

COVID-19 and Mass Incarceration

Voices from the Inside

Revised April 15, 2020

FJP's COVID-19 and Mass Incarceration resources offer insights into trends and promising practices among reform-minded elected prosecutors responding to COVID-19, as well as answers to frequently asked questions. "Voices from the Inside" highlights firsthand accounts from individuals behind bars, their families and loved ones, and staff in these facilities. It underscores the human toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the tremendous anxiety and terror experienced by all of these individuals.

There are almost [2.3 million people](#) confined by local, state and federal authorities in America. Crowded quarters, poor sanitation, and medical neglect promote [rapid transmission of disease](#) and make it [challenging or impossible](#) for people behind bars to abide by even the simplest of CDC disease prevention guidelines, such as "social distancing" and frequent handwashing. Without rapid and proactive action, outbreaks within these facilities will be inevitable, deadly and catastrophic.

Set forth below are excerpts from some of the many moving firsthand accounts that provide a vivid picture of the reality of the dangerous conditions behind bars and the mounting fear and uncertainty that people inside are facing as the COVID-19 virus spreads and the death toll mounts.

"Social distancing" is impossible behind bars.

[Inside the Deadliest Federal Prison, the Seeping Coronavirus Creates Fear and Danger](#)

The Washington Post | April 10, 2020

- "They've got us cooped up... We are going to die here."
- "You can't tell us to social distance and throw six men in a 15-by-15-foot cubicle.... They won't let us outside. People are sick, coughing, not able to breathe, and we are piled on top of each other.... I'm mad; I'm terrified."

['I Feel Scared for My Life' — Inmates Face COVID-19 Inside NYC's Only Private Jail](#)

Queens Daily Eagle | April 3, 2020

- "Everyone's coughing, sneezing on top of each other.... We're not practicing social distancing because you cannot do social distancing in this jail because everyone is so on top of each other."
- "They're not giving us masks or gloves so a lot of us walk around with t-shirts on our faces.... The place is completely unsanitary, they're not cleaning, they're not changing our linens and they're not doing anything to keep the virus from spreading."

[Q&A: Two Oregon Prison Inmates on Facing COVID-19 Behind Bars](#)

Portland Mercury | April 3, 2020

- “The biggest issue is that we simply aren’t practicing the social distancing guidelines recommended by the CDC. I’m in a dormitory with over 80 people, with people sleeping no more than 2.5 feet away from me on both sides.”

[Inmates Worry as Prisons See First COVID-19 Cases](#)

Virginia Public Radio | April 1, 2020

- “[W]e’re nervous. We’re scared....If the coronavirus comes in here, there’s nothing that we can do, nowhere we can go. We’re forced to stay in a cell with someone else....We’re going to be left to die in here.”

[As a Mom Working in a Prison, I Worry About Bringing Coronavirus Home](#)

The Marshall Project | April 1, 2020

- “It’s impossible to practice ‘social distancing’ when you work in a prison. We’re still searching cells. We’re still doing pat downs. We’re still scanning IDs in the chow hall. We’re still breaking up physical fights. None of those requirements have been lifted due to the virus.”

People in jails and prisons aren’t given adequate sanitation or other essential supplies – and all too often have to purchase these items themselves.

[How Coronavirus at Rikers Puts All of N.Y.C. at Risk](#)

New York Times | March 29, 2020

- “It’s scary in there, that’s what I would tell you. When I was in there, you had guys making their own masks with their shirts. They didn’t want to breathe in the air with the same people that’s in the dorm with them.”

[Shampoo, Watery Soap to Disinfect: Conditions on Rikers Island During Covid-19 Unsafe, Some Inmates Say](#)

ABC News | March 29, 2020

- “It took two days to get a bed. I had to lie on the floor in intake with about seven other people, not within 6 feet of each other, but 6 inches. Two days of that on a concrete floor. Very unsanitary, no one was taking precautions, no one had masks, no wiping down with antibacterial cleaning supplies.”
- “We had heard about the virus being on Rikers on the news. A week later they were handing out one sheet of paper saying not to cough in your hands, to cough into the fold of your arms, wash your hands frequently, clean all main surfaces, door knobs, table tops....We took it upon ourselves to use items from commissary to clean. We used shampoo, crushed the soap and added water to stretch it out and clean the surfaces.”

Many inside fear for their lives – especially the elderly and medically vulnerable, who comprise a large percentage of those incarcerated.

[‘We Need Help’: Inmates Describe Prison System Unprepared for Coronavirus](#)

ABC News | April 5, 2020

- “It’s fixin’ to be a mass grave site.”
- “My thing for the outside world is, help. Help. Help for the overcrowding, help for sanitary purposes, help for a release mechanism. We need to release some of these people, we need help.”

[Q&A: Two Oregon Prison Inmates on Facing COVID-19 Behind Bars](#)

Portland Mercury | April 3, 2020

- “When it comes to the general feeling of people in here.... there is a large population that has come to terms with the fact that they may die in prison.”

[Letter from Harris County Jail](#)

Twitter | March 31, 2020

- “People are panicking and nobody wants to die in jail.”
- “We are passing through a very difficult situation here including tremendous stress, anxiety, fear, (depression) and worried about our families and our cases.”

[‘A Lot of These Older Guys Are Gonna Die’: COVID-19 Hits Illinois Prisons](#)

Illinois Public Media | March 30, 2020

- “It’s like a symphony of coughs at night, during the day when it’s quiet, everybody’s just coughing. You can hear people are obviously sick.”
- “They can’t even handle someone having an asthma attack, let alone multiple cases of coronavirus for somebody who is on dialysis, who has heart problems or respiratory problems....I believe if (COVID-19) really, really hits, a lot of these older guys are gonna die, unless by the grace of God, they don’t.”

Fear and anxiety are growing as people are placed in indefinite lockdowns with little communication about COVID-19 ... or with the outside world generally.

[Ohio Inmate Alleges COVID-19 Outbreak in Prison, Lack of Testing, Threats of Retaliation](#)

Fox News | April 4, 2020

- “He was complaining last week about being sick.... He didn’t want to say anything because they would throw him in the hole and call it quarantine.”

[Q&A: Two Oregon Prison Inmates on Facing COVID-19 Behind Bars](#)

Portland Mercury | April 3, 2020

- “The protocol is if they have a fever, they are sent into an isolated discipline segregation unit, also known as solitary confinement. We call it the hole. It’s called the hole for a

reason... it's a dark windowless room with just a toilet and a bed. We have seven of these cells.”

- “Right now, they’re holding both sick and healthy people [the healthy people are being held for disciplinary reasons], but they all share the same ventilation system. People are being held for two weeks in these cells, or until their symptoms have disappeared for three days. Staff are telling family members of people who are sick that they’re going into the infirmary – but we don’t have an infirmary. We have the hole.”

[Coronavirus Restrictions Stoke Tensions in Lock-Ups Across U.S.](#)

The Marshall Project | April 2, 2020

- “It’s a nonviolent protest going on right now because the officers, in the middle of the coronavirus, have refused us electricity for several hours, no showers or anything.”

Children in detention are frightened of what awaits them and struggling with the isolation.

[‘Pacing and Praying’: Jailed Youths Seek Release as Virus Spreads](#)

New York Times | April 14, 2020

- “I have been very nervous about possibly getting infected. When I first found out about the Covid-19 positive staff member, I started pacing and praying.”
- “To occupy the roughly 24 hours [per day] I am alone in my room, I have been given one book, a deck of cards, a puzzle and word search. None of these items keep me calm. I am very scared right now.”

[Coronavirus in Juvenile Detention Is a ‘Nightmare Scenario,’ Doctors and Advocates Say](#)

NBC News | March 27, 2020

- “I just don't want to die in here.”
- “If you get sick, nobody is coming...”

Families fear for the lives of their loved ones and are often left with little information.

[COVID-19 in Prisons Puts Inmates, Families on Edge](#)

WJHG 7 | April 8, 2020

- “He called me panicking and scared, and said, ‘Momma, they are leaving us here to die.’”

[Butner Has Nation’s Worst Prison COVID-19 Outbreak; Families Describe Anxiety, Worry Among Inmates](#)

The Wake Weekly | April 8, 2020

- “It’s almost like he has a death sentence when he doesn’t.”

[‘It Gets More Frightening’: As Coronavirus Surges in Prisons, Families of Elderly Inmates Wait in Fear](#)

USA Today | April 8, 2020

- “We haven’t gotten really any information at all....Hours and days go by, it gets more frightening.”

[Inmates Worry as Prisons See First COVID-19 Cases](#)

The Wake Weekly | April 1, 2020

- “Yeah, we’re nervous. We’re scared! If the coronavirus comes in here, there’s nothing that we can do, nowhere we can go. We’re forced to stay in a cell with someone else. If someone next door gets the coronavirus we’re going to get it. We’re going to be left to die in here.”

[Families of Sick Prisoners Plead for Compassionate Release as Coronavirus Spreads Behind Bars in Texas](#)

Texas Observer | March 31, 2020

- “There are honestly times where I fear whether he’ll make it out alive....if he gets sick, it’s possible I may never see my husband again.”
- “I wasn’t so worried before, but now with coronavirus, I’m calling everyone I can find....He was basically in bad shape going in, and since then has deteriorated tremendously.”

Additional Resources

These accounts are simply some of many. For more descriptions of the tension, fear and uncertainty among those behind bars, [follow Temperature Check](#), a rapid response series from PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing Program or [subscribe to Life Inside](#) from The Marshall Project.

To learn more about the concerns and perspectives of children of incarcerated parents, follow the important work of [We Got Us Now](#).