

United States: Virus Hot Spots in Prisons and Native American Reservations

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The current upsurge if the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States is by far the most serious period of the infection to date. Hospitals are reaching full capacity in some areas, which may become a national problem. One hot spot has been in prisons and jails. Another group of hot spots are Native American reservations.

The current upsurge if the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States is by far the most serious period of the infection to date. New cases and hospitalizations break records every few days, and deaths will soon surpass the daily rate of 2,200 reached last March when hospital workers were just beginning to learn how to treat patients.

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Experts predict that these numbers will take a new upturn as a result of travel and family dinners over the Thanksgiving holiday (November 26) increased spread of the virus. The same will happen over Christmas.

While many families obeyed the experts and stayed safe for Thanksgiving, many did not, including among the tens of millions who listened to Trump's dismissal of the disease.

One hot spot has been in prisons and jails. An editorial in the New York Times noted, "The American penal system is a perfect breeding ground for the virus.

"Squabbles over mask wearing and social distancing are essentially moot inside overcrowded facilities, many of them old and poorly ventilated, with tight quarters and with hygiene standards that are difficult to maintain. Uneven testing, inadequate medical resources and the constant churn of staff members, visitors and inmates further speed transmission.

"Crueler still, inmates suffer disproportionately from comorbidities, such as high blood pressure and asthma, putting them at an elevated risk for complications and death.

"Eight months into the pandemic, the precise shape of and scope of the devastation remains difficult to pin down. But the available data us heartbreaking. As of mid-November, more than 196,600 coronavirus cases had been reported among state and federal prisoners.

"More than 1,450 of those prisoners have died. The case rates among inmates are more than four times as those of the general public, and the death rate is more than twice as high.

"Inmates are not the only ones trapped with the virus. The correctional system employs more than 685,000 people – guards, nurses, chaplains and so on. There have been more than 45,470 coronavirus infections and 98 deaths among staff members to date. Their case rates are three times

as high as for the general public.

“Remember: these are the reported cases. The real numbers are assumed to be higher. The virus ripples out from these hot spots, engulfing the families and communities of inmates and workers.

“The coronavirus does not respect prison walls any more than it respects state or national borders. It will not be confined.”

Information about local jails is hard to come by, but they too are hot spots, the editorial says. A minority of those being held in jails have been convicted of a crime, with the large majority being held awaiting trial, sometimes for months or even years, because they are unable to pay for bail.

The U.S. system of mass incarceration holds 2.3 million people in federal and state prisons and local jails, and many more on parole or otherwise still part of the system. The majority of prisoners are Black or Latinx, so this is one more way people of color are disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Mass incarceration is central to the new version of the institutional systematic racism that has been exposed by Black Lives Matter, which continues the 400 years of oppression of African Americans. White supremacy is the ideology of this system, so all people of color are swept up in it.

The pandemic also rages in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) jails, holding some 25,000 people, most of whom are immigrant asylum seekers. ICE says that 3,000 have tested positive. Before Trump, such asylum seekers were not in jails, but released pending the disposition of their cases.

Trump says they are criminals that have to be jailed while awaiting adjudication of their asylum requests. Most of these jails are privately owned for profit. It is well known that conditions in them are squalid, with children still being separated from their parents. We do know that some who test positive have been deported, spreading the virus in their home countries.

Another group of hot spots are Native American reservations. A major case is the Navajo Nation reservation. About 150,000 Navajos reside on the reservation. The reservation is larger than West Virginia, and straddles Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. The per capita infection rate since the pandemic began in the U.S. is highest in the country after New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

The Navajo reservation was hard hit in the early months of the pandemic, and its government took strong measures that succeeded in bending the curve of new cases down. In this new upsurge, Navajo President Jonathan Nez issued some of the strongest stay-at-home measures in the country. In spite of these efforts there were a total of 2,559 cases by November 5, and 79 deaths.

The Navajo Nation, along with nearby Hopi, Pueblo, Zuni and Gila River communities have endured despite centuries of genocide, oppression and systematic racism and poverty. Access to water is scarce.

“That’s from a long state of histories with treaties and our relationship with the government,” Dr. Michelle Tom said in an interview on Democracy Now. She is a member of the Navajo Nation and a family physician.

She said “Our infrastructure for water has never been at the capacity where we can provide water for everyone on the reservation. So, you’re telling people to wash their hands for 20 seconds, and yet people are trying just to get water to drink and cook with.”

Economic Impact.

The pandemic has resulted in mass unemployment, shutting down of businesses and schools, and will get worse with the new upsurge.

There has been a disproportionate impact among women workers. There are two reasons for this. One is that women workers tend to be predominate in the businesses that have been hardest hit, like restaurants, hotels and retail.

The other reason is that women still are the primary care givers of children. With many schools closed, children stay at home, where there can be remote learning if there is the proper equipment available, many women have been forced to leave work to care for them.

An article in the New York Times notes: "Long term damage on top of the recent economic devastation would add to the inequality that has been a central feature of recent decades, as people with greater education, advanced skills and access to stock and real estate harvested the winnings of expansion, while other struggled.

"The pandemic has made the world more so. It has concentrated its lethal force on blue color workers, for whom human interaction is a necessity, striking people who work in warehouses, slaughterhouses and frontline medical facilities. Professionals able to work from home have maintained their safety along with their incomes."

This quote is from a long article titled "No Return to 'Normal' for the Global Economy". What happens worldwide obviously effects the U.S. economy.

Exactly how the new upsurge of the pandemic is impacting the U.S. economy won't be known until more data comes in, especially for the fourth quarter of this year.

But there has already been an uptick in the weekly number of people filing for unemployment claims.

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