

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. finishes testing all juvenile offenders for coronavirus as advocates push for more early releases**

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published May 29, 2020

New Jersey has now tested almost all juvenile offenders, providing the first comprehensive look at how the coronavirus has spread behind bars and leading some to push the state to release more from detention facilities.

Advocates asked New Jersey's Supreme Court Wednesday to free some prisoners whose sentences end within a year, which would include residents of the Juvenile Justice Commission.

"Without a significant reduction in the JJC population, distancing will remain impossible and the threat of infection will continue unabated," Laura Cohen, a Rutgers University law professor and director of the Criminal and Youth Justice Clinic, told the seven justices.

At least 55 residents are set to be released within a year, the head of the commission told the court, but many had committed serious crimes, including robbery or endangering the welfare of a child. State officials also said social distancing was possible. Although many residents slept in dormitories, the entire system was less than half full, according to court documents filed by acting Executive Director Jennifer LeBaron.

New Jersey was the first state to start testing its entire juvenile population, and all but one of its approximately 260 residents have now been screened.

Twenty-eight people, or about 10%, were positive, according to public data. That's similar to the current 9% infection rate within the adult system, although the corrections department hasn't finished testing.

In contrast, less than 2% of the general population has tested positive.

"The system has to do better," said Quadnesha Selph, a woman whose 19-year-old son tested positive at the New Jersey Training School, the commission's largest facility and site of the most positive cases. "I might look good on the outside, but me not knowing what's really going on with my son, it's tearing me up on the inside."

Selph's son has asthma and was put in isolation after he reported symptoms, she said, and a doctor now checked him twice a day. It had been difficult to get information from officials about his status, she said.

Lisa Coryell, an agency spokeswoman, wrote in an email that the commission had increased free phone calls and video chats. Anyone in medical isolation can make a free phone call at least every other day, she said, in addition to outreach to relatives by staff.

“Officials at the JJC understand the importance of family connection, and are working hard to keep youth and families connected at this difficult time,” Coryell wrote.

Other juvenile facilities have been less affected, and there are no positive cases at Bordentown’s Female Secure Care and Intake Facility.

No residents or staff have died, according to court documents filed Thursday by the state attorney general’s office, and no residents have required hospitalization.

Many changes the juvenile system made to stem the outbreak were “commendable,” but more releases were still needed, Cohen said at Wednesday’s hearing. Some offenders had “serious underlying health conditions” like heart problems and diabetes, she said, and one teenager was pregnant.

Those still inside are also not receiving the help the system normally provides, Cohen said, because “all of the rehabilitative, educational and therapeutic programming that happens in the JJC has, by necessity, been curtailed.”

In response, Coryell wrote that the commission was going to “great lengths” to continue education, including installing Wi-Fi throughout the system to make it easier for residents to connect with teachers.

“Educational staff continue to speak with students via telephone, review completed assignments, drop off new coursework to be completed, and otherwise remain available,” she said. Social workers and other counselors have also continued to remotely meet residents, officials said.

The total juvenile population has dropped by almost a fifth since early March, according to the agency’s public reports.

Thirty-six employees who sought out their own tests were also positive. The commission aims to begin testing its more than 600 employees around June 9, LeBaron wrote in a court document.

The justices did not give a timeline for when they would issue a decision.

About 490 residents and 580 staff within juvenile systems around the country had tested positive as of Tuesday, according to the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit the Sentencing Project. Maine has finished testing the handful of juveniles it oversees, and Maryland’s governor recently announced plans to test all that state’s juvenile offenders.