

ACLU of Wisconsin: With COVID-19 cases rising at Wisconsin Corrections facilities, data model shows mass incarceration will increase death toll by 100,000

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MILWAUKEE – The day after officials confirmed the number of confirmed cases at Milwaukee County House of Correction rose to 103 and in the Dane County Jail to 21, a new data model shows that COVID-19 could claim the lives of approximately 100,000 more people nationwide than current projections stipulate if jail populations are not dramatically and immediately reduced. The findings indicate that — even if communities across the United States continue practicing social distancing and following public health guidance — they will still experience much higher death rates if no substantial action is taken to reduce jail populations.

“These numbers confirm what public health experts have been warning for weeks: mass incarceration is a tinderbox for COVID-19,” said Chris Ott, ACLU of Wisconsin executive director. “Without immediate and dramatic action to reduce incarcerated populations, these facilities will become death-traps – especially for people of color who are disproportionately trapped in this broken system. This data should be a wakeup call for Governor Evers and state corrections officials, who have the power to avert this public health catastrophe – but they must act now.”

On April 10, the ACLU of Wisconsin [filed a lawsuit](#) in the Wisconsin Supreme Court seeking the release of elderly and vulnerable people from state prisons in order to avoid a dangerous outbreak that would further strain the state's health care capacity and put public health at risk.

The U.S. is the largest incarcerator in the world, with just four percent of the world's population and 21 percent of its incarcerated population. About 40 percent of all incarcerated people suffer from at least one chronic health condition, such as asthma or diabetes. This means the U.S. faces a unique challenge in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and is likely facing a much higher death count than models based on data from other countries predict.

"We didn't need a data model to tell us that racial injustice is deadly – but these numbers expose just how staggering the death toll could be," said Sean Wilson, statewide organizer ACLU of Wisconsin's Smart Justice campaign. "State and local officials must take strong action immediately to avert a public health catastrophe that would disproportionately impact people of color."

The ACLU model used data pulled from more than 1,200 midsize and large jail systems around the country, whose surrounding communities account for 90 percent of the U.S. population. It found that, unequivocally, keeping people out of jail saves lives — both inside the jail and in the surrounding community. Other key findings from the model include:

- If a model that doesn't account for jails predicts the U.S. death toll will be 100,000, our model shows that that projection undercounts deaths by 98 percent. Actual deaths, once we account for jails, could be more than double, rising to 200,000.
- Implementing swift, bold reforms to reduce arrests by 50 percent can save

12,000 lives in jails, and 47,000 lives in the surrounding communities.

- Aggressive action and policy change could save as many as 23,000 people in jail and 76,000 in the broader community if we stop arrests for anything but the five percent of crimes defined as most serious by the FBI — including murder, rape, and aggravated assault — and double the rate of release for those already detained.
- States that have begun to reduce their jail populations are quantifiably saving lives. Colorado, for example, has so far achieved a 31 percent reduction in jail population. Our model found this likely will save 1,100 lives — reducing total lives lost in the state by 25 percent.
- Every day that goes by without action means more people will die. Delaying action for a week could mean a difference of 18,000 lives lost in the U.S.

“The prevailing epidemiological models largely fail to take into account our incarceration rates and the complete absence of social distancing in our jails — which is why we had to build our own model,” said Lucia Tian, chief analytics officer, ACLU. “While we always knew that jails would have an impact on loss of life in this pandemic, the model shows us just how large that impact may be — that even under our best case scenarios, we could be looking at 100,000 more deaths. We can’t save our community while ignoring our jails.”

The original model was developed by Dr. Nina Fefferman at the University of Tennessee, Dr. Eric Lofgren at Washington State University, and Dr. Kristian Lum from the University of Pennsylvania, in collaboration with Aaron Horowitz and Brooke Madubonwu of the ACLU’s data analytics team, experts from the ACLU and other corrections organizations contributed expertise.

The white paper with key results outlined can be found [here](#).

The original academic paper on Allegheny County can be found on MedRxiv, [here](#).