The effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on individuals incarcerated in the U.S. has shed light on the vulnerability of this population, the abysmal conditions in which they are kept, and the complete failure by officials to see and treat them as human beings.

The following timeline documents an 11-day period. In the blue boxes, you'll find the work of advocacy groups, demanding relief in the form of release and hygiene. In the orange boxes, you'll find actions taken by local, state and federal officials in the criminal justice system. Almost the entirety of the initial response by officials consists of suspending visits. But, like most prison contraband, outside materials get in mainly through the staff, not visitors who are screened and restricted. You'll see the cases of infections (red circles) begin with staff. You'll also see a flurry of government activity as the virus begins to appear at state and federal prisons, as officials rush to contain a viral bomb they have already ignited.

For context, the first case of Coronavirus in the U.S. was reported on January 20 and the first Coronavirus-related fatality was on February 29. On March 9, after death toll doubled in one weekend, Iran says it will release 700,000 prisoners. Confirmed cases in the U.S. reach 1,000. The only action taken by correctional facilities in the US to date is the suspension of visitation, with the exception of legal visits, in Nevada.
Over 100 advocates call on the governor to release aging and infirm people from the state’s prisons, as jails and prisons across the country brace for the effects of COVID-19.

Indiana

A staffer at Hancock County jail (IN) tests positive.

Washington, Utah, Kansas, Delaware, Tennessee, South Dakota, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Oregon and North Dakota suspend personal visits.
More than 40 state and local advocacy groups urge LA County officials not to wait until COVID-19 has entered a jail facility to take protective steps. LA County jails are the most populated jails in the country.

Twenty-seven advocacy groups, including LSPC and California Coalition for Women’s Prisoners, petition the governor to immediately release certain categories of people into parole supervision under the Emergency Services Act. The categories include medically fragile adults, adults over the age of 60 and people who have an anticipated release dates in 2020 and 2021. It also urges the expedition of the commutation process; the suspension of parole meetings and revocation for technical violations; the lifting of fees for calls to family members; and that CDCR provide a comprehensive plan of action.

LSPC and CCWP send a separate letter to Gov. Newsom urging them to reconsider the cancellation of visits, highlighting the fact that more staff come in and out of facilities than visitors.

Juvenile justice organization in the East Bay pen letter to Alameda County probation urging the release of youth who don’t pose a safety risk. They also ask for the diversion of more youth to community-based organizations.


SF Public Defender Mano Raju pens letter to Juvenile Justice Center, asking them to enable the release of all youth confined in the juvenile detention facility who are eligible for release, with a particular focus on those youth who are particularly young, suffer from disabilities such as asthma, or are immunocompromised, and therefore at higher risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Employee at the George W. Hill Correctional Facility (PA) tests positive; 11 prisoners are quarantined.

Inmate tests positive in Ontario County jail (NY), released on bail.

Two prisoners in Santa Clara County jail (CA) quarantined after public defender tests positive.

Two correctional employees in Washington state test positive.

All visitation at federal prisons are suspended, including legal visits. Attorneys may be approved for an in-person visit on a case-by-case basis.

A federal district court in Ohio delays all trials.

Shelby County is one of the first jurisdictions to make phone calls and video chat free for people in jail.

Washington DC sends its prisoners to the Federal Bureau of Prisons.
ACTIONS TAKEN BY ADVOACY GROUPS

ARIZONA
Prison Law Office request that attorneys for the Arizona corrections department immediately provide them and the Court with all plans that the ADC and its health care contractor Centurion have prepared for the prevention and management of COVID-19 in the Arizona prison system. This is part of the ongoing federal lawsuit between incarcerated persons being represented by Prison Law Office and the ADC over healthcare for prisoners. (Parsons v. Shinn).

OHIO
Judges in Ohio begin holding special sessions to try to settle cases, release prisoners or send them to prison, or release on house arrest.

MINNESOTA
Public Defender’s Office tells staff to demand the release of jail detainees across Minnesota to protect them from the spread of Coronavirus.

New York, Illinois, Kentucky and Iowa suspend visitation, but legal visits are allowed.

AN Employee at Peninsula Work Release (WA) tests positive.

Prisoners in two cellblocks at San Quentin State Prison are quarantined with flu-like symptoms. They are not tested for COVID-19.

MARCH 14

MARCH 15
March 16

Parsons v. Shinn demanding, among other things, the provision of hygiene and cleaning supplies.

ACLU National issues letter urging not to book any new arrestees into jail unless absolutely necessary.

Abolitionist Law Center urges Allegheny County to release those being held pretrial, all individuals with less than 6 months left in their sentence, all individuals incarcerated for misdemeanors, drug possession, sex work, and other nonviolent offenses as well as pregnant women, individuals over 50, and those at high risk of vulnerability.

Coalition of NYC defense attorneys call on governor and mayor to release anyone held in pretrial detention or solely for admin reasons.

A NY state judge orders federal immigration officials to release all people detained at local, municipal police and school police facilities.

Northwest Immigrant Rights Project and the ACLU of Washington filed a lawsuit for ICE to release people who are vulnerable to COVID-19.

An inmate at Nassau County jail (NY) tests positive for COVID-19 and is transferred to a local hospital to be isolated and treated.

An investigator with the NYC Corrections Department dies from the virus.

State suspends all non-essential health care visits.

California suspends overnight visits.

LA sheriff holds a press conference, reporting that over the course of two weeks, the Sheriff’s Department has reduced the jail population by about 617. The sheriff has ordered the release of people who had less than 30 days left on their sentences. He also directed local agencies to cite and release as many suspects as possible.

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Thirty-one prosecutors pledged to drastically reduce incarceration in the fight against #COVID19 and for our collective future. They represent over 17 million people in all parts of the country.

Representatives of 14 groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, Columbia Legal Services, and Disability Rights Washington call for Gov. Inslee to release thousands of people from Washington prisons, citing fears of a potential coronavirus outbreak in the prison system.

Sacramento judge authorizes sheriff to release people in jail with 30 days or less left on their sentences.

Philly DA says he’ll integrate the threat of the virus into charging and bail decisions.

St. Louis DA rolls out new bail policies to reduce pretrial detention.

Cook County sheriff secures the release of “several” detainees held on low-level, non-violent charges who are at-risk to the virus, including the elderly.

Judges and attorneys lower Cuyahoga jail population to its lowest level in facility’s history.

DOC and CHS announce they will work with the chief judge, the Defense Bar to begin identifying people over 50, people who have underlying health conditions or a weakened immune system, people detained for administrative reasons; and people serving sentences of one year or less.

Brooklyn’s DA says he will not prosecute people for misdemeanors and felonies classified as nonviolent.

Two probation agents with in Michigan test positive. One works at a suspect holding facility in Detroit.

An employee at Sing Sing, the state prison in New York, tests positive for COVID-19.

DOE Colorado calls for governor to immediately and safely decrease in the number of people in Colorado’s jails and prisons, dramatically decrease new admissions, dramatically decrease in-person court appearances; and implement evidence-based, humane and rights-affirming measures to protect the health and wellbeing of the prisoners and staff.

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In Charlotte, about 50 of the jail’s 1,600 occupants have been scheduled for release, part of an ongoing analysis by judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys of who needs to be in custody during the pandemic.

Travis County’s Justice of the Peace courts suspend issuance of arrest warrants for failure to appear for traffic offenses, summonses, and cite-and-release charges. Active warrants for Class C misdemeanor offenses are also suspended.

With West Virginia reporting its first case, the virus has now hit all 50 U.S. states.
**MARYLAND**

ACLU Maryland and local advocacy groups request Gov. Hogan issue an executive order urging all law enforcement and correctional agencies, state’s attorneys and members of the judiciary to take every step possible to avoid adding to the number of people incarcerated.

**MARCH 18**

LA Times runs an editorial entitled, “Coronavirus makes jails and prisons potential death traps. That puts us all in danger.”

**TEXAS**

Officials at McLennan County Jail say they are working to release 29 inmates on OR bonds.

**FLORIDA**

Prisons temporarily stop accepting new prisoners. Meanwhile, the jail in Pinellas County is facing a crisis as the court system freezes while arrests continue.

**ALABAMA**

Circuit judge orders all prisoners to released on OR in an effort to ease overcrowding. The sheriff has discretion on releasing prisoners based on their perceived threat to the public.

**MARYLAND**

New Orleans DA is denying requests for people to be released pretrial, while the state DA’s association calls to suspend speedy trial rules, increasing the likelihood that pretrial incarceration will increase exponentially.

**MINNESOTA**

A staff member is diagnosed for COVID-19 at the Detroit Detention Center, another at Jackson County Probation Office (MI).

**OHIO**

Mercer County jail releases 50 low-level prisoners to free up space to create up to 30 more medical isolation cells.

**ARIZONA**

ADC announces a set of baseline policies in prisons including distributing free soap.

**COLORADO**

Judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys collaborate to release 25 prisoners from La Plata County Jail.

**FEDERAL**

ICE officials say they will delay arresting immigrants who are not “public safety threats” and will roll back detaining those who fall outside of mandatory detention guidelines.

**IOWA**

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**LOUISIANA**

A staffer at Santa Barbara County jail (CA) tests positive. More than a dozen employees are sent home to self-quarantine.

**NEW HAMPSHIRE**

First instances of COVID-19 in the federal system are reported. Two staffers test positive in 24 hours. Their positions are not identified. One employee works at a medium security prison in New Hampshire, the other at an admin facility in Texas.

**ILLINOIS**

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**NEW YORK**

A corrections officer at Rikers Island (NY) tests positive Two hours later, an inmate tests positive and is put in isolation at an undisclosed location. 8 people have been identified as “close contacts” and are symptomatic.

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**NEW YORK**

Joint coalition of defenders in NYC call on ICE to cease all detention and release anyone in their custody.

**NEW JERSEY**

ICE detainees in Essex County launch hunger strike over coronavirus fears.

**NEW MEXICO**

The Sandoval county attorney asks judge to order the release of all misdemeanor and non-violent offenders from the local jail and to refuse to admit any more.

**NEW JERSEY**

Bergen County Jail officer (NJ) tests positive.

**COLORADO**

**ALABAMA**

**NEW JERSEY**

Wisconsin state prison Waupun Correctional warden sends email to staff saying “an employee or client” has been infected.

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**FLORIDA**

Hillsborough sheriff releases 164 prisoners from county jail.

An administrative employee at an Alabama state prison tests positive. The state corrections department does not release the name of the facility at which the employee was working.

Bergen County Jail begins distributing disinfectant spray and hand sanitizer to staff and prisoners; rotating which prisoners are allowed out of their cells; increasing cleaning of cells and offices; and screening employees, vendors, detainees and prisoners.

A member of the medical staff at Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey tests positive for coronavirus, the first case confirmed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement of an employee contracting the virus.

Two Rikers (NY) correction officers and a captain test positive for the coronavirus, bringing the total number of infected staff to four. So far, only one inmate has been tested -- he is also infected.

Joint coalition of defenders in NYC call on ICE to cease all detention and release anyone in their custody.

Bergen County Jail releases 164 prisoners from county jail.

Sheriff orders release of prisoners who have served at least 50 percent of their sentence and meet all other early release program requirements from Jefferson County Detention Facility.

Philby DA says he’s working to identify and release: parole eligible; are worthy of early parole; are elderly, ill, and/or infirm; are being held pre-trial for non-violent misdemeanors because they can’t afford bail; are candidates for alternative detention, i.e. house arrest or GPS monitoring; and juvenile offenders who are deemed to pose no threat to public safety.

**Pennsylvania**

**Florida**

**New Mexico**

**New York**

Judge orders release of people detained on bonds of less than $5000 in three counties.
March 20

**CALIFORNIA**

Californians for Safety and Justice sends pledge signed by over 100 organizations to local, state, and federal leaders, asking them to commit to restrict ALL bans on housing, provide more resources for reentry, put protocols in place for people on probation and parole, and stop all ICE raids and deportations.

Polling by Data Progress shows strong, bipartisan support for dramatically reducing jail and prison populations to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Sixty-six percent of likely voters, including 59% of those who are “very conservative,” said that elected officials should be considering actions to depopulate the jail and the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center as much as possible; and stem the flow of new arrests entering the criminal and juvenile systems.

**NEW YORK**

Faith leaders from 165 organizations sent joint letter to Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie in strong opposition to any bail reform rollbacks, particularly in light of the current crisis.

**ILLINOIS**

Advocates at 17 organizations pen letter to Chief Judge Evnas, urging him to work with decision-makers to immediately depopulate the jail and the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center as much as possible; and stem the flow of new arrests entering the criminal and juvenile systems.

Two state prison employees test positive for coronavirus — one at California State Prison, Sacramento, outside Folsom and another at San Quentin.

An inmate at Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center tests positive for COVID-19.

The number of infected individuals reaches 38: 21 prisoners, 12 jail employees and 5 correctional health workers. Two dorms of 45 people incarcerated there are refusing to leave their dorms for work duties or for meals in protest of deteriorating conditions on the island.

Nationally, over a 10-day span, the number of incarcerated individuals reported to have contracted COVID-19 went from zero to 31.

There are 37 infected staff.

Hundreds are being quarantine, but many are not being tested.

**CALIFORNIA**

Alameda County Public Defenders, in collaboration with the sheriff, DA and courts, secure the release of over 300 prisoners in the Santa Rita County Jail.

**NEW YORK**

NYC mayor releases 40 inmates “with health risks and low-level offenders” from Rikers Island.

**ILLINOIS**

Several attorneys say their clients incarcerated at the Cook County Jail in Chicago are being asked if they want to go to court to plead guilty to escape conditions. They are asked to check a box indicating yes or no.

Dixon Correctional Center, a state prison in Illinois, begins making sanitizer available for sale at the comisary, but prisoners have to pay.

**TEXAS**

Travis County Attorney suspends prosecution of minor nonviolent offenses. Governor directs Texas DCJ to suspend all fees for health care services related to COVID-19.

**LOUISIANA**

After advocates petition the governor of Louisiana, JPay and Securus announce two free 15-min calls per week, which will replenish automatically each week.

**OHIO**

Hamilton County judge issues a court order authorizing the sheriff to release low-risk, nonviolent prisoners who are not charged with sex crimes from the jail. The Hamilton County Justice Center has been reduced by nearly 600 prisoners in one week in response to the virus. The DA is seeking OR bonds in non-violent cases.

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TO OUR COMRADES INSIDE: WE ARE FIGHTING FOR YOU!

RESOURCES

Information on supporting incarcerated people and family members during a crisis:
https://www.beyond-prisons.com/covid19

Coronavirus information for incarcerated people:
Coronavirus Manual - CA Jails

Coronavirus Manual - Federal Facilities

Coronavirus Manual - Other States

Coronavirus Manual - CDCR

Marshall Project:

The Justice Collaborative website:
https://thejusticecollaborative.com/covid-19-policy-shifts/

The Appeal:

End Incarceration (a website tracking changes in incarcerated population levels by state and city):
http://end-incarceration.org/

Ella Baker Center:
https://ellabakercenter.org/COVID19EBC

Western Center on Law and Poverty website:

CDCR website on COVID-19:
https://www.cdc.ca.gov/covid19/

BOP website on COVID-19:

“Coronavirus and Mass Incarceration” was produced by Paula Lehman-Ewing, Editor at All Of Us Or None, a project of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. Learn more at prisonerswithchildren.org

LSPC is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and a designated California State Bar legal support center for Qualified Legal Service Providers. We do not provide direct services or take on individual legal cases. However, we are able to provide informational manuals and referrals to other legal services.

LSPC organizes communities impacted by the criminal justice system and advocates to release incarcerated people, to restore human and civil rights, and to reunify families and communities. We build public awareness of structural racism in policing, the courts, and the prison system, and we advance racial and gender justice in all our work.
Contact us at info@prisonerswithchildren.org