

# Spokane County jail population plunges during pandemic

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The Spokane County Courthouse and downtown jail are seen in 2019. The county's jail population has dwindled to a level not seen in roughly two decades, as judges and attorneys move to release defendants from cramped detention facilities where they might be exposed to the novel coronavirus. (Jesse Tinsley / The Spokesman-Review)

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Spokane County's jail population has dwindled to a level not seen in roughly two decades as judges and attorneys move to release defendants from cramped detention facilities where they might be exposed to the novel coronavirus.

Only 620 people were held in the Spokane County Jail and the Geiger Corrections Center on Friday evening, according to the county's online jail roster. That's roughly two-thirds of the usual inmate population.

Before the local justice system began responding to the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this month, there were close to 700 inmates in the downtown jail alone. The combined population of the two facilities had for years hovered between 900 and 1,000. It reached an all-time high of nearly 1,200 inmates in 2008.

The sharp decrease is the result of court orders requiring many defendants to be released from custody. Spokane County Detention Services made an urgent request to the local courts two weeks ago, while also [barring friends and relatives from visiting inmates in person](#) and implementing other restrictions to prevent the virus from spreading.

Inmates prioritized for release include those with serious underlying health issues, those held for low-level misdemeanors and those held for bonds of a few thousand dollars or less. Some who were serving sentences were essentially furloughed and [will be expected to return to jail](#) once concerns about coronavirus transmission subside. Judges and court administrators have stressed that those being released [present little risk to the community](#).

Spokane County Public Defender Tom Krzyminski said he hopes this period will inform future efforts at reforming the local justice system.

“At some point, I hope there’s a look back at who we’ve incarcerated, and do we need to be incarcerating them?” Krzyminski said. “I’m kind of curious about how this plays out and influences the conversation we’ve been having for years about reducing the jail population.”

County spokesman Jared Webley said the downtown jail also has suspended a shuttle service that transported federal prisoners to and from the jail in Benton County, in accordance with a statewide order by Gov. Jay Inslee. Staffing levels have not changed and no employees have fallen sick, but some of their responsibilities have changed as the jail has mandated more regular cleaning and sanitation, Webley said.

Meanwhile on Friday, Spokane County Superior Court announced it has made additional changes in light of the pandemic, allowing some court procedures, such as ex parte filings, to take place by email.

“We’ve really worked hard as court to come up with a guideline for citizens and attorneys to actually come in and access the court,” said Court Administrator Ashley Callan.

Those guidelines are available online at [spokanecounty.org/superiorcourt](http://spokanecounty.org/superiorcourt).

The Washington Supreme Court has postponed all hearings for out-of-custody criminal defendants across the state until late April. The high court also has required that most in-custody criminal hearings take place by phone or video conference, if possible.

Some local defense attorneys have expressed frustration that they still must appear in person for criminal hearings in Superior Court. Callan said judges have required both prosecutors and defense attorneys to appear in courtrooms because of glitches in phone and video technology.

“To have either one of (the attorneys) appear by phone while the defendant is appearing by video, it’s really difficult to conduct a meaningful hearing,” Callan said.