

DEATHS IN CUSTODY

NEW JERSEY STATE PRISONS, 2018-2024

New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson
DECEMBER 2025 |

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Introduction

The Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson (“the Office”) provides independent prison oversight for the state of New Jersey, focused on the health, safety, and wellbeing of incarcerated people.¹ The Office’s mandate to inspect state prison conditions includes authority to examine deaths in custody.² This report looks at deaths in state prisons between 2018 and 2024, and relies on medical examiner investigations into the cause and manner of death. A medical examiner is a New Jersey licensed physician with specialized training in forensic pathology who is authorized to perform autopsies and forensic examinations.³ State law requires medical examiners to investigate all deaths in correctional facilities.⁴ This report layers onto the medical examiner’s findings data maintained by the New Jersey Department of Corrections (“the Department”) related to demographics, sentencing, housing, and custody status.

This initial report does not attempt to assess preventive or emergency responses by the Department and their health care providers, nor does it examine the Department’s internal morbidity and mortality assessment process, patient medical records, or incident reports. It simply aims to increase transparency for the public about the demographics, time, place, and manner of death for those who died while serving a prison sentence.

Analyzing the reasons and circumstances under which people died in custody may ultimately offer insight into living conditions and the treatment of people in prisons. Starting with available data about who died, where they died, and what they died from, allows the public as well as policymakers and correctional administrators to have an initial understanding of the big picture, ask questions, flag concerning trends, and engage in a policy discussion about how to prevent deaths in the future.

¹ N.J.S.A. §52:27EE-28.

² N.J.S.A. §52:27EE-28.2(b)(2).

³ Office of the State Medical Examiner, Glossary, available at <https://ocsme.nj.gov/glossary>.

⁴ N.J.S.A. §26:6B-10(a)(12).

Executive Summary

Over a span of seven years from January 1, 2018 through December 31, 2024, 336 people died while serving state prison terms in New Jersey. This period included a global pandemic, which caused 14% of those deaths, mostly within the first two months of the COVID-19 virus reaching New Jersey.

A large majority of deaths among people in state prisons were from natural causes like cardiac disease, cancer, COVID, or other respiratory issues, and most deaths occurred in a hospital setting. A medical examiner's determination that a death occurred from natural causes is not an evaluation of the quality of the person's health care. Similarly, a death deemed to be a homicide or accident is a medical classification, not a determination of criminal responsibility.

Unnatural deaths included overdoses, suicides, homicides, and accidents, and accounted for one in every seven deaths in custody. Most unnatural deaths occurred at Northern State Prison (NSP) or New Jersey State Prison (NJSP), and more than half of all suicides occurred in disciplinary housing units. Eight of nine deaths among those in prison who were 25 years old or younger were deemed unnatural.⁵

The prison population dropped by a third between 2018 and 2024. However the number of deaths in custody remained fairly steady (with the exception of 2020, the first year of the pandemic). This means the rate of deaths increased over that period.⁶ White people in custody died at higher rates than Black and Hispanic people in custody. However, Black people made up both the majority of the prison population and the largest number of deaths in custody.

The ages at which people died in New Jersey prisons closely mirror the ages of those who died in state prisons across the country. In 2019, about two-thirds of all in-custody deaths—in New Jersey as well as in other state prison systems—were people over the age of 55.

About a third of all people who died in custody were housed in the Department's Extended Care Unit, where they were receiving end-of-life care or other advanced nursing care. Nearly all individuals who died while serving state prison terms were housed in General Population.⁷ Fewer people died who were housed in close custody, minimum security camps, or residential community placements.

Less than a third of those who died in prison were serving life or "virtual life" sentences.⁸ Fifteen percent of people who died in prison had less than one year left to serve before being released.⁹

The Ombudsperson Office welcomes questions and encourages policymakers and members of the public to engage with this data and help us identify topics for further exploration.

⁵ The NJ Department of Corrections can house people as young as 18. The youngest person to die in state custody between 2018-2024 was 20 years old.

⁶ For purposes of this report, death rates were calculated using the number of deaths in state prisons per every 1,000 people incarcerated.

⁷ For purposes of this report, General Population housing includes gang minimum, medium, and maximum custody classifications. It does not include housing at the full minimum camps, the Residential Community Reintegration Programs, or close custody settings like Protective Custody or disciplinary housing units.

⁸ For purposes of this report, a "virtual life" sentence is one with a projected release at age 90 or older.

⁹ Time left to serve was calculated based on the date of the person's death and their maximum sentence expiration date.

How many people died in prison?

During the seven-year period between 2018 and 2024, 336 people died in state correctional facilities, an average of 48 people per year (or 41 people per year excluding COVID-related deaths). The vast majority (83%) of deaths in custody were ruled natural deaths, meaning a death resulting from disease or age rather than from an accident, injury, or violent act.¹⁰ (See Figure 1.) Forty-eight people died of COVID-related illness, nearly all in the first two months of the pandemic.¹¹ (See Figure 2.)

Figure 1. Total deaths in custody, by year, 2018-2024.

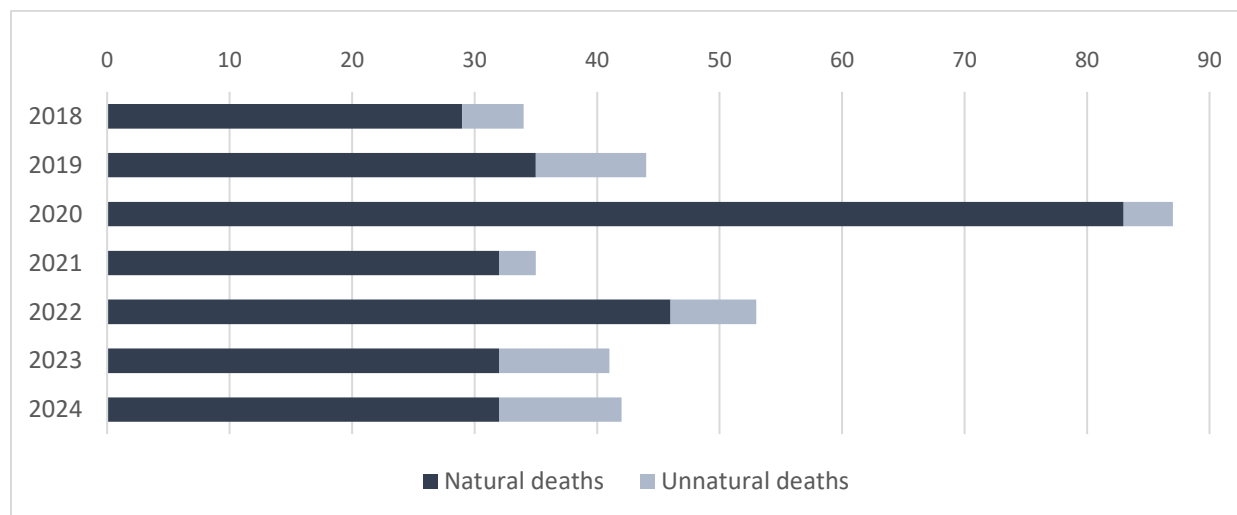
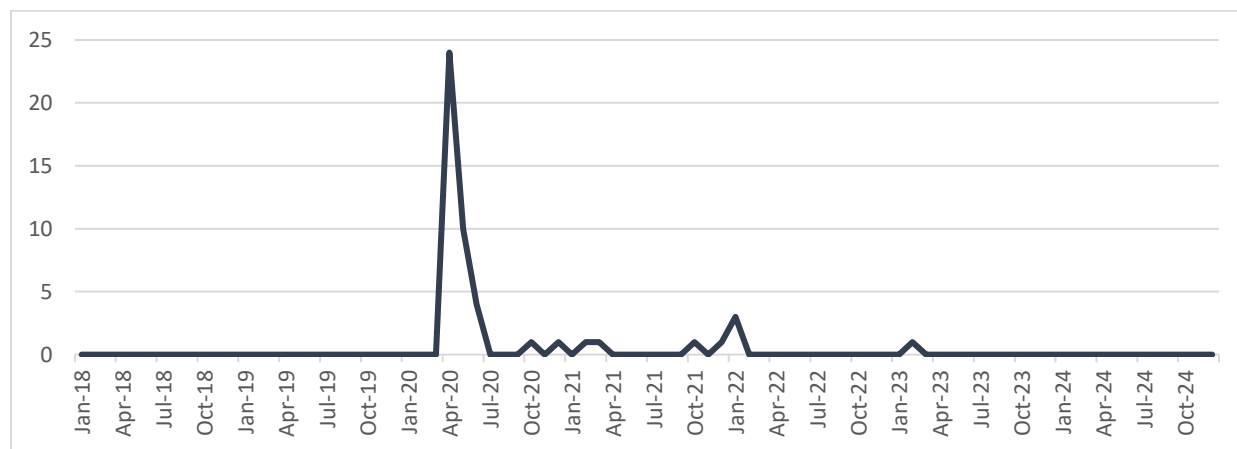


Figure 2. COVID-19 deaths in custody, by quarter, Jan. 2018 – Dec. 2024.



¹⁰ A small number of deaths were marked “undetermined” by the medical examiner. In Figure 1, undetermined deaths are grouped with natural deaths.

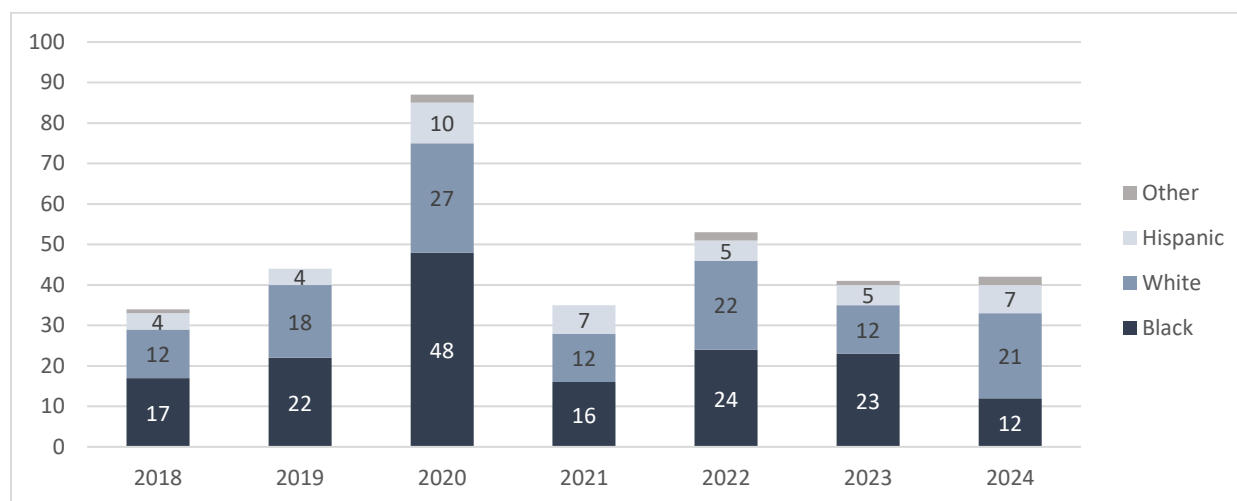
¹¹ COVID-related deaths were initially over-reported, likely out of an abundance of caution. Only 48 were confirmed by a medical examiner to be COVID-related deaths. More information about the NJDOC pandemic response can be found in an independent report produced by Montgomery McCracken Walker and Rhoads LLP, available at https://d31hzhk6di2h5.cloudfront.net/20240310/66/e0/28/83/e8d390363f3374c4da9952a7/Independent_Review_of_New_Jersey_Response_to_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.pdf.

Were there racial differences among those who died in prison?

Black incarcerated people died in higher numbers each year, though white incarcerated people died at higher rates.¹² (See Figures 3 and 4.) Black people accounted for roughly 60% of the state prison population and about half of all deaths in prison each year.¹³ White people accounted for 20-22% of the prison population each year and 37% of deaths in prison between 2018 and 2024.¹⁴ Hispanic people accounted for 14-16% of the prison population and 13% of deaths between 2018 and 2024.

The incarcerated population fell from more than 19,000 in 2018 to under 13,000 in 2024, and as the overall population went down, the overall rate of deaths went up.¹⁵ (See Figure 4.) Between 2018 and 2024, the rate increased from 1.3 deaths to 2.7 deaths for every 1,000 Hispanic people incarcerated, and from 2.9 deaths to 7.2 deaths for every 1,000 white people incarcerated. The rate deaths for Black people was nearly identical in 2018 and 2024.

Figure 3. Number of deaths in custody, by race and year, 2018-2024.



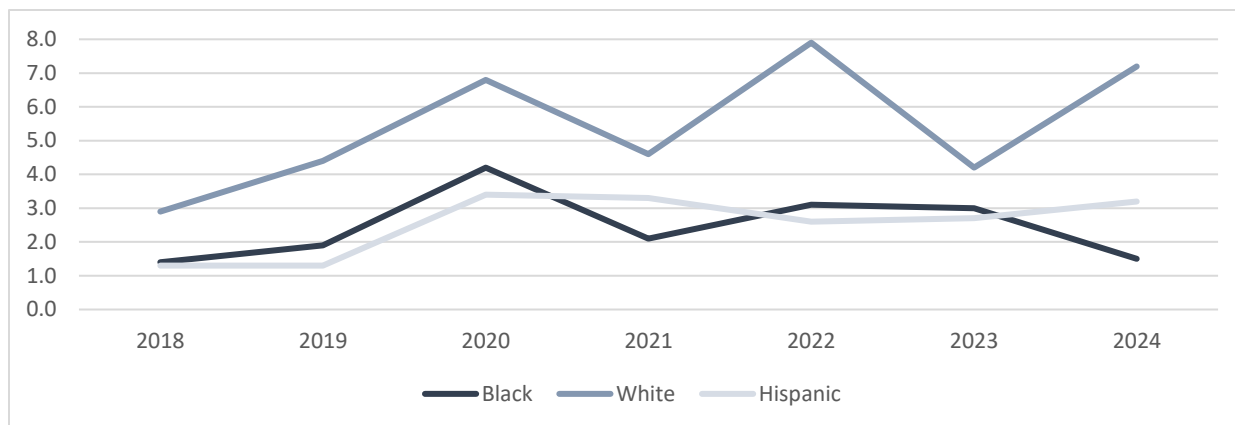
¹² “Number” here means the raw count of deaths in custody, and “rate” is a relative measure that contextualizes the number based on the prison population that year (i.e. the number of deaths per 1,000 people in custody).

¹³ Prison population and race/ethnicity data collected from New Jersey Department of Corrections, Population Characteristics Reports, *available at* <https://www.nj.gov/corrections/pages/Reports/PopulationCharacteristicsReports.html>. Race and ethnicity data for individuals who died in custody collected from New Jersey Department of Corrections iTag database. The category “Other” in Figure 3 includes Asian and Native American individuals and anyone else whose race was marked “other” in iTag.

¹⁴ *Id.* The portion of deaths was different year to year, for example, white people accounted for 29% of deaths in custody in 2023 and 50% of deaths in custody in 2024.

¹⁵ *Id.*

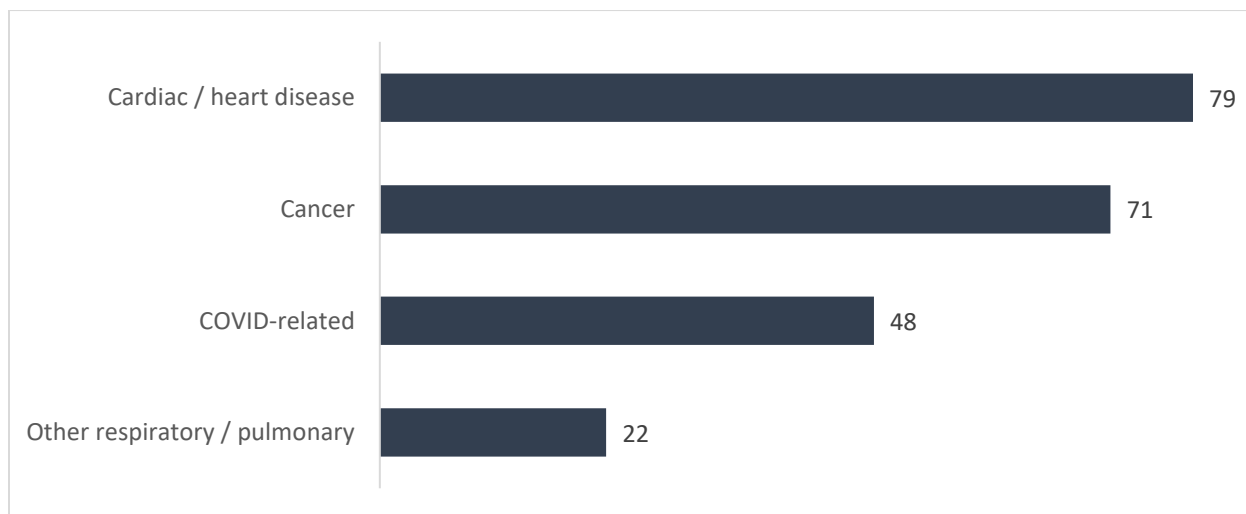
Figure 4. Rates of death per 1,000 people incarcerated, by race and year, 2018-2024.



What caused the deaths in New Jersey prisons?

Natural deaths were mostly related to cardiac issues, cancer, COVID-19, and other respiratory/pulmonary diseases. (See Figure 5.) These four categories represented two-thirds of all deaths in custody.

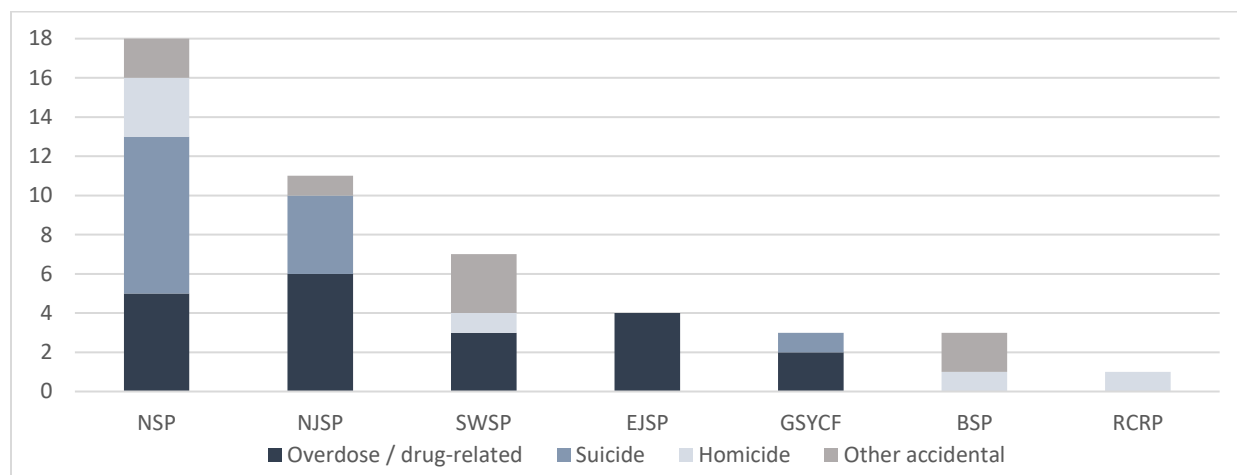
Figure 5. Common natural causes of death in New Jersey prisons, 2018-2024.



Roughly one in every seven deaths in custody was not a natural death, including 20 overdoses and other drug-related deaths, 13 suicides, 6 homicides, and 8 accidental deaths. When broken out by facility, most people who experienced unnatural deaths were housed at Northern State Prison or New Jersey State Prison. (See Figure 6.)

Thirteen people in New Jersey prisons died by suicide between 2018-2024.¹⁶ More than half (54%) of the suicide deaths were people being held in a disciplinary housing unit.¹⁷ Ten of the thirteen people were housed in single cells at the time. Six of the thirteen people were age 35 or younger. Two of the thirteen were serving life or “virtual life” sentences, and six of the thirteen had less than two years to serve before maxing out their prison sentence.

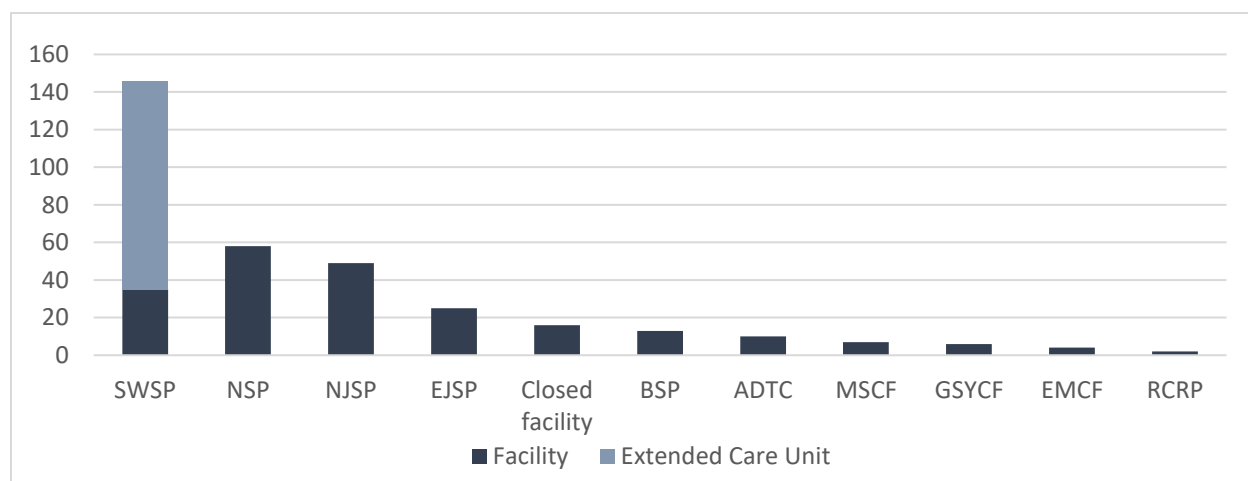
Figure 6. Deaths from unnatural causes, by facility, 2018-2024.



Which prison experienced the most deaths?

Of the 336 deaths in custody, 146 (43%) were people housed at South Woods State Prison, which is the largest New Jersey prison and the only one outfitted with an Extended Care Unit for end-of-life and other extended nursing care. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7. Deaths in custody, by facility where the person was housed, 2018-2024.



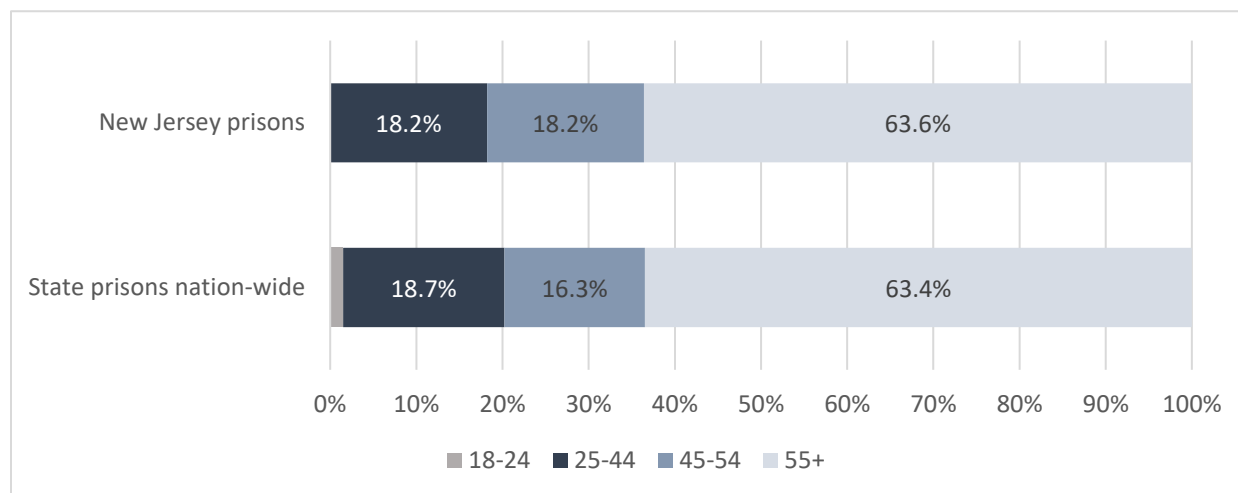
¹⁶ Note that there were no suicide deaths in 2018 or in 2021.

¹⁷ Depending on the year, disciplinary housing units were called Administrative Segregation, Restrictive Housing, or Restorative Housing Units. Housing data gathered from the NJ Department of Corrections iTag database.

How old were people when they died?

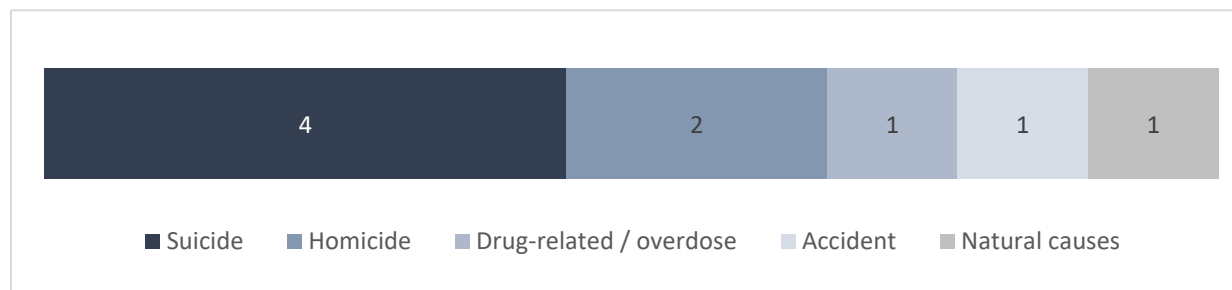
The age at which people in New Jersey died in prison mirrors national data on deaths in state prison facilities. About one-third of in-custody deaths involve people under the age of 55, and two-thirds are people age 55 or older.¹⁸ (See Figure 8.)

Figure 8. Deaths in prison by age, New Jersey vs. nationwide (2019).



Nine people age 25 or younger died in state prisons between 2018-2024. Eight of the nine were ruled to be deaths by unnatural causes. (See Figure 9.)

Figure 9. Deaths of incarcerated young people (age 25 and younger) in New Jersey prisons, 2018-2024.

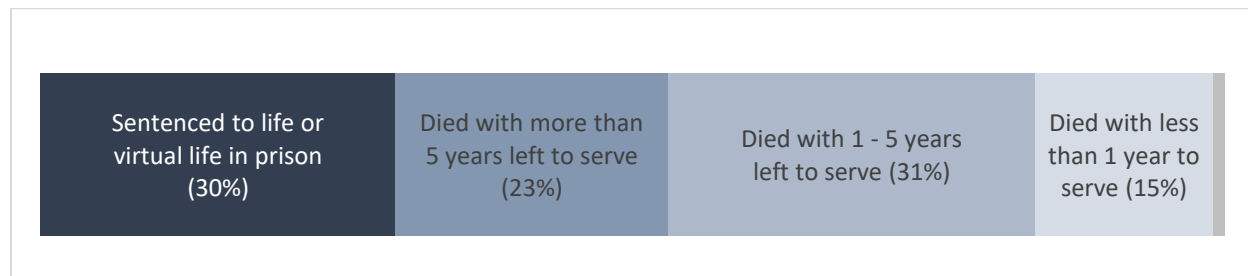


¹⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Mortality in State and Federal Prisons, 2001-2019 – Statistical Tables*, available at <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/msfp0119st.pdf>. These national statistics are not available for calendar years 2020 through 2024.

How much time did they have left to serve in prison when they died?

Most people sentenced to prison do not spend their whole lives in custody. Thirty percent of deaths in prison occurred among people who received a life or “virtual life” sentence. Roughly the same portion of deaths in prison were people with one-to-five years left to serve, and 15% of deaths in prison were people who would have been released in less than one year.¹⁹ (See Figure 10.)

Figure 10. Deaths in New Jersey prisons, by time remaining until release from prison, 2018-2024.

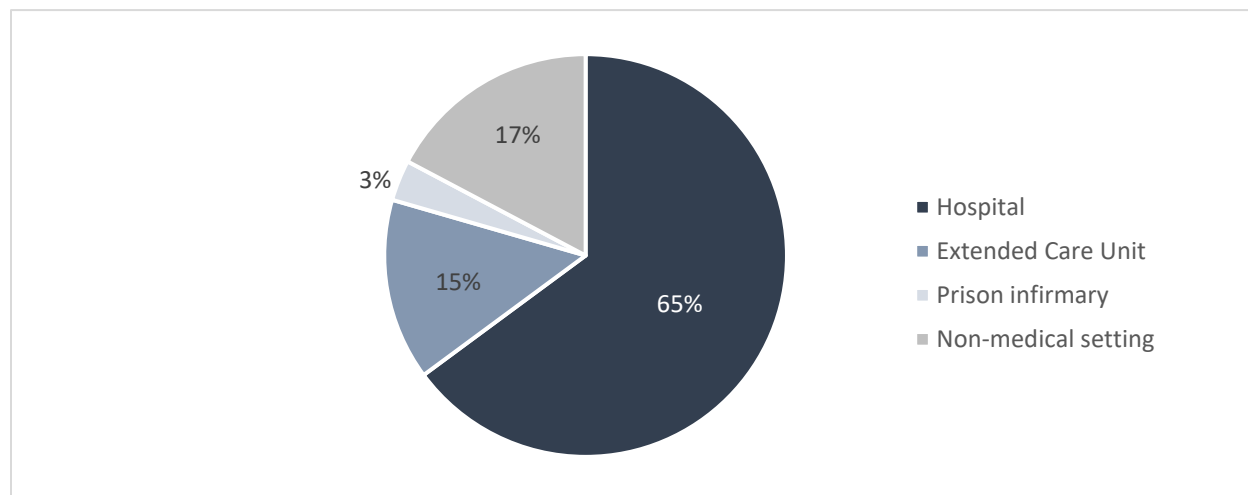


Note: 1% of deaths in New Jersey prisons were people not serving New Jersey state sentences (jail holds or prisoners from out-of-state).

Were people in a hospital or other clinical setting when they died?

Two-thirds of people who died while serving a state prison sentence were in a hospital setting when they passed away. Eighteen percent were in the Department of Corrections’ Extended Care Unit or another prison infirmary setting, according to the decedent’s last recorded location in the Department’s iTag database. The remainder of deaths occurred in a non-medical setting within the prison. (See Figure 11.) Notably, nearly everyone who died of COVID-19 while in custody was in a hospital or other medical setting when they passed away.

Figure 11. State prison deaths in a medical versus non-medical setting, 2018-2024.

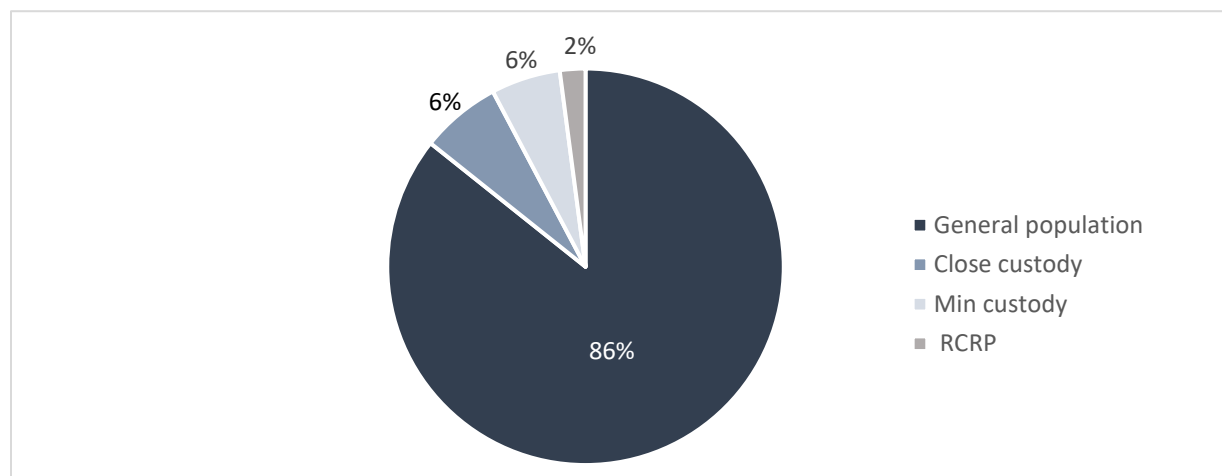


¹⁹ Time left to serve was calculated based on the individuals’ maximum sentence expiration date.

How were those who died classified for housing/custody purposes?

The large majority (86%) of people who died in state prisons were housed in General Population.²⁰ Twenty-two individuals (6%) were housed in close custody (including disciplinary housing, protective custody, and other restrictive settings), 19 individuals (6%) were full minimum security, and seven (2%) were placed in Residential Community Reintegration Programs (RCRPs). (See Figure 12.)

Figure 12. Deaths in New Jersey prisons, by housing classification / custody level, 2018-2024.



The importance of public data on deaths in custody

There are many reasons why publicizing information about people who have died in state prisons is critical. Doing so may help create transparency for the public, queue up important questions for prison officials and health care providers, understand the scale of an epidemic, and draw needed attention to facilities or custody settings where unnatural deaths or other preventable deaths are occurring in larger numbers.

The Ombudsperson Office recommends that the Department utilize data like this to spot trends, and produce regular public reports on deaths in custody, including contextual information about the people who passed away, the location and setting where they lived and died, and the causes and circumstances of those deaths. The Ombudsperson Office is happy to assist with those future analyses.

The Office also encourages lawmakers, advocates, and incarcerated people and their families to engage with the data in this report and use it to help identify key takeaways for policy and practice. This is the Ombudsperson Office's first report on deaths in custody. We welcome your insights, questions, and recommendations for further inquiry.

²⁰ For purposes of this report, General Population housing includes gang minimum, medium, and maximum custody classifications. It does not include housing at the full minimum camps, the Residential Community Reintegration Programs, or close custody settings like Protective Custody or disciplinary housing units.