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COVID-19 SPURS 25% DROP IN INMATES HELD IN LOCAL JAILS

WASHINGTON — Local jails in the United States experienced a large decline (down 185,400 inmates) in their inmate populations from June 30, 2019 to June 30, 2020, which can be attributed mainly to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau of Justice Statistics announced today. At midyear 2020, jails held 549,100 inmates, down from 734,500 at midyear 2019. The jail incarceration rate of 167 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents on June 30, 2020 was the lowest since 1990 when it was 163 per 100,000.

The large decline in the overall jail population had a notable effect on the number of inmates held for a misdemeanor, which fell about 45% from midyear 2019 to midyear 2020. This decrease outpaced the 18% decline in inmates held for a felony. The distribution of inmates by conviction status also changed, due to a 34% decline in convicted inmates compared to a 21% decline in unconvicted inmates. From midyear 2019 to midyear 2020, the female jail population saw a greater decline (down 37%) than the male population (23%).

Jail facilities became less crowded during the pandemic with fewer inmates due to declining admissions and to the expedited release of 208,500 inmates from jails between March and June 2020. About 60% of beds in local jails were occupied at midyear 2020, a decrease from 81% at midyear 2019. From midyear 2019 to midyear 2020, the percentage of occupied beds decreased from 73% to 54% in jails located in counties with the highest confirmed COVID-19 infection rate (1% or more residents with confirmed COVID-19). Moreover, the percentage of occupied beds decreased from 86% to 66% in jails located in counties with the lowest confirmed infection rate (0.2% residents infected with confirmed COVID-19).

Jails nationwide administered 215,360 COVID-19 tests to inmates from March to June 2020, which was the equivalent of testing 9% of the 2.4 million persons admitted to jails during that time. More than 11% of these tests were positive. Jails in counties with the highest COVID-19 infection rate tested nearly 21% of persons admitted to their jails, and about 14% of these tests were positive. Among jails in counties with the lowest COVID-19 infection rate about 4% of persons admitted to the jails were tested, with about 2% of those tests coming back positive.

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As for jail staff, nearly 5% (10,850 of 233,220 employees) tested positive for COVID-19 during the 4-month period. About 8% of jail staff working in counties with the highest infection rates tested positive for COVID-19, compared to 1% of jail staff testing positive in counties with the lowest infection rates.

Among the jails that reported on COVID-19-related inmate and staff deaths (89% of sampled jails), a total of 43 inmates in 22 jails died of COVID-19 from March to June 2020. Thirty-three of those deaths were reported as confirmed deaths from COVID-19 or deaths where COVID-19 was a significant contributor (as determined by a positive test before or after death). The other 10 deaths were reported as suspected deaths from COVID-19 or deaths where COVID-19 was a significant contributor (based on the person having symptoms of COVID-19 before death but no positive test to confirm COVID-19).

A total of 40 jail staff in 30 jails also died of COVID-19 during this time. Thirty-two of the deaths were reported as confirmed deaths from COVID-19 or deaths where COVID-19 was a significant contributor. The other eight deaths were reported as suspected deaths from COVID-19 or deaths where COVID-19 was a significant contributor. Four jails accounted for 14 of the 40 staff deaths, while the other 26 jails had one staff death each. Estimates of inmate and staff deaths were not adjusted for jails that partially responded or did not respond to the survey, or for potential differences between sampled and non-sampled jails.

The report, *Impact of COVID-19 on the Local Jail Population, January-June 2020* (NCJ 255888), was written by BJS statisticians Todd D. Minton, Zhen Zeng, Ph.D., and Laura Maruschak. BJS also released *Jail Inmates in 2019* (NCJ 255608), a report written by BJS statisticians Zhen Zeng, Ph.D., and Todd D. Minton. The reports, related documents and additional information about BJS's statistical publications and programs are available on the BJS website at www.bjs.gov.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice is the principal federal agency responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating reliable statistics on crime and criminal justice in the United States. Doris J. James is the acting director.

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