

March 27, 2020

Dear President Trump,

As Americans are engaging in social distancing to limit the spread of COVID-19, we, as public health experts and concerned citizens, write to urge you to use your discretion to allow for the same to occur in federal prisons and immigration detention centers. These facilities contain high concentrations of people in close proximity and are breeding grounds for the uncontrolled transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The conditions in federal prisons and immigration detention centers present significant health risks to the people housed in them, the correctional officers, health care professionals, and others who work in them, and to the community as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic requires a strategic response based on the conditions we know to exist and the interventions we know to effectively limit transmission. We know that the COVID-19 virus [transmits rapidly in densely populated spaces](#), which is why the CDC [recommends](#) that people keep at least six feet away from each other and avoid gatherings of more than ten people. Responding to the virus also requires an ability to keep sick people from well people and to treat those who have been exposed without endangering others.

This has been difficult to accomplish in our society generally, but is impossible to achieve in our federal prisons and immigration facilities as things currently stand. More [than 221,000 people](#) are incarcerated in federal prisons and [50,000](#) adults and children in immigrant detention centers. These people are [housed](#) cheek-by-jowl, in tightly-packed and poorly-ventilated dormitories; they share toilets, showers, and sinks; they wash their bedsheets and clothes infrequently; and often lack access to basic personal hygiene items. These facilities lack the ability to [separate sick people from well people](#) and to quarantine those who have been exposed. They are [tinderboxes, ready to explode and endanger](#) our entire country. Adequate medical care is hard to provide, even without COVID-19.

Concern over the people detained in these facilities should be sufficient to spur you to action, but they are not nearly the only people who stand to suffer if conditions are not changed: it is likely that an outbreak in a prison or detention center will spread beyond that facility. Through “jail churn” staff, correctional officers, judges, doctors, and visitors will all be exposed to COVID-19 in these facilities and will carry and spread it in the community at large. Facilities face the same risks as cruise ships and nursing homes when dealing with COVID-19.

First, we ask that you commute sentences for **all elderly people**. While the SARS-CoV-2 virus infects people of all ages, the World Health Organization (WHO) is clear that [older people](#) are at a higher risk of getting severe COVID-19 disease and dying. In fact, the risk of severe disease gradually increases with age starting from around 40 years. Also, older people who are released from prison [pose little risk to public safety](#).

Second, we are also asking that you commute sentences for the **medically vulnerable population** including persons suffering from [cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic](#)

[respiratory disease, or cancer](#). In addition to older people, WHO has identified persons with these underlying medical conditions to be at greater risk for contracting severe COVID-19. While there is little known yet about the effects of COVID-19 on pregnant women, the CDC [explains](#) that with viruses from the same family as COVID-19, and other viral respiratory infections such as influenza, pregnant women have had a higher risk of developing severe illness.

Third, we are asking that you commute sentences for **all persons who have one year or less remaining on their sentence**. This measure will limit overcrowding that can lead to [further spread](#) of COVID-19 and free up beds that will be needed to care for the sick who should be housed separate from others.

Fourth, **release all persons, adults and children, detained in an immigration facility**. This includes using discretionary power to release all immigration detainees on parole, or using alternatives to detention methods. Detained adults and children have been held for days, weeks, or even months in cramped cells, sometimes with [no access](#) to soap, toothpaste, or places to wash their hands or shower. These conditions have led to [outbreaks](#) of other contagious diseases such as flu, lice, chicken pox, and scabies and are ripe for an outbreak of COVID-19. U.S. border policies create [further risk](#). Immigrants who have been forced to stay in makeshift camps in Mexico due to the administration's [Remain in Mexico](#) policy are also facing health risks from living in overcrowded conditions without adequate hygiene or health care making them susceptible to outbreaks of contagious diseases.

Lastly, suspend new detentions of suspected non-citizens. Increased interior enforcement by ICE, including [violent raids and arrests](#), has presented unique risks of COVID-19 for immigrant communities. Immigrant families may avoid going to the hospital or seeking necessary medical attention out of fear of detection by ICE. Immigrants may also decline to self quarantine out of fear that ICE will find them and arrest them in their own home. Interior enforcement has [continued to increase](#) even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respectfully,

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