

Researchers find nationwide prison mortality rates skyrocketed during the pandemic

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UCLA School of Law's Behind Bars Data Project—formerly the COVID Behind Bars Data Project—has launched a database that tracks the number of people who died while incarcerated, the only nationwide

accounting of recent deaths in U.S. prisons.

As the federal government ceased reporting on deaths in custody in 2019, the project's carceral mortality database is the country's most comprehensive public resource tracking prison deaths—from all causes—nationwide. A full introduction to the database is available on the project's website and [the full dataset is available on the project's GitHub](#).

The project's database serves as a partial replacement for—and, in significant ways, improvement upon—the former federal reporting, which never included individual or facility-level data.

"American prisons are deadly but obscure places. Our carceral mortality database provides a tragic accounting of the many lives lost in prison in recent years," said Aaron Littman, assistant professor at UCLA Law and acting director of the Behind Bars Data Project. "This new transparency resource will support policymakers and advocates working to end [preventable deaths](#) in prison and reduce reliance on incarceration."

Data analysis from UCLA Law found that while the U.S. has seen a significant increase in deaths in prisons in the past two decades, no year has seen anything like the steep increase in loss of life that occurred from 2019 to 2020.

The UCLA Law Behind Bars Data Project documented 6,182 deaths in 2020 compared to 4,240 deaths in 2019, a 61% increase in the mortality rate (the number of deaths divided by the number of people in prison) that coincided with a 10% drop in the U.S. prison population year-to-year.

In 2001, the federal government documented 3,170 deaths in prisons nationwide, meaning there were 87% more deaths in prisons nationally

in 2020 than in 2001, despite fewer people in prison in 2020. [Additional summary data analysis is available on the project's GitHub.](#)

The analysis shows that some states saw particularly acute increases in deaths. Sixteen state prison systems saw their mortality rate increase at least 90% from 2019 to 2020. These include:

- New Jersey—47 more deaths occurred in 2020 than in 2019, corresponding to a 142% mortality rate increase despite a 10% decrease in the overall prison population.
- Nevada—39 more deaths occurred in 2020 than in 2019, corresponding to a 133% mortality rate increase despite a 16% decrease in the overall prison population.
- West Virginia—18 more deaths occurred in 2020 than in 2019, corresponding to a 131% mortality rate increase despite a 29% decrease in the overall prison population.
- Michigan—131 more deaths occurred in 2020 than in 2019, corresponding to a 130% mortality rate increase despite an 8% decrease in the overall prison population.

Texas and Florida's prisons also saw dramatic increases from already high numbers in deaths over the same period: 253 additional deaths in Texas (a 74% mortality rate increase) and 190 more deaths in Florida (a 60% mortality rate increase).

As highlighted by a recent U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing and report, the U.S. Department of Justice no longer accurately collects and publishes data on deaths in custody, as it had done from 2000 to 2019. The Senate report cited the Behind Bars Data Project as an organization that has, "stepped in to attempt the [data collection](#) that DOJ is statutorily obligated and best situated to do."

Following the [decision to shift bureaucratic responsibility for](#)

[compliance](#) with a federal law mandating the gathering, reporting and analysis of data on deaths in custody, the [justice department](#) announced that it had been [unable to adequately collect recent data and would no longer issue its reports on mortality in correctional institutions](#), "leaving a major gap in knowledge of basic facts about the nation's carceral institutions," said Littman. Additional analysis of the DOJ's failure to use these data to improve carceral operations and prevent deaths is available on the project's blog.

Fearing this lack of reporting would leave the public in the dark as to the impact of the pandemic—and of other causes of death, from heart disease to suicide—on people in prison, the UCLA Law Behind Bars Data Project began requesting [public records](#) and compiling other available data to ensure that records of these deaths were available for and accessible to researchers, advocates and reporters attempting to hold the government accountable for deaths behind bars.

UCLA Law's team collected data on the deaths of people in the custody of the 50 state departments of corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. For 42 state prison agencies and the bureau of prisons, the team has collected individual-level data—meaning records that provide at least a specific date for each death—never included in previous federal reporting. For 43 states and the bureau of prisons, the team has collected facility associated with the [death](#)—critical information that the [federal government](#) has never published. The database also includes demographic data for the [prison](#) populations of 28 states, allowing for the study of rates and disparities by age and race.

"Our data will allow for a wide array of stakeholders and researchers to conduct their own analyses of the individual, facility, and environmental factors related to [mortality](#) in custody. We hope that these data will be used to prevent future deaths," said Michael Everett, data scientist with the UCLA Law Behind Bars Data Project.

The project, founded by professor of law Sharon Dolovich, has already published other research findings from the data, including that [life expectancy dropped much more significantly in the Florida state prison population](#) than in the state's overall population during the pandemic, and that [Hispanic and Black people in Texas prisons were much more likely than their incarcerated White peers to die of COVID.](#)

Additionally, the project's previous research found that [incarcerated people experienced death rates 2.5 times higher](#) than their peers in the first year of the pandemic.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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