Toxic Waste

East Jersey State Prison

New Jersey

PRISON AGRICULTURE LAB

Meadhbh Gannon, 2025

East Jersey State Prison

East Jersey State Prison, formerly Rahway Prison Farm, is a maximum security facility housing individuals across minimum, medium and maximum security levels. Located in Middlesex County, New Jersey, the prison has been featured in multiple films and television shows as the quintessential imposing representation of prison. Opening in 1901 it was the first "reformatory" prison in the state, claiming to focus on reform rather than punishing individuals. Despite this way of framing the purpose of the prison, it has gained a reputation over the years for the violence experienced by prisoners, contaminated water and inadequate healthcare services. The prison has been the site for earliest versions of the "Scared Straight!" program. This was a program documented as a tv series in which children and young people caught up in the criminal legal system were exposed to adult prison contexts. The premise was that fear would deter young people from any future criminal activities. This show was discontinued for legal violations and safety concerns.

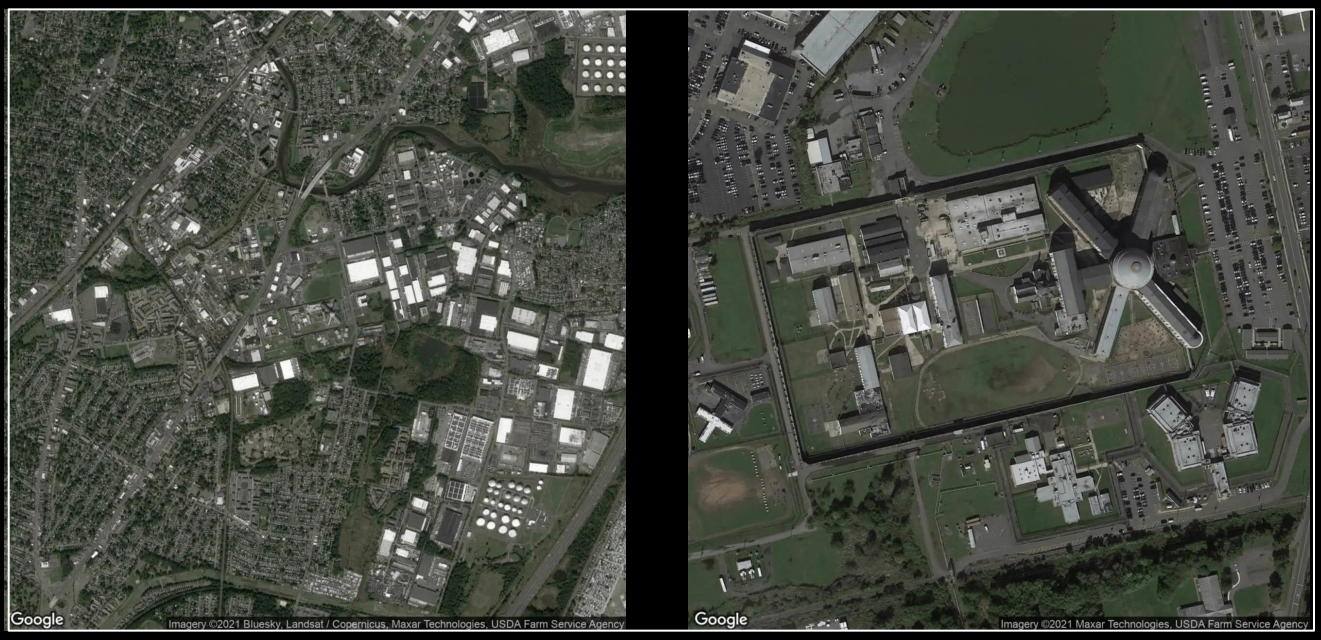

Figure 1. Satellite imagery of East Jersey State Prison and surrounding area. From *Satellite Image Gallery*, by Prison Agriculture Lab, n.d. Used under fair use for educational purposes.

East Jersey is part of the greater network of New Jersey Department of Corrections. Prisoners throughout the prison system are offered a number of programs aimed at skills building and preventing recidivism. These include: Educational Services, Social Rehabilitative Programs, and Substance Abuse Treatment. Prisoners also engage in labor for minimal or no pay, that includes Clerical Work, Storeroom (inventory and filling orders for goods), Yard Detail (cleaning and groundskeeping), Barbering, Sanitation, State Use Shops (producing goods for sale to government, public entities or the public), Law Library Clerks, Food Service Workers, Paralegal Clerks, and Agri-Industry Workers (farming labor). Incarcerated individuals can earn work credit that awards them days off for engaging in vocational or mandatory educational programs. This includes one day off for every five days an individual works (NJ.com, 2025). The prison has had repeated issues with water contamination and concerns have been raised about the health of prisoners. Brown water from taps at the facility as well as limited access to bottled water is an ongoing concern. Individuals report skin burns and sickness after drinking and bathing in the water (American Friends Service Committee, 2023).

New Jersey Superfund Sites

New Jersey has 115 sites listed on the EPA's National Priority List (NPL), making it the state with the highest number of priority sites in the United States (Gonzales, 2015; Trottier et al., 2023; Rakia, 2015). Since the creation of CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act) in 1980, New Jersey has identified a total of 2,168 contaminated sites with 829 still active in 2025. In 2015, WNYC Data News Team estimated 89% of residents to be living within a mile of toxic waste (Gonzales, 2015). Recent estimates put about 50% of New Jersey residents within 3 miles of a NPL site and 50% of New Jersey prisons located directly on top of toxic waste sites or former landfills (Braithwaite, 2024).

NJ Superfund Sites In Reuse:

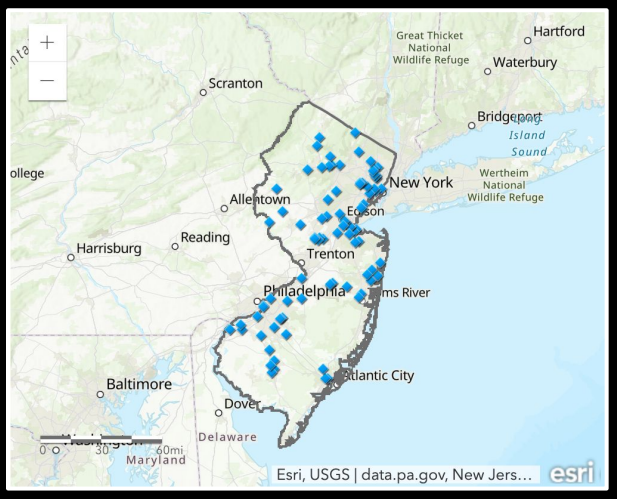

Figure 2. New Jersey EPA Map, *Overburdened Communities* (EPA, 2025).

National Priority List locations become contaminated due to industrial and manufacturing industries, processing plants, landfills, and dumping grounds. Following the closure and remediation of these sites, the locations are often repurposed. Polluted areas in New Jersey have been turned into baseball fields, parks, museums, power plants, and solar fields (New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, 2025). Risk Management Plans for different locations, whether on the priority list or not, include processes to ensure accountability from the state or private entities responsible for the contamination or poor management of toxic waste. These plans include hazard assessment for future leaks and accidents, prevention programming and strategies to avoid accidents, and an emergency response program outlining procedures in the event of an accident. These responsibilities were developed by the Environmental Protection Agency as federal laws and are overseen by state programs (EPA Risk Management, n.d.).

This map shows:

- **National Priorities List**
- **Risk Management Plan Facility Proximity**
- **Hazardous Waste Facility Proximity**

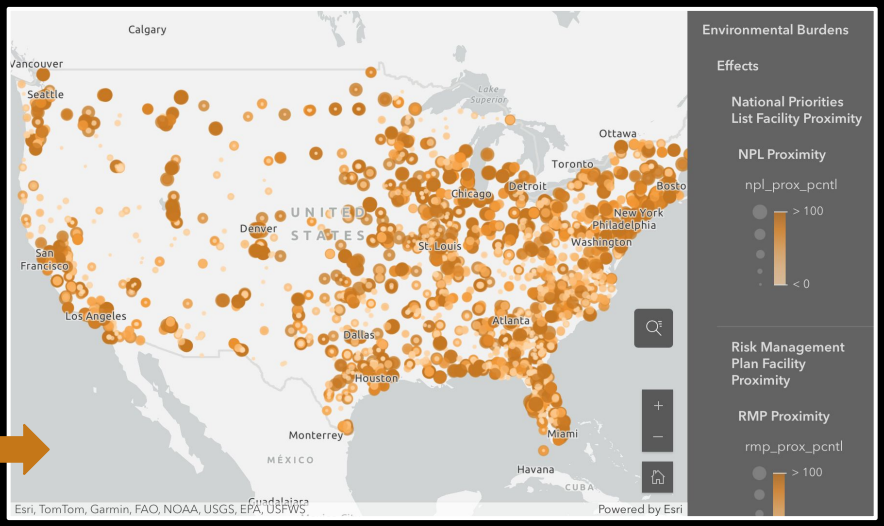

Figure 3. NPL, RMPF, Haz Waste map. From *GIS map showing environmental burdens* [Map], Adapted from Prison Agriculture Lab, n.d. Used under fair use for educational purposes

National Trends

Superfund sites are abandoned hazardous waste sites containing toxic pollutants. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assesses hazardous location and those deemed toxic enough to human health are put on the National priorities list. Nearly 600 federal and state prisons are located within three miles of a superfund site on the National priorities list. Of those prisons, around 100 are one mile from a toxic site. While it is unclear whether East Jersey prison water contamination is due to its proximity to superfund sites, prisons across the country are known to be built on contaminated watersheds with high levels of "forever chemicals" or PFAs (Perkins, 2024). PFAs are manufactured chemicals that have been used in industry and consumer products since the 1940s. It is very common to find these chemicals in landfills or groundwater near toxic sites or landfills. There are thousands of different types of PFAs, but Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) and Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS) are the most common (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024).

Figure 4. Graphic of pollution cycle

Figure 5. PFA Exposure Pathways

Across the country it is common for former superfund sites or landfills to be repurposed for prison facilities. Notorious prisons built on top of toxic material include SCI Fayette Prison in Pennsylvania, California's Federal Correctional Complex, and Wallace Pack Unit in Texas. Louisiana State Penitentiary is located in what is known as "Cancer Alley" with proximity to nearby petrochemical facilities. Challenges related to the location of these prisons include limited access to safe drinking water, weak environmental regulation protecting staff and prisoners from the impact of hazards, as well as minimal funding allocated to improve infrastructure and safety. At all of these facilities, there have been complaints about drinking water and air pollution. This can occur when waste migrates through ground water as a "plume" because contaminants have not been properly contained. Plumes occur when chemicals, particles and toxic sediment move through soil, groundwater or into waterways. Contamination of the air can occur from drifting dust, combustion or particles in the air that originate from toxic sites. Across New Jersey current and past industrial activities have lead to contamination from heavy metals (lead, chromium, arsenic, mercury), asbestos, Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and Polychlorinated biphenyls (PBCs). These stem from activities such as textile, chemical processing plants, metal manufacturing, landfills and dye operations (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency., n.d.).

East Jersey Prison Proximity to Toxins

According to Prison Agriculture Lab's Superfund Proximity Map and data, East Jersey State Prison has a NPL effect score of 90.76 and a NPL Proximity score of .18, placing it in a 91.53 percentile when compared to all prison data collected. Prison Agriculture lab gives this facility a vulnerability score of 64.48 out of 100 and places its vulnerability at 93.40 percentile when compared to other prisons in their dataset. Being in this percentile means that East Jersey prison is closer to toxic waste sites than over 90% of all other prisons with agricultural operations. This elevated proximity and elevated effect tells us that there are significant environmental risk factors for prisoners housed within this facility. Prisoners at this location are more likely to be exposed to hazardous waste contaminants than other prison locations across the country (Prison Agriculture Lab, n.d.).

The image below captures Prison Agriculture Lab's mapping data with a snapshot of East Jersey State Prison's "Effects Score" when compared to the rest of the country. This graph shows measures using a count of proposed and listed NPL sites:

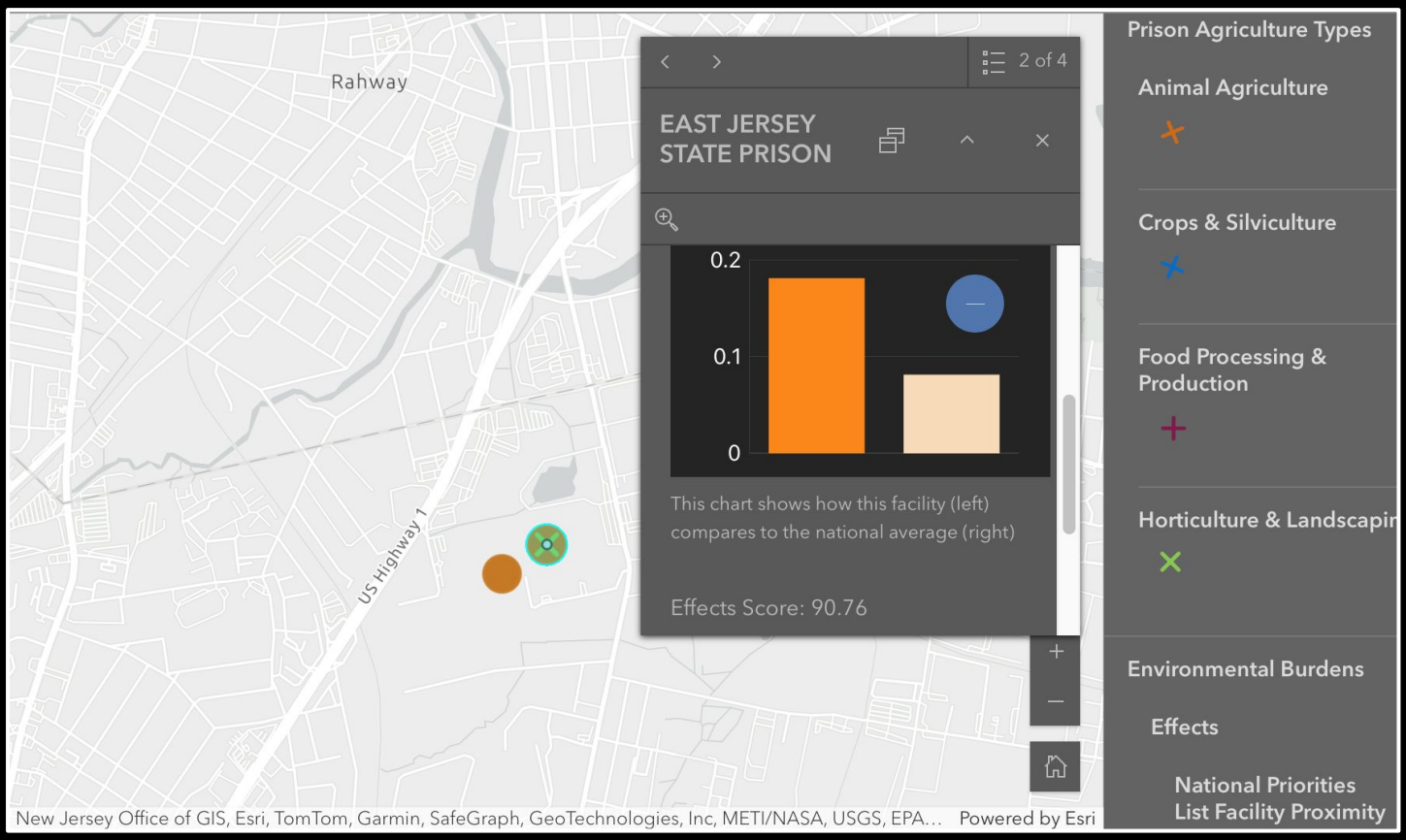

Figure 6. New Jersey National Priorities Proximity map. From *GIS map showing environmental burdens* [Map], by Prison Agriculture Lab, n.d. Used under fair use for educational purposes

Human Health

There is not readily available information regarding the location of horticulture activities at East Jersey or whether prisoners participate in activities on or off site. It is not easy to determine whether participation in horticultural programming at East Jersey prison is in any way correlated to hazardous waste exposure. However, incarcerated men at this prison have reported concerns related to water quality and other environmental hazards that could be connected to nearby toxic and industrial waste.

Anyone living at East Jersey Prison, regardless of engagement or work in a horticultural and gardening program has an increased potential exposure to hazardous chemicals. These exposures can occur through contaminated air (such as dust or vapors drifting into the prison grounds), through water pollution (groundwater pollution and drinking water), through contact with contaminated soil, and from consumption of produce that has been grown in these contexts. Any horticultural program in proximity to a superfund site would have concerns related to soil and water contamination. Below outlines health concerns associated with contaminants found at superfund sites:

Top Health Concerns Associated with Superfund Site Proximity

Health Concern	Types of Contaminants
Cancer	Benzene, arsenic, TCE, vinyl chloride
Neurological Disorders	Lead, mercury, toluene, PCBs
Birth, Reproductive Issues	Dioxins, solvents, metals
Immune, Endocrine Effects	PCBs, dioxins, pesticides
Mental Health Impacts	General site proximity, odors, stress

Table 1. Note. Adapted from "Contaminants at Superfund Sites" (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.)

There is a strong negative correlation between between life expectancy and living in proximity to a superfund site. This means that living close to these toxins or being exposed to them is a determinant in how long someone lives. This is especially apparent when looking at low-income and minoritized communities because these communities tend to live closer to contaminated sites due to historical discrimination and socio-economic factors. One in five Black men in the United States born in 2001 are likely to experience incarceration at some point in their lives. Not only are Black men more likely to live near a contaminated site prior to incarceration, incarceration at a place like East Jersey poses a risk to human health (Kiaghadi, A., Rifai, H. S., & Dawson, 2021). This compounding harm, coupled with existing health disparities faced by incarcerated populations means amplified risk. Many prison advocates consider this to be part of "death by incarceration" due to the length of a sentence, particularly life sentences that are common at East Jersey, as well as the harm to health and life within prisons (Abolitionist Law Center, n.d.).

Continued Cleanup

Figure 7. East Jersey State Prison in Rahway, New Jersey, U.S., July 12, 2018. Photo by Brendan McDermid, Reuters. Reprinted from Kruzman, D. (2018, July 18). *In U.S. prisons, tablets open window to the outside world*. Reuters.

East Jersey prison is only one example of countless prison facilities across the United States with proximity to toxic waste that presents concerns about the health of those inside the facility. It serves to illustrate the need to assess and monitor the environmental conditions surrounding prisons for the safety of incarcerated individuals and staff. With the potential for serious harm related to industrial corridors and landfills, documenting and monitoring by independent parties is critical to ensure that human rights are upheld and leadership is held accountable.

A pattern of prisons located near or on superfund sites is not a coincidence. It is part of greater systems of inequity, punishment and marginalization. In order to prevent further harm to human health, greater transparency, monitoring, policy change and ethical responsibility is crucial. Continued remediation efforts of toxic sites across New Jersey, especially for populations that have been rendered at risk by systemic injustice is an important step.

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