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Overcrowded correctional facilities during a pandemic are disasters waiting to happen

CT VIEWPOINTS :: by MIKE LAWLOR | MARCH 31, 2020 | "EXIT CLEAN READ"



MARK PAZNIOKAS :: CTMIRROR.ORG

Then-Gov. Dannel P. Malloy announced a prison population milestone outside a correctional facility in Hartford last year.

Connecticut's total incarcerated population dropped by 524 in March. That is the single biggest one month decline in our state's history. Yes, COVID-19 was a factor, but this dramatic acceleration is part of a

continuing 12-year downward trend in both incarceration and reported crime.

On Saturday morning our state passed a correctional milestone: Since its peak of 19,894 on February 1, 2008, our total incarcerated population has dropped by 40%. No other state has experienced a jail and prison reduction of this magnitude.



Mike Lawlor

Since 2010 we have closed five adult correctional institutions: Webster C.I. in Cheshire; Bergin C.I. in Mansfield; Gates C.I. and Niantic Annex C.I. in Niantic; and Enfield C.I. in Enfield. Connecticut Juvenile Training School, our only facility for adjudicated juveniles, closed in 2018. Major portions of four other facilities: Osborn C.I. in Somers; Radgowski C.I. in Montville, Bridgeport C. I. and Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire have been taken off-line as well. Still, hundreds of cells statewide sit empty. Northern Correctional Institution for example, our “super-max” prison that once held almost 500 people, now houses fewer than 70.

Last month’s unprecedented steep downward trend appears to be the result of a concerted effort throughout the criminal justice system to emulate hospital triage during the COVID-19 crisis: the cancellation or postponement of elective incarcerations. In this crisis, those who need to be incarcerated for public safety should be confined in our facilities, but those who do not pose a public safety threat should not.

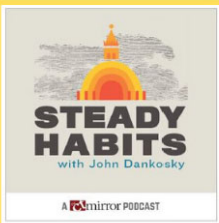
The preliminary data publicly available show significant reductions in the pre-trial population (those who cannot afford to post money bail); the sentenced population and parole violators, especially those re-incarcerated for technical violations.

Since March 1, the pre-trial population dropped by 89 or 2%. The total number of sentenced prisoners dropped by 406, or just over 4%. A subgroup, those sentenced to serve less than one year (generally speaking,

the less serious incarcerated people) dropped by 169, or 17%. The approximate number of parole violators who were back in prison dropped by only 29 or 1%.

One fact that seems to be lost on many of those who have discussed these recent trends is that, in a typical month, Connecticut admits about 1,500 people to jail, and releases about the same number. This churning effect, constantly cycling relatively less serious offenders into and out of jail every month, is a perfect engine for contagion spread inside the facility walls and then into the community outside.



As we have seen elsewhere, this is extremely dangerous. In Italy last month, a dozen incarcerated people died and 16 escaped following prison riots due to the virus. Iran has been experiencing similar riots. A federal prison in Louisiana and a state prison in Alabama now have widespread COVID-19 infection and are trying to manage the chaos that has ensued.



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The time is now to double down on our efforts to safely reduce the incarcerated population in advance of the peak of the pandemic.

The bottom line is this: overcrowded correctional facilities during a pandemic are disasters waiting to happen. Immediate steps must be taken to limit the number of people admitted and maximizing the

number of people released.

One reason that Connecticut has managed to avoid this nightmare scenario during the early phase of this crisis is our relatively under-crowded jail and prison facilities. But the time is short. The next phase of the crisis here will challenge even the best run and staffed prisons. The time is now to double down on our efforts to safely reduce the incarcerated population in advance of the peak of the pandemic.

Every indication is that this accelerating downward trend will continue for at least the next two months as we experience the effects of both social distancing and enlightened triage by front-line criminal justice professionals. It would not be surprising to see our total incarcerated population drop by at least another 1,000 by June. As has been the case for the past ten years, experts will keep a close eye on arrest and reported crime data to determine whether rapid decarceration increases or decrease crime. My bet is, as always, is on the latter.

In the meantime, I am encouraged that advocates, policy makers and practitioners alike are committed to protecting the safety of people who are incarcerated, of the professionals who work in our correctional facilities and their families as well as the rest of us who encounter recently incarcerated people every day, even in the best of times. Their health and safety, after all, is our health and safety.

Mike Lawlor is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of New Haven and was Under Secretary for Criminal Justice for former Gov. Dannel Malloy.

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