

U.S. Prison Population Dropped 8% During Coronavirus Crisis

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TOPLINE

Over 100,000 people were released from federal and state prisons between March and June, according to new [data](#) illustrating how the coronavirus pandemic impacted the criminal justice system.



An aerial view San Quentin State Prison in California. Over 1,400 inmates and staff at San Quentin ... [+] State Prison have become infected with coronavirus and six inmates have died from the virus.

Getty Images

KEY FACTS

The analysis—compiled by the *Associated Press* in collaboration with *The Marshall Project*—shows some states significantly lowered their prison populations over the course of four months.

Rhode Island reduced prison incarceration by 32%, while Connecticut, North Dakota, West Virginia and Vermont all shed over 15% of their prison populations.

The data also finds that more than 57,000 prisoners tested positive for Covid-19 (35,000 recovered and 651 died), while 12,400 staff were infected with the virus (46 died).

Though prisons were hit hard by the pandemic—with prisoners [facing](#) a death rate three times higher than the general U.S. population—the *Marshall Project* does not source the entire population drop to increased efforts to release prisoners for health reasons.

Data and experts [suggest](#) that the shrunken prison population was more likely driven by a halt on accepting new prisoners from county jails to prevent bringing in new cases, fewer sentences because of court closures and more leniency with parole violations.

As a result, the drop in the country's massive incarceration rate could bounce back up once the pandemic begins to subside.

Big Number: 2.3 million.

How many people in the U.S. [were](#) behind bars as of March 2020, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. In addition to prisons, this number includes other facilities like juvenile detention facilities, local jails, immigration detention centers and more.

Key Background

From the beginning of the pandemic, health experts encouraged detention facilities to take action preventing the quick spread of disease among their vulnerable populations. Attorney General William Barr [released](#) a memo in April ordering the Federal Bureau of Prisons to identify "at-risk inmates who are non-violent and pose minimal likelihood of recidivism and who might be safer serving their sentences in home confinement." States then began releasing hundreds or thousands of inmates at a time to some [pushback](#). However, the *AP* [reports](#) that many of these temporary relief programs didn't release nearly as many people as originally intended. These efforts are ongoing and most recently, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation—facing [rising](#) cases in some state prisons—[announced](#) July 10 that 8,000 California inmates could be eligible for early release by the end of August.

Further Reading

["Coronavirus disproportionately harms U.S. prison population"](#) (UCLA Newsroom)

["California's San Quentin prison declined free coronavirus tests and urgent advice — now it has a massive outbreak"](#) (Nature)

["Prison Population Drop 100,000 During Pandemic"](#) (The Marshall Project)

[Full coverage and live updates on the Coronavirus](#)

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