***Doctors, Judges, and Other Experts Say***

**DECARCERATE Before COVID-19 Takes Over Our Jails, Prisons, and Immigration Detention Centers**

**Doctors**

[**Dr. Scott Allen and Dr. Josiah Rich**](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/health/doctors-ice-detention-coronavirus/index.html)**, experts for the Department of Homeland Security:** “[At minimum, DHS] should consider releasing all detainees in high risk medical groups such as older people and those with chronic diseases, [...] In addition, given the low risk of releasing detainees who do not pose a threat to public safety -- i.e., those only charged with immigration violations -- releasing all immigration detainees who do not pose a security risk should be seriously considered in the national effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus."

[**Dr. Rachael Bedard**](https://time.com/5808020/rikers-island-coronavirus/)**, a geriatrician working at Rikers Island prison in NY:** Jails are “a perfect setup for an outbreak[...] Depopulating, in this case, is not letting a dozen guys out or two dozen guys out [...] It means pushing as hard as possible for hundreds of people to get out so that the jail population is decreased enough that you don’t just benefit the people who are released but you also benefit those who are left behind — and the staff who take care of them and the officers who take care of them.”

[**Dr. Burton Bentley II**](https://www.businessinsider.com/experts-keeping-prisons-free-of-coronavirus-will-be-a-challenge-2020-3)**, an emergency medicine physician and founder of the consulting firm Elite Medical Experts:** "They're unique because these people are in tight confines, often tightly packed, and that's a fertile ground for infectious disease...Anytime you have populations that are tightly condensed, the spread of communicable diseases … is obviously elevated and accelerated."

[**Dr. Laura Chambers-Kersh**](https://prospect.org/coronavirus/risks-for-pregnant-women-ice-detainees-and-all-of-us/)**, family physician, Dayton, Ohio:** “Even in the hospital, once you get a certain number of people with the virus, it gets everywhere—and that’s in the hospital in Italy, which has an excellent health care system. So. what’s that going to look like in a detention center? In a jail? In a prison? In a hospital where you have cleaning crews going through two or three times a day, hand sanitizer everywhere, people with [personal protective equipment], we don’t have enough PPE in the hospitals right now. So they certainly don’t have it in detention centers and jails. I think it would be incredibly difficult to contain it once it starts.”

[**Dr. Amy Cohen**](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-ice-release-immigrants-detention-outbreak/), **a child psychiatrist who specializes in detention conditions of migrant families:** “[An outbreak would be] nearly impossible to contain, [...] One has to see these detention centers are powder kegs, [...] They are going to be petri dishes. They are going to be places where this virus is going to thrive and spread and where some people are going to get desperately ill — and some of those people are going to die. [...] There's an intimate connection between what goes inside these facilities and what goes on in the communities around them, [...] And I think that we will see this to our serious detriment if this isn't something that is taken into consideration and dealt with now."

[**Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières USA and Physicians for Human Rights, along with Amnesty International USA, Human Rights First, Refugees International, and Women’s Refugee Commission**](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1beORFZsFhKgSd17qoOLkes9A0FeNCIyoGB5MiWOsBKU/edit)**:** “Medical professionals advise that to prevent transmission, individuals should not be congregated in enclosed or densely populated spaces, including detention facilities or mass quarantine centers. Public health experts [universally agree](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/17/we-must-release-prisoners-lessen-spread-coronavirus/) that limiting detention, not expanding it, is one of the most important steps authorities can take to combat the spread of COVID-19.”

[**Dr. Carlos Franco-Paredes**](https://ohioimmigrant.org/2020/03/20/infectious-disease-expert-calls-on-ice-to-release-immigration-detainees-for-covid-19/)**, Program Director, Infectious Disease Fellowship at the University of Colorado: “**Given the large population density of immigration detention centers, and the ease of transmission of this viral pathogen, the attack rate may take exponential proportions. Behind the walls of a detention center, the basic reproductive rate of the infection (R0=2) may be responsible for infecting between 30-50% of detainees and staff within a facility…. [reducing the size of the detained population] is the public interest since the release of people from detention will minimize the number of people infected with COVID-19 that may potentially spread to the surrounding communities around detention centers.”

[**Dr. Jonathan Giftos**](https://time.com/5808020/rikers-island-coronavirus/)**, a former medical director at Rikers Island prison in NY:** “The halls are small… many [inmates] are escorted in shackles. You cannot physically distance yourself from other people [...] I don’t think there is anything unique about Rikers [...] The risk factors are similar [at other facilities].”

[**Dr. Gregg Gonsalves**](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/it-spreads-like-wildfire-covid-19-comes-to-new-yorks-prisons)**, epidemiology professor at Yale School of Public Health:** “It’s nearly impossible to provide infection control in these settings [...] If you wanted to set up a situation that would promote rapid transmission of a respiratory virus, you would say prison: it’s close quarters, unsanitary, individuals in frequent contact. [...] You have a gaping wound and you’re giving a Band-Aid, [...] You have to reduce the population load to reduce the risk of infection.”

[**Dr. Nathaniel Kratz**](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4agp4w/thousands-of-doctors-demand-ice-release-detainees-to-stop-a-covid-19-disaster)**, Columbia University’s Irving Medical Center and a member of NYLPI’s medical steering committee:** “What happens in there happens in the community as well [...] The conditions and the outbreaks that happen in these facilities are going to be reflected in the communities of which they’re a part. [...] These are spaces that are created for control, they are not spaces created for hygiene, [...] All of the basic public health measures that we use to prevent the spread of infectious disease are either severely lacking or absent.”

[**Dr. Ross MacDonald**](https://time.com/5808020/rikers-island-coronavirus/)**, Chief Physician of Rikers Island prison in NY:** “The right preventive measures don’t exist to stop the spread of this virus in [jail and prison facilities]. There is simply no way to protect a jail [from a virus like this].”

[**Dr. Jessica Merlin**](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4agp4w/thousands-of-doctors-demand-ice-release-detainees-to-stop-a-covid-19-disaster)**, associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh, director of Doctors for Camp Closure’s Pennsylvania chapter:** “Delaying action on this is only going to make things worse, [...] The sooner we act, the better it will be.”

[**Dr. Ranit Mishori**](https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/487986-risk-behind-bars-coronavirus-and-immigration-detention)**, senior medical advisor at Physicians for Human Rights and a professor of family medicine at the Georgetown University School of Medicine:**“On the one hand, there is a captive population. On the other hand, there is a revolving door of exposure. The guards come and go; health staff come and go; visitors come and go; food workers come and go. [...] They should already be arranging for shipments of masks, soap, sanitizing wipes, and bleach to facilities around the country. [...] More importantly, discussions should take place about letting many of the [detainees go](https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/groups-release-immigrant-detainees-high-coronavirus-risk-69514557), either via parole or bond, or other mechanisms. Most of them should not have been in detention in the first place. Some [jails](https://www.wjhl.com/coronavirus/inmates-in-ohio-being-released-due-to-concern-of-coronavirus-spread/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook_WJHL&fbclid=IwAR3xUd18Sv3t4GZpardvik28xcz3FU_I3gaAdk7zsKkWoLolZbkM9Qwmoms) are beginning to do just that.”

[**Dr. Owen J. Murray**](https://www.gazettextra.com/news/nation_world/prisons-are-bacteria-factories-elderly-inmates-are-at-most-at/article_c6871401-e7a7-5635-b554-a54817a6e23f.html)**, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, vice president for offender health services:** “Unfortunately, a lot of our patients have not had great health care coming into prison [...] And this isn’t unique to Texas. The same thing is going on in every state.”

[**Dr. Jody Rich**](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-immigration/staff-working-with-immigrant-detainees-in-the-u-s-test-positive-for-coronavirus-idUSKBN2172EG), **director of the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights and professor of epidemiology at Brown University:** “The infection of staff members should raise a huge alarm.”

[**Dr. Zachary Rosner**](https://time.com/5808020/rikers-island-coronavirus/)**, NYC CHS [Community Health Systems] physician:** “Imagine an already overburdened city hospital in your district having to receive case, after case, after case of severely ill patients and the officers who have to escort them, [...] Imagine what it looks like when our staff are home sick and cannot provide care in the jails. [...] Act at scale today, otherwise, the suffering of the patients and staff… will be remembered for generations.”

[**Dr. Julie Sierra**](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/release-ice-detainees/608536/)**, San Diego-area doctor who requested to vaccinate migrants at the border:** “It’s putting people in a dangerous situation and increasing their risks of getting any disease, including the flu. [Although migrants can get vaccinated later] the vaccination’s not going to help them once they’ve already gotten sick.”

[**Dr. Marc Stern**](https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/LettertoOhioonCOVID19andimmigrationdetention.pdf)**, correctional health expert and former health services director for Washington State’s Department of Corrections:** “[w]ith a smaller population, prisons, jails, and detention centers can help diseases spread less quickly by allowing people to better maintain social distance,” and “[i]f staff cannot come to work because they are infected, a smaller population poses less of a security risk for remaining staff.”

[**Dr. Homer Venters**](https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/LettertoOhioonCOVID19andimmigrationdetention.pdf)**, former chief medical officer of the New York City jail system:** “Coronavirus in these settings will dramatically increase the epidemic curve, not flatten it.”

[**Dr. Homer Venters**](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/17/21181515/coronavirus-covid-19-jails-prisons-mass-incarceration)**, former chief medical officer for New York City Correctional Health Services:** “If you spend even just a couple of minutes in any jail or prison area, you would quickly find that many of the sinks there for handwashing don’t work, or that there are no paper towels or no soap, [...] In other words, handwashing, the most basic tool that incarcerated people have, won’t be consistently available. Jail and prison administrators should be thinking right now about how they can put more infection control measures into place very quickly.”

[**Dr. Tyler Winkelman**](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/17/21181515/coronavirus-covid-19-jails-prisons-mass-incarceration)**, doctor and researcher at the University of Minnesota:** “We can learn what works in terms of mitigation from other countries [...], but none of those countries have the level of incarceration that we have in the United States, [...] If Covid spreads in a large, thousand-person facility, and within five days you have a thousand people with multiple chronic conditions who just got the virus, that has the potential to really overwhelm a health care system. [...] No jail or prison in the world has ever seen anything like this. There are policies in place to handle influenza, but we don’t have, historically, policies around what to do if prisons and jails can’t slow down the spread of a virus.”

**Judges and Law Enforcement**

[**Ted Barrows**](https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200319/police-judges-weigh-arrests-and-jail-time-amid-coronavirus-outbreak)**, Administrative Judge, Franklin County (OH) Municipal Court:** “When we come out of this, we may decide there’s no reason to go back to the way things were before.”

[**Satana Deberry**](https://www.davisvanguard.org/2020/03/early-release-of-some-sacramento-county-jail-inmates-urged-for-safety-of-residents-jailers-and-prisoners/)**, District Attorney, Durham, NC:** “For incarcerated individuals, social distancing is not possible. Durham DA’s Office implemented a pretrial release policy that recommends people charged with nonviolent crimes be released from custody without monetary conditions, [...] [noting that her staff is] reviewing the jail population…working proactively with defense attorneys and judges to identify people who could be safely released through a modification of release conditions or disposition of their case. [...] We are also working with local law enforcement to ensure that only those few individuals who do present a danger to our community are brought to the detention facility during this emergency.”

[**Michael Dougherty**](https://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/16/colorado-coronavirus-jails-arrests/)**, Boulder County District Attorney**: “We have the president saying we shouldn’t gather in groups more than 10, and if we have a group of 500 people in our jail that seems like a public health crisis waiting to happen.”

[**Ed Gonzalez**](https://www.wivb.com/health/coronavirus/as-coronavirus-seeps-into-u-s-prisons-activists-push-for-the-release-of-vulnerable-inmates/)**, Harris County Sheriff, Texas:** “We can’t check our humanity at the door [...] It has got to be important for us to remain very strong with public safety, but not lose our compassion along the way.”

[**Gurbir Grewal**](https://www.app.com/story/news/2020/03/23/nj-coronavirus-up-1-000-inmates-released-jails/2897439001/)**, Attorney General, New Jersey:** “This is the most significant public health crisis we face in our state's history and it's forcing us to take actions that we wouldn't consider during normal times."

[**Sgt. Ray Kelly**](https://theappeal.org/coronavirus-san-francisco-reduce-jail-population/)**, Alameda County Sheriff’s Office, CA:** “We know if we get one COVID case in the jail it probably is going to bring a major disruption to the criminal justice system in Alameda County, [...] It will affect the courts, jail, and officers on the street who may not be able to book arrestees into our jail. [...] We’re dealing with a very at-risk population with a lot of underlying health problems, [...] Some have compromised immune systems, HIV, cancer, and hepatitis. This is like the most at-risk group in society who ends up in jail.”

[**Mike McGrath**](https://santamariatimes.com/news/national/govt-and-politics/montana-high-court-asks-judges-to-consider-releasing-inmates/article_63149602-e225-5dfb-b97c-961080a6c9f4.html)**, Chief Justice, Montana Supreme Court:** “Because of the high risk of transmittal of COVID-19, not only to prisoners within correctional facilities but staff and defense attorneys as well, we ask that your review your jail rosters and release, without bond, as many prisoners as you are able, especially those being held for non-violent offenses.”

[**Maureen O’Connor**](https://www.nbc4i.com/news/local-news/ohio-chief-justice-urges-release-of-those-in-jail-vulnerable-to-coronavirus/), **Ohio Chief Justice:** “I urge judges to use their discretion to release people held in jail, and release incarcerated individuals, who are in a high-risk category for being infected with the virus.”

[**Paul Pazen**](https://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/16/colorado-coronavirus-jails-arrests/)**, Denver police chief:** “We don’t want to unnecessarily introduce infection in the (Downtown Detention Center) or the county jail for a low-level crime, [...] We want to use good judgment to reduce risk and reduce exposure.”

[**John Sandweg**](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/release-ice-detainees/608536/)**, Former acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):** “ICE is fortunate that the threat posed by these detention centers can be mitigated rather easily. By releasing from custody, the thousands of detainees who pose no threat to public safety and do not constitute an unmanageable flight risk, ICE can reduce the overcrowding of its detention centers, and thus make them safer, while also putting fewer people at risk. […] An outbreak will expose the hundreds of ICE agents and officers, medical personnel, contract workers, and others who work in these facilities to the virus. Once exposed, many of them will unknowingly take the virus home to their family and community.”

[**Anne Marie Schubert**](https://www.davisvanguard.org/2020/03/early-release-of-some-sacramento-county-jail-inmates-urged-for-safety-of-residents-jailers-and-prisoners/)**, District Attorney, Sacramento County, CA:** “It is everyone’s moral responsibility to act today, not tomorrow or next week.”

[**Brendan Sheehan**](https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2020/03/cuyahoga-county-officials-will-hold-mass-plea-hearings-to-reduce-jail-population-over-coronavirus-concerns.html)**, Common Pleas Court Administrative and Presiding Judge, Cuyahoga County (OH):** “We have to do something to reduce the jail population because of the coronavirus issue.”

[**Jacqueline Sherman**](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/News/covid-19/Letter-from-BOC-re-NYC-Jails-and-COVID-19-2020-03-21.pdf)**, Interim Chair, The Board of Correction City of New York:** “This immediate reduction should prioritize the release of people who are at higher risk from infection such as those over 50 or with underlying health conditions. Additionally, you must safely release other people in jail to decrease the overall population; this process should begin with people detained for administrative reasons (including failure to appear and parole violations) and people serving “City Sentences” (sentences of one year or less). The process should continue to identify all other people who can be released. DOC and CHS should provide discharge planning to all people you release, including COVID screening, connection to health and mental health services, and support with housing, as necessary.”

[**Ashley Tabbador**](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/u-s-called-close-immigration-courts-release-some-detainees-n1163306)**, immigration judge in Los Angeles, president of the National Association of Immigration Judges:** “The scientific, evidence-based opinion of public health experts can only lead to one conclusion for us all who are connected with the immigration court system, and that is to immediately and temporarily close all of the immigration courts nationwide [...] COVID-19 does not discriminate between a DHS trial attorney, private counsel, the respondents or court employees.”

[**Kym Worthy**](https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2020/03/20/coronavirus-covid-19-wayne-county-inmates-identified-release/2888073001/)**, Wayne County Prosecutor, Detroit, MI:** “As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been working on the issue of administrative release of prisoners nonstop, [..] They have been identified and are being medically assessed by the experts. Then decisions can be made on more administrative releases, [...] This is critical because many of these individuals do not have health insurance, an identifiable doctor, or anyone to take care of their medical needs.”