

Title: COVID-19 Spread in Chicago's Cook County Jail

Activities: Identify vulnerable populations; Ensure access to care for vulnerable populations; Provide care for vulnerable populations; Coordinate with security sector and law enforcement; Identify and provide timely access to essential hygiene items; Promote good hygiene practices

Stakeholders: National and subnational health authorities; Local or regional NGOS; National NGOs; National and subnational law enforcement

Phases: Early response; Intervention

Years: 2020

Countries: United States

Agent: COVID-19

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On March 23, 2020, two inmates in Chicago's Cook County jail tested positive for the coronavirus. They were placed in isolation cells in the hopes of controlling the outbreak's spread among the 4,500 inmates who share the facility with them. However, within about two weeks, more than 350 people were infected. 238 inmates and 115 staff members had tested positive. However, jail officials recognized that this was likely a significant undercount, for the jail's inmates had largely not been tested. As of April 23, 2020, this made the jail the nation's largest-known source of coronavirus infections.¹

To attempt to curb infection within the jail, one sheriff reported establishing a quarantine area for inmates who had tested positive and another area in which to monitor those with symptoms. The most serious cases were admitted to hospitals. However, despite these careful measures, jails are generally overcrowded and unsanitary, making it difficult to fully mitigate the outbreak's continued spread. In response to these less-than-ideal conditions and the danger they posed to inmates, several attorneys and civil rights groups filed a class-action lawsuit against Cook County Sheriff Thomas Dart. They called for the immediate release or transfer of older detainees

¹ Williams T & Ivory D. Chicago's Jail Is Top U.S. Hot Spot as Virus Spreads Behind Bars. *New York Times*. 23 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/us/coronavirus-cook-county-jail-chicago.html>.

or those with underlying medical conditions that left them particularly at risk if infected with COVID-19.²

By June 2020, almost 1,000 Cook County Jail employees and detainees had tested positive for COVID-19 at some point. Researchers reported that 1 in 6 Chicago COVID-19 cases could be tied to Cook County Jail. The authors of this study explained this by noting the danger of the jail cycle to COVID-19 spread. That is, arresting individuals, bringing them into the jail, and then sending them back into their communities majorly drove up COVID-19 infections. Moreover, this research did not even consider the impact of jail staff. Jail staff enter and leave the facility daily, potentially serving as ‘super spreaders.’

On July 15, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in collaboration with Cook County Jail, reported that only 11 of the detainees were currently positive for COVID-19. The CDC asserted that the jail had succeeded at stopping the spread of the virus through early intervention of testing and sanitation. This claim was rejected by the civil rights team who had sued the county sheriff’s office in April for failing to protect inmates from COVID-19. Alexa Van Brunt, a lawyer from the MacArthur Justice Center who was part of the civil rights team, alleged that the jail had been mandated to implement social distancing protocols and provide COVID-19 testing, personal protective equipment, and hygiene products such as soap. Van Brunt claimed that the decline of the infection was in fact due to the court intervention, not the jail’s initial response to the pandemic.³

More testing, improved sanitation, and decreased density in the jail may have resulted from legal action and/or decisions from the Sheriff’s office. Needless to say, these efforts mitigated the spread of infections. As of July 20, 2020, 16 detainees were currently positive. 533 detainees in custody had recovered and were being monitored at a recovery facility in the jail. 7 detainees who tested positive for COVID-19 died while being treated at local hospitals. As well, 19 correctional officers and 5 other Cook County Sheriff’s employees were currently positive. 436 employees had since recovered and returned to work. 3 correctional officers and 1 deputy died due to COVID-19-related complications.⁴ The County continues to implement its strategic, enhanced testing regimen, provide adequate PPE and hygiene supplies, and effectively quarantine and monitor individuals with symptoms and/or positive test results.

² Grimm A. Detainees sue Sheriff Tom Dart over coronavirus at Cook County Jail. *Chicago Sun Times*. 6 April 2020.
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/coronavirus/2020/4/6/21209889/civil-rights-groups-sue-tom-dart-covid-19-coronavirus-cook-county-jail>.

³ Goudie C & Markoff B. Cook County Jail coronavirus cases drop, according to CDC; attorneys, sheriff struggle for credit. *ABC7 News*. 15 Jul 2020.
<https://abc7chicago.com/politics/cook-county-jail-covid-19-cases-drop-cdc/6319308/>

⁴ COVID-19 Cases at CCDOC. Cook County Sheriff’s Office. 20 July 2020.
<https://www.cookcountysheriff.org/covid-19-cases-at-ccd/doc/>.

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As of April 2020, COVID-19 infections were out of control in Chicago's Cook County Jail. Inmates were particularly vulnerable due to the high density and substandard hygiene practices in the facility. This not only posed a danger to their health, but also left jail staff susceptible and raised questions about the potential for infectious spread in the community as individuals cycled in and out and staff came and went. In response, attorneys and civil rights groups sued the jail. It is still unclear if the significantly lower case counts as of July 2020 are to be attributed to the legal injunctions or the jail's decisions.