December 3, 2020

Dear Dr. Kessler, Dr. Murthy, and Dr. Nunez-Smith:

As your colleagues, and experts in the medical and public health community, we write to urge President-elect Biden and the Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board to advance pandemic relief strategies that substantially reduce federal, state, and local incarceration levels.

Prisons and jails have become leading coronavirus hotspots, but federal, state, and local leaders have not sufficiently sought to reduce the public health threat that their conditions present. The estimated 11% reduction in the overall incarcerated and detained population during the pandemic has been inadequate given the scale of U.S. incarceration. Depopulating carceral settings, including for detained youth and immigrants, during the COVID-19 pandemic would save lives and help limit the spread of the virus to communities nationwide. Physical distancing is unattainable in overcrowded and unsanitary carceral facilities, making viral outbreaks especially likely among a population with disproportionately high numbers of people who are medically vulnerable.

Insufficient staff and resources limit access to timely and adequate medical care for those incarcerated or detained. Additionally, there are large numbers of older people in the incarcerated population who are more vulnerable to the virus. A Marshall Project analysis found that the percentage of people in state prisons who are 55 years or older more than tripled between 2000 and 2016, and today older individuals make up a greater portion of the state prison population than people aged 18-24. The overrepresentation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people in these facilities also exacerbates the disproportionate harm that COVID-19 has already inflicted on these populations in the community.

The rate of COVID-19 cases reported in federal and state prisons is over four times the national rate of confirmed cases. The COVID-19 mortality rate in prisons is twice that of the general population, after adjusting for age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Jails and immigration detention

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centers have also reported higher rates of COVID-19 positivity than the U.S. population.\textsuperscript{2} The movement of staff between correctional facilities and their communities and the close contact between staff and incarcerated people enables the virus to spread into and out of these facilities. By mid- November, at least 42,000 corrections workers nationwide had tested positive for COVID-19 and 86 had died, according to UCLA Law's COVID-19 Behind Bars Project.

Medical, public health, and criminal justice experts and practitioners have already recommended substantial depopulation in these facilities because the infrastructure of carceral facilities and the policies practiced within them are incompatible with basic Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and given the heightened health vulnerability of incarcerated populations. Pandemic-era depopulation of detention and corrections facilities is supported by criminological evidence that many incarcerated people do not pose an unreasonable public safety risk. Even before the pandemic, the level of decarceration in the United States was incommensurate with the nationwide crime drop. Although nationwide crime rates have fallen to half their 1990s level in recent years, the incarcerated population grew by 300% between 1980 and 2008 and only declined by 8% between 2008 and 2018.\textsuperscript{3}

Since the pandemic, decarceration has been too modest. Local jails, in which two-thirds of the confined population has not yet been convicted, reduced their populations 22\% by July 2020 (from 738,400 to 575,952 people).\textsuperscript{4} Preliminary evidence suggests that this reduction has helped to reduce the spread of the virus without harming public safety. But several jurisdictions have since reversed this trend and increased their jail populations. State prisons, which confine over half of incarcerated individuals, decreased their confined population by only 4\% by May 2020 (from 1,260,393 to 1,207,710).\textsuperscript{5} Shortening excessive prison terms and expediting releases, especially of elderly people who pose a limited public safety risk, would go far in mitigating the harm of this virus. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP), whose confined population grew by over 600% between yearends 1980 and 2019, downsized by just 14\% between March and November 2020 (from 175,315 to 154,396), remaining dangerously overcrowded.


\textsuperscript{4} Compared to the nationwide jail population on Dec 31, 2018, the most recent data reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

\textsuperscript{5} The Marshall Project and Associated Press estimate an 8\% reduction in the population confined in both state and federal prisons between March and June 2020.
Meaningful and effective decarceration amidst the pandemic can limit the number of people exposed to the virus in leading coronavirus clusters while also protecting the broader communities to which these individuals return. A consensus report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommends “implementing COVID-19 testing and facilitating quarantines in the community for 14 days (if needed) before released individuals return to their families or group housing.” The report also recommends that plans to ensure a safe reentry of incarcerated persons to communities also include: “identifying resources to provide housing; addressing access to public benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (popularly known as food stamps); and working with community health systems for access to health care.”

We urge the Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board to make the following recommendations to the Biden - Harris Administration:

● Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shall explicitly recognize and include decarceration and expanded access to healthcare for incarcerated and recently released individuals as necessary guidance for federal, state, and local officials.
● Department of Justice leaders shall utilize existing authorities, such as compassionate release and home confinement, to expedite the immediate release or transfer of elderly and medically vulnerable people out of the Bureau of Prisons.
● Support COVID-19 relief funding for state, local, and tribal carceral systems to incentivize a significant reduction of incarcerated populations and to assist reentry and community-based organizations to respond to COVID-19.
● Direct the Attorney General to minimize arrests, decline to seek detention of individuals at their initial appearance in court, and consent to the release of those already detained, absent clear and convincing evidence that the person poses a specific threat of violence to a specific person.
● Support the COVID-19 in Corrections Data Transparency Act, which would require the BOP, U.S. Marshals Service, and state and local correctional agencies to report disaggregated data to the CDC on the effects of COVID-19 in their facilities, including any racially or ethnically disparate impacts.
● Ensure that pandemic-related decarceration is not racially imbalanced.
● Implement universal and regularly repeated testing for all correctional staff and people incarcerated.

As with the COVID-19 situation in the rest of the country, the situation in detention and correctional facilities is likely to get much worse. According to a recent weekly report from The White House Coronavirus Task Force, there is “now aggressive, unrelenting, expanding broad community spread across the country, reaching most counties, without evidence of improvement
but rather, further deterioration.” The report goes on to state that current efforts to stop the spread “are inadequate and must be increased to flatten the curve.”

Current efforts to minimize the impact of the spread of COVID-19 behind bars have also been insufficient. We urge you to recommend policies that are commensurate with the challenge before us. For more information contact Carlos Franco-Paredes: carlos.franco-paredes@cuanschutz.edu.

Sincerely,*

Jane Appleyard Allen, MA  RTI International
Jason Andrews, MD, SM  Stanford University
Zinzi Bailey, ScD, MSPH  University of Miami
Sachini Bandara, PhD  Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Ana Barreto  AfroResistance
Mary T. Bassett, MD, MPH  Harvard University
Anne Beckett, MD, MPH  Boston University School of Medicine
Joanne Belknap, PhD  University of Colorado-Boulder
Zackary Berger, MD, PhD  Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Emma Biegacki, MPH  Yale Program in Addiction Medicine
Kim Blankenship, PhD  American University
Carolyn Bloom  Center for Housing and Health
Ricky Bluthenthal, PhD  Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California
Christopher M. Bositis, MD  Greater Lawrence Family Health Center
Elizabeth Bowen, PhD  University at Buffalo School of Social Work
Zsea Bowman, JD  National Lawyers Guild - SF Bay Area
Jeffrey Bratberg, PharmD, FAPhA  University of Rhode Island
Jennifer K. Brody, MD, MPH, AAHIVS Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program
Lesly-Marie Buer, PhD, MPH  Choice Health Network
Amanda Bunting, PhD  New York University School of Medicine (Postdoctoral Fellow)
Jennifer J. Carroll, PhD, MPH  Elon University
WL Chapkis, PhD  University of Southern Maine
Alexandra Charrow, MD  Brigham and Women's Hospital
Elizabeth Chin, PhD candidate  Stanford University, Biomedical Data Science
Carolyn Chu, MD, MSc  University of California, San Francisco
Seth Clark, MD, MPH  Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University
Claire D. Clark, PhD MPH  University of Kentucky
Zach Clayton, MA candidate  Stanford University
Mardge Cohen MD  Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program
Michelle Collins-Ogle, MD, FAAP, AAHIVS  Montefiore Medical Center
Alexandra Collins, PhD  Brown University, School of Public Health (Postdoctoral Research Associate)
Caroline Conzelman, PhD  University of Colorado Boulder
Kimberly Cook, PhD  University of North Carolina Wilmington
Johanna Crane, PhD  Albany Medical College
Caroline Davidson, MPH  Shatterproof
Dana DeHart, PhD  University of South Carolina
James W. Deutsch, MD, PhD  University of Toronto
Alex Duello, MPH  University of Missouri St. Louis - Missouri Institute of Mental Health
Gabriel Eber, JD, MPH  Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Miguel Echenique, MD,FACS  University of Puerto Rico and University of Ponce School of Medicine
Mark Eisenberg, MD  Harvard Medical School
Parsa Erfani, MD candidate  Harvard Medical School
Esthelle Ewusi Boisvert, PhD candidate  University of Southern California
Jamie Favaro, MSW  NEXT Harm Reduction
Paul J. Fleming, PhD, MPH  University of Michigan School of Public Health
Ligia Fragoso, MD candidate  Warren Alpert Medical School, Brown University
Carlos Franco-Paredes, MD  University of Colorado, Denver
Kassandra Frederique, MSSW  Drug Policy Alliance
Jennifer Furin, MD, PhD  Harvard Medical School
Emily Galpern, MPH  Emily Galpern Consulting
Adan Garcia, PhD candidate  University of California, Davis
William C. Goedel, PhD  Brown University School of Public Health
Gregg Gonsalves, PhD  Yale School of Public Health
Sara Goodkind, PhD  University of Pittsburgh
Linda Gorgos, MD  Southwest Care Center
Barbara Gottesman, MPH  University of Illinois Chicago, School of Public Health
Marc Gourevitch, MD  New York University Langone Health
Madeline Gray, MSPH, CPH  Mount Sinai Morningside
Linda D. Green, MD  George Washington School of Medicine
Barbara Gripshover, MD, FIDSA  Case Western Reserve University
Mallory Hakes, LMSW  Integral Care
Kasey Halsey, MS2  Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University
Miriam Harris, MD, MSc  Boston University
Jeffrey C Hatcher, MD  Cone Health
Laura Hawks, MD, MPH Medical College of Wisconsin
John Herrmann Catalyst Clinical Research
Ricky Hill, PhD Institute for Sexual and Gender Minority Health and Wellbeing, Feinberg Medical School, Northwestern University
Leila Hojat, MD University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center and Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine
Laura Huckins, PhD Department of Genetic and Genomic Sciences, Department of Psychiatry, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kathryn Humphries, MPH Johns Hopkins
Bronwyn A. Hunter, PhD University of Maryland Baltimore County
Clare Idehen Campaign Against Racism- Atlanta Chapter
Franklin Iheanacho, MD candidate Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University
Jaquelyn Jahn, PhD, MPH City University of New York
Victoria Jent, MAS New York School of Medicine
Monik Jimenez, ScD Harvard Medical School/ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Alison O. Jordan, LCSW ACOJA Consulting LLC
Summers Kalishman, PhD University of New Mexico School of Medicine (retired)
Mohammad Karamouzian, MD University of British Columbia
Rebecca Kellum, MD SSM Heath
Jacklyn Kelty, PhD Rutgers University
Dana Kennedy, MPH Center for Health Progress
Jeanne C. Keruly, MS, CRNP Johns Hopkins University, School of Medicine
Mathew Kiang, ScD, MPH Stanford University
Eugene Kim Stanford University
Kelly Knight, PhD University of California, Los Angeles
Jennifer Kraft, MSN, CRNP University of Pennsylvania Hospital System
Alex Kral, PhD RTI International
Noa Krawczyk, PhD New York University Grossman School of Medicine
Sunny Kung, MD Brigham and Women's Hospital
Laura Kwong, PhD Woods Institute for the Environment, Stanford University (Postdoctoral research fellow)
Michael M. Lederman, MD Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine
Charlotte Lee, MD candidate Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University
Chrysanthi Leon, JD, PhD University of Delaware
Divine Lipscomb Restorative Justice Initiative Penn State
Yiran Liu, PhD candidate Stanford University, Knight-Hennessy Scholars Program
Vishalli Loomba, MPH, MD candidate University of California, San Francisco
Andrea M. López, PhD  University of Maryland
Margaret Lowenstein, MD, MSHP  University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine
Ross MacDonald, MD  New York University School of Medicine
Theresa Mack, MD, MPH  Harlem Docs
Erin Fanning Madden, PhD, MPH  Wayne State University School of Medicine, Department of Family Medicine and Public Health Sciences
Leonardo Martinez, PhD  Stanford University
Silvia Martins, MD, PhD  Columbia University
Duncan Maru, MD, PHD  Mount Sinai School of Medicine
Mariya Masyukova, MD, MS  Albert Einstein College of Medicine/Montefiore Medical Center
Nathaniel Matthews-Trigg, MPH  University of Washington
Jill McCorkel, PhD  Villanova University
Julian McDaniel, PhD candidate  University of Tennessee
Dillon McManus, LMSW  Maryland Department of Health
Kathleen A McManus, MD, MSCR  University of Virginia
Ryan McNeil, PhD  Yale School of Medicine
Brendan McQuade, PhD  University of of Southern Maine
Dwayne Meeks  Colorado African American Drug Policy Coalition
Justin Mendoza, MPH  Partners In Health
Gloria Miele, PhD  University of California Los Angeles Health
Alice M. Miller, JD  Yale Law and Public Health Schools, Yale University
Michelle Morse, MD, MPH  EqualHealth
Olivia Moscicki, MD candidate  Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Evan Munn, MD candidate  Indiana University School of Medicine
Blake Elizabeth Murphy, MD candidate  Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine
Tammera Nauts  Primary Care
Nolan Nelson, MSSW  Family Health Centers, Inc.
Jules Netherland  Drug Policy Alliance
Cheikh Njie, MD  Brigham and Women's Hospital
Dr. Noel Vest  Stanford University School of Medicine
Ella Norman  Stanford University
Molly Nowels, PhD candidate  Rutgers School of Public Health
Amesika Nyaku, MD, MS  Rutgers New Jersey Medical School
Virginia Adams O'Connell, PhD  Moravian College
Georgina Osorio, MD, MPH  Mount Sinai St. Luke and Mount Sinai West and Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Karin Otsuka  University of Washington
Melina Packer, PhD  University of California, Riverside (Postdoctoral fellow)
Luisa Paredes, MD  Brigham and Women’s Hospital
Tarlise Townsend, PhD  
New York University School of Medicine (Postdoctoral fellow)

Harold Trulear, PhD  
Healing Communities USA

Kate Vander Tuig, MPH  
Futures Without Violence

Sheila Vakharia, PhD  
Drug Policy Alliance

Jenna Valleriani  
Canopy Growth

Homer Venters, MD  
New York University

Alejandro Victores, MD candidate  
Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University

Ingrid Walker, PhD  
University of Washington, Tacoma

Grace Wallis, PhD candidate  
Stanford School of Earth, Energy, & Environmental Sciences

Katharine S. Walter, PhD  
Division of Infectious Disease and Geographic Medicine, Stanford University (Postdoctoral fellow)

Emily Wang, MD  
Yale University School of Medicine

Julie A. Ward, RN, PhD candidate  
Johns Hopkins University

Nathaniel Webb, PhD candidate  
University of North Texas Health Science Center

Megan Welsh, PhD, MSW  
San Diego State University

Lauren Wessler, MD  
NYC Health + Hospitals

Bram Wispelwey, MD, MS, MPH  
Brigham and Women’s Hospital

Aimee Wodda, PhD  
Pacific University

Joe Wright, MD  
Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program

Caroline Wunsch, MD  
Center for Primary Care

Alysse Wurcel, MD  
Tufts University School of Medicine/ Tufts Medical Center

Jonathan You, MD candidate  
Stanford University School of Medicine

Coletta A Youngers  
Washington Office on Latin America

Claire M. Zagorski, MSc, LP  
The University of Texas at Austin

Amy Zeidan, MD  
Emory University

Michael Zingman, MD, MPH  
New York University Langone Health

* Institutional affiliations listed for identification purposes.