

# Coronavirus and crime: Jail counts fall as police give non-violent offenders citations, not handcuffs

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Northern Utah jail populations are falling and police are delivering fewer detainees for jailing, except violent offenders, as law enforcement responds to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Weber County Jail in Ogden had about 780 inmates this time last year, but the head count is down to about 685 today, said Lt. Joshua Marigoni, spokesman for the Sheriff's Office corrections division.

Davis County's jail population at Farmington dipped below 500 last week, Sheriff Kelly Sparks said. That's compared with the daily averages last spring ranging from 600 to 700.

Police departments that feed arrestees to the county jails are participating in the effort to limit those populations, which are at high risk of spreading infection if any inmates contract COVID-19.

"The public should understand that if we get COVID-19 in the jail, we've got a serious issue," Marigoni said. "We don't have the option of social distancing."

Sparks and Marigoni said trimming inmate numbers give the jails a better chance of effectively quarantining any COVID-19 cases.

Sparks said the Davis jail already has set aside one cell block for quarantining if necessary.

"A lot of people are concerned about the release of inmates, but we have no immediate need or intention to release any significant number of inmates from the jail," Sparks said.

In addition to limiting the numbers of new inmates, some offenders are being released early, Sparks said. These include inmates who are within a week of release anyway and those who have exhibited good behavior behind bars.

"We are making sure to keep room in the jail for anyone who is a possible public safety threat," Sparks said.

Those convicted or suspected of violent crimes, including domestic abuse, still are being detained.

More people stopped by police for nonviolent offenses are receiving citations with a promise to appear in court. Such offenses may include "warrants, DUI, barking dogs, or things of a very minor nature," Marigoni said.

Police agencies have been asked by sheriff's offices "to exercise discretion on who they decide needs to come to jail," said Liz Sollis, Davis sheriff's office spokeswoman.

At the Layton Police Department, the number of calls for service, police incidents and arrests were nearly identical over the last two months compared with February and March 2019, Lt. Travis Lyman said.

"Our officers have been told to limit contacts to emergencies and arrests on things that are not so critical, so I expect that would start showing up in bookings into jail," Lyman said.

On a typical day a year ago, the Davis jail could expect to see 20 to 50 or so new arrests or jail entries per day, according to booking log reports. Last Wednesday, there were three new inmates, and on Thursday just five.

The jail population draw-downs in the face of COVID-19 are to protect inmates, jail staff and the public, jail officials say.

Sparks said all incoming Davis inmates get temperature checks and other health screenings by jail nurses before they are admitted. All jail staff members have their temperature checked upon arrival and are sent home if they're feverish.

He said the jail also is making provisions to move inmates in high-risk groups, such as those over 60 or with comprised immune systems, into “safer locations” of the jail to minimize exposure if COVID-19 does hit.

“If we do the right thing now, it could make a big difference,” the sheriff said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued [detailed guidelines for the criminal justice system](#) to limit coronavirus risks in jails, prisons and courts.

Video court hearings were stressed by the CDC, and meanwhile the Utah court system has ordered the postponement of all jury trials and nonessential hearings until further notice.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah last week sent a letter to justice system officials in the state urging comprehensive action in light of the coronavirus.

“This must include preventing people from unnecessarily entering the criminal legal system in the first place, and ensuring that prisons do not needlessly keep people incarcerated who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19,” the group’s director, Brittney Nystrom, said in a letter to officials.

“We have reviewed booking records in some counties that suggest that even over the last few days of extreme social distancing efforts, including an emergency declaration by Governor Herbert banning public gatherings over 100, some county jails are still admitting new detainees on a variety of criminal charges, including many non-violent ones,” she said.

In Layton, Lyman said police also have taken steps on their own to limit coronavirus risks for all involved.

“We’ve really scaled back our discretionary contacts,” he said. “Community engagement and outreach stuff has been put on hold.”

Patrol shifts no longer have group briefings and officers are writing a lot of their reports while alone in their cars, Lyman said.

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