An Examination of the Prevalence of COVID-19 in the Texas Juvenile Justice System

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant risk to environmental public health in the United States, with over 30.5 million people infected and 552,000 dead by March 2021. Different populations are disproportionately affected, with disparities connected to factors such as income, race, geographic location, population density and pre-existing medical conditions. These vulnerability indicators are compounded for one of the most overlooked and concurrently high-risk youth populations in the United States: those in the juvenile justice system. In order to understand how to break this cycle of environmental health disparities faced by incarcerated youth, an examination was performed of the prevalence of COVID-19 in juvenile justice through a Texas case study, chosen due to the state’s large incarcerated youth population, vulnerability to COVID-19, and transparency in juvenile justice COVID-19 data reporting. Data on demographics and COVID-19 were gathered on Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) secure facilities and halfway houses to understand who comprises the at-risk population and the extent of that risk. The potential for community influence on facility vulnerability was examined through data from the NIEHS Pandemic Vulnerability Index (PVI) and data from the TJJD on staff COVID-19 case counts. Data analysis demonstrated racial disparities in TJJD populations in both the TJJD overall and in placement in high versus lower-security facilities. Analysis further demonstrated high county vulnerability, high facility COVID-19 case counts, likely disease vectors from the staff to the youth, and disparities in case counts between facilities, perhaps due to population density but likely other unknown factors.