

Health experts, activists urge 'decarceration' to slow pandemic

May 13 2020, by Jeanna Lucci-Canapari



Credit: Dreamstime

Members of the Yale and local activist communities are coming together to urge Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont to depopulate the state's prisons to combat the spread of COVID-19 and protect the state's most vulnerable populations from the pandemic.

More than 50 [faculty members](#) signed a letter to the governor recently, urging him to "thoughtfully release a substantial portion of the state's [prison population](#)." The letter was coordinated by Yale School of Public Health Assistant Professor and co-director of the Global Health Justice Partnership Gregg Gonsalves, Ph.D., and Ryan McNeil, Ph.D., assistant professor at the School of Medicine.

"Prisons and jails are institutional amplifiers of infectious disease, and decarceration is what's best for Connecticut, inside and outside corrections facilities," Gonsalves said. "We are hoping the governor will do the right thing."

Gonsalves and McNeil also coordinated a virtual, call-in press conference on May 7 with more than 25 local community leaders, who raised the alarm on what they believe is an insufficient government response to the COVID-19 pandemic among not only the incarcerated but other vulnerable communities in Connecticut, including those experiencing homelessness, people who use drugs, sex workers and people with disabilities. Among the participants were representatives from Stop Solitary-Connecticut; Sex Workers and Allies Network, Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition, Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice; Alliance for Living; Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health; Yale Global Health Justice Partnership; and One Standard of Justice.

The press conference follows months of efforts by these groups to call attention to the inadequate state and local government attention to the particular needs of these vulnerable groups, including basic hygiene requirements such as access to public restrooms for those living on the streets or in encampments.

Facilities that congregate people, like prisons, detention centers, half-way houses, homeless shelters and others where people with disabilities

may reside, are associated with high transmission rates of infectious disease. Further complications exacerbate public health problems in these conditions.

"Prisons are porous settings that concentrate people with many at-risk conditions," said Frederick Altice, M.D., Yale professor of medicine and epidemiology. This includes an increasing older [prison](#) community, and many people with chronic disease including HIV and diabetes. "Staff from the community come and go three shifts per day and as we have learned, infection is inevitable. Even with depopulation, it is nearly impossible for people who are incarcerated to deal with issues of self-isolation and crowding. You can't get six feet away from someone if you are in a bunk bed."

According to the Connecticut Department of Correction, 1,455 prisoners have been released between March 1 and May 1 to lessen the spread of COVID-19. "One could call it a start, ... but that is certainly not going to be sufficient," said Altice.

People jailed for short sentences are people who could actually end up with a death sentence because of current practices, said Barbara First of Stop Solitary-Connecticut on the call. Both the letter and advocates attending the press conference also voiced concerns about the treatment of incarcerated people who have already contracted the virus. Currently, they are sent to the Northern Correctional Institute for isolation.

On the call, Altice addressed the potential public concern surrounding the release of prisoners. "It's a balance between public health and public safety," he said. "[Prisons] have the resources to triage those individuals who no longer pose a risk. Let's look to those options."

Provided by Yale University

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