The unique risks posed by COVID-19 to prison inmates and correctional officers
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New research and guidance in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, published by Elsevier, focus on critical topics pertaining to community and individual health during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Researchers outline guidelines to help address the unique and often overlooked risks posed by COVID-19 to both prison inmates and correctional officers

The correctional environment is often considered distinct or isolated from the wider society and health system, but the wellbeing of correctional workers and prisoners is inexorably linked to the health of the country as a whole. Almost 3 million people are incarcerated, or work in, state and federal prisons, local jails, and other detention facilities. Their safety is inherently a matter of public health. Researchers highlight some of the inherent risks within correctional systems that may increase COVID-19 transmission among and between inmates and staff. They outline recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, WHO, and other organizations to help correctional professionals mitigate these risks and protect and treat anyone who lives and works in their institution. This includes collaboration between correctional systems and their local public health authorities, adherence to the principles of infectious disease control, and early release or furlough of prisoners whose release would pose fewer public safety risks than their continued incarceration.

"Both correctional employees and inmates have long been overlooked by our society, community leaders, and legislators," said lead author Andre Montoya-Barthelemy, MD, MPH, HealthPartners Occupational and Environmental Medicine, St. Paul, MN; and American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Elk Grove Village, IL. "As we researched this article, we were immediately struck by how abruptly COVID-19 has exposed our neglect of those who live and work within the prison system, and how the health of our neighbors in the correctional environment is so tightly bound to our own."

Vulnerable populations may pay the highest price in the COVID-19 epidemic, researchers warn

Marginalized in the best of times, people who are homeless, incarcerated, or using drugs are likely to experience a higher risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 because of their social circumstances. A response to these forgotten populations must be central to the COVID-19 response. Planning should incorporate dedicated efforts, funding, and guidelines specific to these populations, both because they deserve care and services and not doing so poses greater risk to the broader community.

Researchers note that homeless shelters are ideal for viral transmission. They caution that healthcare resources may be prioritized for those at least risk of death, and vulnerable populations may be further
chronic diseases that elevate the risk of severe illness due to COVID-19. By focusing testing, case detection and treatment programs in communities most at risk of severe illness due to COVID-19, we may be able to reduce the overall toll of the disease.”

Mandatory social distancing measures in Clarke County, GA slowed the spread of COVID-19, compared to surrounding counties and the rest of the state

In the state of Georgia, Clarke County was among the first to adopt a mandatory policy of sheltering in place (SIP) in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, effective March 20, 2020. Except for one neighboring county, the counties surrounding Clarke County did not implement similar measures, and statewide measures were not put into effect until April 3, 2020. Mark H. Ebell, MD and Grace Bagwell-Adams, PhD, MPA, of the College of Public Health, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, explain that this variation in policies at a “hyperlocal” level created a natural experiment prior to the statewide policy change and allowed them to examine the relationship between SIP policy implementation and the doubling rates of COVID-19 cases for Clarke County versus surrounding counties. Doubling time is a key metric used to evaluate whether progress is being made in containing a virus: the faster it takes the number of cases to double in an area, the faster the disease is spreading.

Dr. Ebell and Dr. Bagwell-Adams observed that doubling time in Clarke County was 11.3 days longer compared to surrounding counties and increased by an average of eight days compared with the entire state. Looking at percentage daily increases, they found a 30 percent decrease in percent increases in Clarke County compared with other counties. “Our report reinforces the fact that mandatory implementation of distancing measures is the most important way to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic,” say Dr. Ebell and Dr. Bagwell-Adams. “Our mayor and commission were two weeks ahead of the rest of Georgia in mandating isolation measures, and we think the community has benefited as a result.”


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