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N.J. county jail population plunges with inmate releases, fewer arrests in coronavirus crisis

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New Jersey's county jail population dropped by more than 2,000 people last month, a significant decrease that could help the state fight the coronavirus behind bars.

While there were 8,900 people in jail in early March, there were 6,875 three weeks later, almost a quarter fewer, according to data from the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey.

That does not mean 2,000 people were released. Police are arresting fewer people, crime is down and lawyers have argued successfully to free some people. In addition, there was one large release last month of inmates, who were serving jail time as a result of probation sentences or municipal court convictions.

A year ago in March, cops made 13,459 arrests statewide, according to a State Police spokesman. Last month, officers only arrested 8,576.

The state attorney general has recommended cops delay filing some criminal charges during the pandemic, and State Police previously reported a drop in shootings and other crime amid the statewide shutdown.

Lawyers are also successfully freeing some residents who have not yet been convicted.

Thousands of inmates awaiting trial were thrown into limbo when the state stopped forming new juries, and public defenders who filed motions to free some were "responsible for a significant amount of releases," according to office spokesperson Jennifer Sellitti.

Furthermore, county jails released almost 700 low-level offenders last month because of a state Supreme Court order.

A total of 697 people were set free, according to ACLU-NJ data, slightly less than previously reported. That includes 157 people who judges freed over prosecutors' objections.

However, 98 people initially flagged for release were kept detained.

Lawmakers who opposed the court's move praised prosecutors who fought to keep some people behind bars.

"This is a huge win for the rule of law," state Sen. Declan O'Scanlon, R-Monmouth, and two colleagues said in a statement about prosecutors' efforts.

Those who were freed stepped into a world of job losses, rent struggles and lost health plans.

The New Jersey Reentry Corporation is receiving about 100 calls a day from former inmates who need housing or other services, according to Bolivar Flores, a pastor who runs the nonprofit's hotline.

Jacqueline Petrakian, the group's Ocean County site director, said she's fielded dozens of calls in recent weeks from people needing food stamps, cash assistance and other help. Those without phones would normally apply for jobs in libraries, employees said, but libraries are closed.

The nonprofit has been able to line up short-term warehouse jobs for some people, and motels are making it easier for the homeless to spend the night, employees said.

That group and other organizations could soon see a larger workload. Gov. Phil Murphy said Friday that some sick and elderly prison inmates will be temporarily released to ease pressure inside a prison system near capacity.