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Social distancing is really hard in N.J. prisons. And that could be a problem for all of us.

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New Jersey prisons are more than 90% full, according to state data, making it difficult to keep people apart and slow the coronavirus' spread.

"I don't know how they could socially isolate" at near capacity, said Sandra Langston, a former Rikers Island warden who's now a doctoral student at the City University of New York. "That would be very difficult."

The pandemic has reached nearly every New Jersey prison, and officials said Friday they would free some inmates to reduce the strain. Hundreds are quarantined, and at least one officer and one inmate have died.

"Social distancing is extremely hard to accomplish in a prison setting," Gov. Phil Murphy said Friday at his daily briefing in Trenton as he emphasized why releasing some non-violent offenders was important.

At stake is more than just the lives of inmates and staff.

Even if the state successfully beats back the virus in free society, prisons should be considered "reservoirs that could lead to epidemic resurgence," three researchers recently wrote in The New England Journal of Medicine.

"Why should we care about the health and well-being of incarcerated people?" asked Lior Gideon, a criminal justice professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "Ninety-five percent of them will return back to your community."

Inmates have the same capacity to carry illnesses as anyone else, he added, and he pointed to research that's found health problems inside prisons can become health problems outside without proper care.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently published 26 pages of recommendations just for prisons that said keeping people apart was key. "Although social distancing is challenging to practice in correctional and detention environments, it is a cornerstone of reducing transmission," the agency wrote.

Lawyers, inmates and experts said that can be near impossible. Three New Jersey prisons are filled about 95% or more: Bayside State Prison in Leesburg, East Jersey State Prison in Rahway and Garden State Youth Correctional Facility in Crosswicks.

Many CDC recommendations have already been met in state prisons, such as stopping visits, eliminating co-pays for COVID-19 checkups and limiting some transfers.

Officials have said prisons are practicing social distancing when they can, allowing some staff to work from home and replacing inmate classes with independent studies. Communal dining has been stopped where possible, state Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks said Friday.

“In general population areas where we have seen a population decrease in dormitory housing, we reduced the number of inmates in each (area) to adhere to social distancing mandates,” Liz Velez, a corrections spokesperson, wrote in an email about quarantined inmates.

She didn’t immediately respond to a follow-up question about what social distancing was feasible in near-capacity facilities.

Ventilating rooms was also key, experts said, but that can be difficult in older facilities. At least three state prisons were built more than a century ago, and New Jersey State Prison was established before the Civil War.

Furthermore, a prison’s capacity is partially based on the number of guards able to work, and at least 150 employees have tested positive for COVID-19 and more than 1,000 are quarantined.

That puts a dent in the 5,492 available guards represented by the state’s largest corrections union, according to William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105. (Supervisors are represented by a separate group.)

He added that operating near capacity was normally a good thing, because it helped maximize resources.

Furthermore, many residents around the state struggling with the virus have underlying medical conditions and a disproportionate share are African-American, two populations heavily represented behind bars. A U.S. Department of Justice report previously found that half of the nation’s inmates reported at least one chronic condition, and New Jersey prison inmates were 62% black at the start of the year, according to state data.

“This is one of the populations that is at highest risk,” said Aakash Shah, an emergency room doctor in Bergen County who’s also the New Jersey Reentry Corporation’s medical director, where he works with inmates returning to society.

Shah said he diagnosed the first New Jersey jail inmate with COVID-19, and he regularly sees former prisoners with Hepatitis C and HIV. The prevalence of pre-existing conditions meant prisons were a lot like nursing homes, he said, and officials should treat them similarly.

“They can deal with it when it’s a toaster fire,” Shah said, “or they can deal with it when it’s an inferno.”