

The Coronavirus Strikes Back!

by

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Not so long ago, in a prison not so far away, the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV2, better known to the world as COVID-19, decimated the American correctional system. Many institutions were blasted, and rightly so, for their gross mishandling of the planetary pandemic. Both inmate and staff were infected in droves. A year later, it finally appeared as if the country, including our correctional facilities, had turned the corner regarding the virus. The number of sick individuals plummeted and the rate of new infections sharply declined — and then the variants began to ~~emerge~~ immerse.

The coronavirus has proven itself to be no respecter of person, especially the current Delta variant. It doesn't concern itself with your religious affiliation or social status; it couldn't care less if you are young or old; inmate or staff; male or female; black or white; fully vaccinated or an anti-vaxxer or anything else. No, its only concern is whether you are a suitable host.

In fact, from a purely statistical viewpoint, at least where FCI-Texarkana and FCI-Ashland are concerned, it would appear that the latest strain of the virus actually prefers to infect a previously-vaccinated host.

At FCI-Ashland, all currently infected persons, both inmate and staff, had been previously vaccinated against the virus.

According to the Coalition for Prisoners Rights Newsletter, between March 2020 and March 2021, the New York Times collected a wide range of data regarding coronavirus infections and deaths at state and federal prisons, immigration detention centers, juvenile detention facilities, and local, regional, and reservation jails in the U.S.

The data revealed that the majority of prisoners with symptoms were never tested for the virus. I can personally attest to the validity of this finding. In late July-early August 2020, I became extremely ill. It was like the flu on steroids. I was given a bag of IV fluids and sent back to my cell to suffer. During the late year outbreak of the virus, inmates returning to the housing unit after being declared recovered by the BOP described symptoms which mirrored my previous two-week illness.

The data also revealed that our nation's correctional facilities were among the most dangerous places when it comes to the coronavirus, with over 1,400 new infections and 7 deaths being reported each day during the 12-month study period.

On July 26, 2021, the LISA Foundation (formerly known as the Legal Information Services Associates) reported, "It wasn't even two weeks ago that the BOP was doing a happy dance about having delivered 200,000 COVID vaccine shots and reporting only 29 inmates and 130 staff had the coronavirus." Half of all BOP facilities had been declared "COVID-FREE".

Such numbers are grossly misleading at best. According to the official BOP website, as of July 29, 2021, the federal inmate population stood at 155,078. Given the two-dose recommendation, 200,000 shots in arms equates to 100,000 fully vaccinated inmates, or nearly two-thirds (66.66%) of the total inmate population.

However, the official numbers indicate that as of the same date, only 54.8% of inmates and 52.4% of staff had been vaccinated and among vaccinated staff, 48% had received only one dose. Additionally, a large number of federal inmates have received only a single dose or currently remain unvaccinated.

Not that the Delta variant seems to care about vaccination rates. On July 23, 2021 there were 245 inmates and 129 staff at 79 BOP facilities infected with COVID-Delta. 64% of those infections were at FCI-Texarkana, prompting an investigation by the CDC into why the Delta variant has gained a foothold among vaccinated inmates.

The number of COVID-Delta infections continue to rise. As of August 29, 2021 the numbers stood at 512 inmate and 442 infected staff, with the virus being present at 108 of the 122 BOP facilities. These numbers are not without their own controversy. Joe Gulley, union president at USP-Leavenworth, told the Business Insider the number of infections among staff at the facility were "at least twenty times higher" than reported.

Gulley said in a statement, "The Warden lied because he wanted his bosses and the public to think he was doing a good job. His only concern was that everyone outside USP - Leavenworth believed he was controlling COVID and keeping everyone safe so he could get his next promotion". The same could said for FCI-Ashland which has seen four wardens in two years.

On August 23, 2021, FCI-Ashland reverted to "Level 3 Operations - Intense Modifications", commonly referred to as "Red Level", which includes such restrictions as cohort scheduling and movement; limited work details with designated inmates; face coverings at all times except within your own cell; limited recreation; weight pile closed; barber shop closed; social distancing required in all areas; and, limited capacities in all areas. Most of these protocols are being violated with impunity by inmate and staff alike.

On August 29, 2021, just prior to the start of the 10:30 AM lunch period, the South Cohort was placed on total lockdown due to an outbreak of COVID-Delta. The outbreak appears to have originated with the JA/JB Unit Counselor who had recently contracted the Delta variant, causing some 298 inmates - nearly 32% of FCI-Ashland's 933 inmates, to be confined to their cells as the entire four-unit cohort quarantined. Ironically, the South Cohort had recently been "rewarded" with a small bag of popcorn for each inmate for having an 81% vaccination rate. The Delta variant was not impressed.

Also as of August 29, 2021, the overall vaccination rate within the BOP had shown very little improvement over previous months with 53.1 percent of staff and 58.2% of inmates being vaccinated. At this point it is safe to say the Delta variant doesn't seem to care if one is or is not vaccinated — four BOP inmates have reportedly died from the virus in the past week.

The most recent numbers for September 2021 show the vaccination rate among inmates growing slightly while the rate among staff remains virtually unchanged, even while the infection rate among staff soars.

Salon has reported that, "researchers found that BOP data shows the infection rate among correctional officers drives the infection rate among incarcerated individuals". This should come as no surprise as it is obviously staff members who are bringing the virus behind the walls.

Unfortunately, the situation is likely to get worse. Last week, the Biden Administration announced that "some individuals with a two-shot vaccination should get a booster". And while the Delta variant, which is six-times more virulent than COVID-19 according to the CDC, continues to spread like wildfire, yet another variant has been identified — COVID-Lambda.

World-wide, more than 2 in 100 people, or just over 21% of planet earth's population has had the coronavirus. That's an immensely staggering statistic. The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights has stated, "COVID-19 has stolen our loved ones, harmed the health of thousands of people, and made the lives of people incarcerated much worse than before. No one is more affected than those imprisoned."