



Life on Lockdown: A Growing Crisis



Background

When a prison goes on lockdown, daily operations are restricted to the point that the people incarcerated in the facility are confined to their cells for nearly the entire duration of the lockdown. Lockdowns severely limit or often completely eliminate access to education, recreation, exercise, contact with loved ones, and other beneficial programming and activities.

Amid an ongoing correctional staffing crisis, there has been an increased use of lockdowns in U.S. correctional facilities, which is having a deleterious effect on incarcerated people, their families, and even prison staff. Compounding this problem is a complete lack of transparency and data reporting on the causes, frequency, and duration of prison lockdowns at the state and federal levels. While once a rare action taken in times of crisis, lockdowns have become a routine response to address not only security concerns but administrative issues such as prison overcrowding, understaffing, and budget shortages.¹

The number of corrections officers has been falling for more than a decade and dropped sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic.² At the same time, prison populations—briefly reduced during the pandemic—are rising again. The staffing crisis is especially severe in many states with the highest incarceration rates. Ten of the 13 states that have seen reductions in corrections officers of at least 25 percent have incarceration rates above the national average.³

As a result, prisons across the United States are grappling with dangerous levels of understaffing and overcrowding. Limited space and staff stretched too thin have led to increased conflict in correctional facilities and unsafe conditions for both staff and individuals in custody. With prisons in a perpetual state of crisis, facility administrators have too frequently relied on lockdowns as a means of managing inadequate staff and the security concerns that arise from chronic understaffing.

The Problem

While often framed as a necessary operational measure, lockdowns routinely exacerbate the conditions that prompted their implementation in the first place. Across the country, lockdowns have sparked protests, compounded tensions between incarcerated people and staff, and inflicted emotional and psychological harm on the prison population and, by extension, their loved ones—at times resulting in devastating consequences.⁴ For incarcerated people, lockdowns mean no access to law libraries, attorneys, education programs, or even basic hygiene without difficult choices—like deciding between the first shower in days or a five-minute call to a loved one. For families, the pain is equally tangible: There's no advance notice, no phone calls or messages, and sometimes no way to know a lockdown is happening until families are turned away at visitation. The lack of communication, clarity, and control only magnifies the baseline anxiety of having a loved one incarcerated. Lockdowns are not just administrative decisions; they are complete disruptions that ripple far beyond prison walls.

Children with a parent in prison experience “confounding grief,” the emotional strain of having a parent who is physically absent but psychologically present. One study found that when communication is further restricted during a lockdown, the deterioration of the parent-child relationship may lead to anxiety in children that manifests as weight loss, sleeplessness, and depression.⁵

Similarly, the inability to communicate with loved ones takes a toll on the mental health of incarcerated individuals. Lockdowns are stressful for both incarcerated individuals who are deprived of support and communication, and for their families who are unaware of why communication with their loved one has ceased.⁶

Lockdowns continue to be used both as a stopgap measure for inadequate staffing and as a response to isolated incidents of violence. However, lockdowns do not address the underlying issues of prison overcrowding and understaffing that compromise the safety and security of both corrections officers and incarcerated individuals. Sufficient staffing is essential for allowing incarcerated individuals to leave their cells for their jobs, hygiene, and meals, among other aspects of daily prison operations. Understaffing can mean that correctional officers are unable to quickly respond to critical incidents or provide adequate supervision to prevent violence. In a sufficiently staffed institution, individuals may be subjected to solitary confinement and limited access to programming because they have violated the institution's rules. But instead, amid chronic understaffing and overcrowding, lockdowns are used as a safety management tool, punishing entire units or facilities for the actions of a few.

The complete lack of transparency around the use of lockdowns compounds the impact of this mounting crisis. The nonprofit news outlet "Truthout" found that 33 state prison systems had implemented non-disciplinary lockdowns at least once—and often repeatedly or for extended periods—between 2016 and 2023.⁷ However, most states neither report nor are legally required to disclose the frequency of lockdowns or what types of incidents occur during lockdowns. Without a national tracking system, there is no way to know the exact number of lockdowns that happen in federal or state prisons. A conservative estimate of 264,190 individuals, excluding those in jails or juvenile facilities, are under lockdown in state and federal prisons on any given day, representing a staggering 22 percent of the total state and federal prison population.⁸

The absence of public reporting standards on when and why lockdowns occur and how long they last is extremely concerning. Without transparency, there is little accountability, allowing prisons to continue using lockdowns without public scrutiny.

State and Federal Lockdowns

The systemic issues driving the increased use of lockdowns—understaffing, overcrowding, and a lack of transparency—are playing out across the country. The following examples illustrate the human and institutional consequences of these conditions.

Wisconsin

Green Bay Correctional Institution was on lockdown for more than a year, from June 2023 to July 2024.⁹ The facility housed 1,080 people, nearly 45 percent above its designed capacity of 749.¹⁰ Waupun Correctional Institution, also in Wisconsin, has been under some form of lockdown for more than a year. At least five incarcerated people have died at Waupun since June 2023. Nine current and former staff members, including the facility's former warden, are facing felony charges in connection with two of the deaths.¹¹ These extreme outcomes highlight how overcrowding, prolonged isolation, and lack of oversight can escalate into preventable tragedy.

Texas

In response to rising drug-related violence and an increase in contraband,¹² the Texas Department of Criminal Justice placed the entire state prison system on lockdown from September to October 2023.¹³ At the time, some facilities were operating with a 70 percent correctional officer vacancy rate—meaning those prisons were trying to maintain basic security functions with fewer than half the staff they needed.¹⁴ The statewide lockdown, imposed without individualized assessments of each facility, underscores how extreme staffing shortages can result in sweeping restrictions with little oversight or control.



North Carolina

In 2021, severe staffing shortages led North Carolina's Division of Prisons to close the minimum custody unit at Alexander Correctional Institution. Simultaneously, the prison was under lockdown for nearly six months.¹⁵ Statewide, the correctional officer vacancy rate hovered around 34 percent.¹⁶ The prolonged restrictions at Alexander and the closure of housing units illustrate how staffing crises not only reduce facility capacity but also extend lockdown conditions indefinitely.



Mississippi

Amid a 48 percent corrections staff vacancy rate, the South Mississippi Correctional Institution implemented a lockdown that lasted more than four months in 2019. Although prison officials claimed that individuals were not being confined to their cells 23 hours a day, family members of the individuals in custody reported that they were only allowed out for medication and doctors' visits.¹⁷ This case highlights the disconnect between official statements and lived experiences, and it reflects the lack of transparency and communication that often characterizes lockdowns.



Connecticut

In 2025, excessive lockdowns, poor medical care, and low-quality food sparked hunger strikes at two Connecticut correctional facilities. While prison officials at one institution acknowledged five lockdowns over a two-week span, incarcerated individuals report that this number does not include routine "modified lockdowns" or the weekly lockdowns scheduled for correctional officer training.¹⁸ Chronic understaffing continues to drive these disruptions—according to the Department of Corrections, an additional 60 clinicians are needed to meet even basic healthcare needs.¹⁹



Federal Bureau of Prisons

In 2024, a federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas, spent nearly two months on lockdown initially to carry out an investigation of a smuggled firearm. During this time, individuals in custody were denied access to programming, communication with loved ones, and, most critically, had limited access to food and water.²⁰ The union representing Leavenworth staff reported that the facility's prolonged use of emergency operations was tied to understaffing and allowed prison leadership to circumvent the union's contract by reassigning teachers, nurses, counselors, and other staff to serve as prison guards to address chronic understaffing.²¹ Reports from visits by the District of Columbia's Corrections Information Council to prisons in Louisiana, Virginia, and Kentucky suggest that this issue is widespread across the federal system. The most frequently raised concern during their investigations was the regular use of lockdowns and their disruptive impact on visitation, programming, and religious practice.²²

The Solutions

Independent prison oversight improves transparency and accountability in corrections by collecting unbiased information about what is happening inside prisons, analyzing that information, making recommendations, and in some cases sharing findings publicly. Oversight bodies can do this work effectively through unfettered and confidential access to prison facilities, residents, staff, data, and other records.²³ There is a range of models of oversight, and different oversight bodies serve different functions. For example, oversight bodies may focus on investigating and resolving individual grievances; preventing, identifying, and addressing systemic problems; or both.²⁴ Within the context of the lockdown crisis, it is especially important that oversight bodies have the authority to collect and share data from correctional institutions, both across systems and with the public.

For independent prison oversight to be an effective solution to lockdowns, correctional institutions should be required to document the reasons for and number and duration of lockdowns and report this information to oversight bodies. Further, formalizing how and when lockdowns should be used would help address the persistent lack of transparency, and, over time, could also reduce their overall frequency. Establishing clear criteria for implementing lockdowns would also prevent institutions from defaulting to lockdowns as a response to chronic issues of understaffing or overcrowding. Standardizing the rationale for lockdowns and mandating real-time reporting of their frequency would help safeguard the rights and services that are often restricted in these situations. For example, access to medical and mental healthcare should not be suspended, and families should be notified when a lockdown is initiated and informed of its expected duration. These common-sense standards would mitigate the most harmful effects of lockdowns and reinforce public accountability.

It is also important to recognize that the dangerous conditions affecting incarcerated people also threaten the health, safety, and well-being of correctional staff. Addressing the root causes of many of our nations' lockdowns—overcrowding and understaffing—is critical to creating a safer and more sustainable prison environment for everyone. Second-chance initiatives, sentence reviews, early release, and parole can reduce prison populations by creating safe opportunities for release.²⁵ Expanding home confinement and other tools of decarceration would also ease population pressures. Fewer people in custody means fewer logistical and security risks and, ultimately, fewer lockdowns.

On the staffing side, implementing safe staffing minimums, better training, and improved working conditions would allow prisons to operate more safely and effectively. A sufficiently staffed facility is less likely to rely on lockdowns and more likely to foster a stable, secure working environment for staff and a more humane living environment for incarcerated individuals. When prisons are safer, lockdowns are less frequent.

Policy Recommendations

Independent Prison Oversight

Create independent oversight bodies with the authority to inspect prisons unannounced, collect data from correctional institutions on lockdowns, and share this information between corrections systems and with the public. The number of lockdowns, the reasons for their use, and their duration should be recorded by correctional institutions and reported to an independent oversight body. Oversight ensures accountability, helps identify systemic problems early, and builds public trust through transparency.

Regulate Use of Lockdowns

Correctional institutions should be permitted to use lockdowns only in genuine emergencies, with criteria guiding their implementation. There should be a clear definition and straightforward intermediate steps that can be used to avoid a lockdown. Formalizing the process reduces the risk of overuse and collective punishment due to staffing or operational failures.

Notify Families of Lockdowns

The occurrence of a lockdown should be posted publicly and communicated to individuals in custody and their family members in a timely manner. Clear communication can reduce confusion, fear, and emotional harm caused by unexpected and unexplained loss of contact.



Safely Reduce the Prison Population

The prevalence of lengthy sentences and the lack of a mechanism for individuals to demonstrate their rehabilitation for possible early release contributes to prison overcrowding. Policymakers should support sentence review and second chance initiatives that allow for safe reductions in prison populations. Reconsideration of lengthy sentences contributes to reducing overcrowding and therefore alleviates the operational strain that often triggers lockdowns. Additionally, truth-in-sentencing states should introduce credit systems, which incentivize good behavior to reduce security incidents while safely lowering the prison population through earned early releases.



Address Understaffing

Improved living and working conditions, comprehensive training programs, investments in staff support services, and retention incentives are all actionable solutions to address understaffing in prisons. A sufficiently staffed facility is essential for safe operations—and reduces reliance on lockdowns as a crisis management tool.

Endnotes

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