differ from other BJS-published distributions. For the U.S. prison population counts of race/ethnicity, please see *Prisoners in 2020 - Statistical Tables* (NCJ 302776, BJS, December 2021), appendix table 2.

\*Excludes persons of Hispanic origin (e.g., “white” refers to non-Hispanic white persons and “black” refers to non-Hispanic black persons).

## Effects of COVID-19 on prison population size

The number of persons in the custody of state, federal, or privately operated prisons under state or federal contract decreased by more than 16% during the 12-month 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 from March 2020 to February 2021.

The full report (*Impact of COVID-19 on State and Federal Prisons, March 2020–February 2021*, NCJ 304500), related documents, a link to the archived dataset, and additional information about the Bureau of Justice Statistics are available on the BJS website at [bjs.ojp.gov](https://www.bjs.ojp.gov).