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Rottnek and Flanders: The trouble with the coronavirus and Missouri's jails

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Oct 28, 2021



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While the spread of the coronavirus hit the United States hard, the places hit perhaps hardest were the nation's correctional facilities. A report recently released by the nonprofit Missouri Appleseed traces the still ongoing spread of the virus in Missouri's prisons and jails. The report focuses on Missouri prisons because, with them, there is at least something to go on. Prisons are regulated by the Missouri Department of Corrections, which sets the rules on how the state prisons should be run.

But with locally run jails, it's a different story: We don't know much about what jails are doing to deal with the coronavirus. And that leaves us not only unprepared for what to do in the next crisis but also in the dark about where things are now.

The response by the corrections department was far from perfect. Missouri's prisons were slow to adopt mask mandates and uneven in enforcing them. Adequately staffing prisons in Missouri was, and remains, a problem. Whatever the failings of the department in its response — and to be fair, Missouri's prisons were hardly alone in falling short — at least we have some sense of what is happening. For example, the corrections department has been posting the number of cases of coronavirus among inmates and staff, as well as the deaths resulting from the virus, although verifying the accuracy of the numbers can sometimes be hard.

But almost all jails in Missouri, and in the nation, remain black boxes. Jails house those who are either awaiting bail hearings, awaiting trial or serving shorter sentences. Turnover can be high. New people are coming in on a daily basis, and employees go in and out shift by shift.

The problems with jails are well known, but the coronavirus crisis has highlighted them. Health services are usually minimal, and the cleanliness of facilities is a low priority. If you combine this with aging facilities and overcrowding, jails are incubators for the virus. And the risk is not just for those who live or work



With each person admitted, released or transferred, and with every staff member starting or ending a shift, people can unknowingly spread the coronavirus to an incarcerated community or to their home community.

The Missouri Appleseed report includes an analysis of publicly available coronavirus data by Hedwig Lee and Savannah Larimore of Washington University in St. Louis that reveals higher coronavirus community case rates in Missouri counties with prisons than in counties without them. This suggests that poor containment of the virus in prisons threatens not only those incarcerated and people who work in prisons but also surrounding communities. If this analysis applies to prisons, it makes sense that it would also apply to jails. A study published last August in Health Affairs found that movement through Illinois's Cook County Jail was implicated in 15.7% of all coronavirus cases in the state of Illinois up to that point.

What makes the lack of transparency in jails especially troubling is that, in Missouri, there are no binding statewide and state-imposed standards for how jails should be run. It is pretty much up to the county administrators to decide what to do. Enforcement of any standards, even self-imposed ones, can be spotty. If Missouri jails are failing to stop coronavirus outbreaks, we may only find out indirectly, and too late: by seeing it spread in the community.

Many states have a commission on jail standards that oversees all jails and requires them to meet certain minimum requirements. Missouri should follow these states. In the meantime, jails should be more open about what their policies are. A pandemic protocol in the Missouri Appleseed report shows where they can start: with low- and moderate-cost measures to reduce viral spread, thereby protecting detainees, correctional workers and surrounding communities. The report singles out the St. Louis County jail as having proactively taken many of these steps; it has seen a very low coronavirus positive test rate among detainees as a result.

Taxpayers deserve to know what is going on in local jails, and everyone deserves to be protected against potentially fatal diseases spreading in their communi



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