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N.J. prisons have highest coronavirus death rate in the nation, new study shows

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New Jersey prisoners are dying from the coronavirus at a higher rate than those in any other prison system in the nation, according to state and federal data assembled by The Marshall Project.

Thirty New Jersey inmates had died as of Friday. Only Michigan, Ohio and federal prisons reported more deaths, but each system oversees far more people.

Since the pandemic began, Garden State prisoners have died at a rate of 16 people for every 10,000. In contrast, Michigan inmates died at a rate of almost 11 per 10,000, the second-highest rate. Fewer than 9 per 10,000 died in Massachusetts, the third highest, according to the data.

New Jersey oversees about 18,000 inmates in the state prison system. The figures do not include those in county jails.

“Nobody talks about these men,” Wali Williams, an inmate at East Jersey State Prison, said Thursday on a conference call after reading names of the dead. “These men were sons, they were fathers, they were brothers.”

“You’re waiting to see who’s gonna die next,” he said.

Public health experts have estimated that the coronavirus kills about 1% of cases, meaning New Jersey prisons likely house thousands who have the infection but have not been tested. Experts have warned for weeks that an outbreak behind bars threatens communities everywhere, because prisons can act as “reservoirs that could lead to epidemic resurgence” even if the virus is stopped in free society.

When asked about the death rate during his Saturday press briefing in Trenton, Gov. Phil Murphy said corrections officials were separating inmates behind bars, ramping up testing and releasing as many as they could.

Corrections spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote in an email Saturday that “the department’s highest priority is the health of its inmates and staff as we deal with this unprecedented public health crisis.” Prisons had increased sanitation and distributed personal protective gear, she said.

“We’ll continue to explore additional means to help ensure the health our those in our custody and our staff,” she said.

The state has only tested a sliver of those incarcerated, according to public statistics.

On Thursday, Murphy said testing for all inmates and officers should begin in about a week. Velez said it would be “the largest universal testing effort from a State agency.”

Three experts told NJ Advance Media that the death rate was partially affected by factors outside the state’s control.

“New Jersey prisons, more than any other prison anywhere else in the country, are in the middle of a vortex,” said Todd Clear, a criminal justice professor at Rutgers University.

New Jersey is both the most densely populated state and home to the second-most cases in the nation, meaning its prisons are closer to epicenters than those in neighboring states, he and another researcher said.

They noted that New York, which has the highest number of coronavirus cases and deaths, has prisons in areas that are far from the virus epicenter in and around New York City. New York’s prison death rate from coronavirus is ninth highest in the nation.

Federal prisons are also more equipped to deal with the pandemic, because they’re spread across the country and often have healthier inmates and more funding, according to Lior Gideon, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and editor of a public health and criminal justice journal.

Each also agreed that New Jersey had been slow to respond.

“Could New Jersey have acted faster? Absolutely,” said Christine Tartaro, a criminal justice professor at Stockton University.

At least two prison officers have also died. On Wednesday, the governor’s office denied officers’ request for hazard pay.

The state has flagged more than 1,000 inmates for possible early release to ease pressure inside near-capacity prisons, but fewer than 100 had been released by Friday, three weeks after the plan was announced.

Matt Platkin, Murphy’s chief counsel, said 63 have been temporarily sent home and another 35 are pending.

Sondra Steen, a 64-year-old convicted of money laundering, is one inmate waiting for possible release at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women. She’s repeatedly had pneumonia because of a chronic lung problem, according to her sister Jan Van Holt.

“We’re just sitting here waiting for her to die,” Van Holt said.

NJ Advance Media staff writers Joe Atmonavage, Brent Johnson, and S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.