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Study: Hispanic People in Texas Prisons Died of COVID at a Rate Double Their White Peers, Black People Died at Rate 1.6 Times

Nationwide, there have been over 656,000 COVID cases among people in custody and at least 3,160 deaths in custody from COVID.

Los Angeles, CA — A [new study](#) by the UCLA Law COVID Behind Bars Data Project has found stark racial disparities among the hundreds of people who have died of COVID in Texas prisons. The study was published this month in *Health Affairs*, a leading peer-reviewed healthcare journal. According to the study, **from April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021, Hispanic people in state custody died of COVID at a rate 2.1 times greater than their White peers, and Black people died of COVID at a rate 1.6 times greater than their White peers.** Additionally, 51% of all deaths (or 109 of 215 deaths) among the Hispanic population in Texas prisons were COVID-related, compared with 40 percent for the Black population (96 of 239 deaths) and 33 percent for the White population (93 of 284 deaths).

The new study also notes that although Black and Hispanic populations faced especially dramatic increases, all people in Texas prisons experienced sharply increased mortality rates for both COVID and non-COVID deaths. Between the year preceding the pandemic and the first twelve months of the pandemic, **the all-cause mortality rate for the full population in Texas prisons increased by 88%.**

“People in prisons and jails across the country have been hit particularly hard by the ongoing, once-in-a-century pandemic. Our study now shows that Hispanic and Black people in prison are even more at risk than their White peers,” said UCLA Law Professor Sharon Dolovich who directs the COVID Behind Bars Data Project and is a co-author of the study.

According to the study, the disparities in mortality rates suggest that Hispanic and Black people have differential experiences of incarceration in Texas prisons, with members of these racial and ethnic groups facing inequitable levels of COVID risk, COVID exposure, and/or barriers to health care use that could prevent COVID-related mortality. This finding supports the research-backed claim from [other scholars](#) that **the structures of systemic racism that lead to racial and ethnic health disparities of COVID in the US as a whole have also penetrated the boundaries of carceral systems.**

“Our research supports what people in prison have reported for years: the criminal legal system's disparate treatment of people of color does not stop at the prison walls. Made visible again by the pandemic, the country’s carceral institutions have a long history of systemic racism,” said Neal Marquez, the study’s lead author and former COVID Behind Bars Data Project Research Scientist.

In total, the COVID Behind Bars Data Project has documented nearly [46,000 COVID cases](#) in the Texas prison system and 355 deaths from COVID. Nationwide, the Project has documented over 656,000 COVID cases among people in custody and 3,160 deaths in custody from COVID. According to a previous study published by the UCLA Law COVID Behind Bars Data Project with co-authors in the Journal of the American Medical Association, [incarcerated people experienced infection rates 3.3 times that of their peers and death rates 2.5 times higher](#) in the first year of the pandemic.

The authors call for states to alleviate COVID in prisons nationwide by decreasing prison populations and to focus on strategies to mitigate racial and ethnic inequalities of COVID-related outcomes by eliminating medical co-pays and conducting vaccine outreach that targets people who have historically been mistreated by medical communities.

“COVID remains an urgent public health threat to people behind bars. Prison systems must do more to protect people in custody and the community. Vaccinations, expansion and improvement of health care, reduction of medical costs, and decarceration are all critical public health interventions,” said Amanda Klonsky, a co-author of the study and former COVID Behind Bars Data Project Research and Policy Fellow

The Project also published a [blog](#) announcing the release and summarizing the article.

About the UCLA Law COVID Behind Bars Data Project

The UCLA Law COVID Behind Bars Data Project tracks the spread and impact of COVID in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers, and advocates for greater transparency and accountability around the pandemic response of the carceral system. Project data and analysis are available at uclacovidbehindbars.org.