

**COVID-19 and Mass Incarceration**  
*Voices from the Inside*  
**Revised August 28, 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. Outbreaks within these facilities, which have been occurring across the country, have been deadly and catastrophic. Without rapid and proactive action, additional devastation is inevitable.

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.

***In letters, many incarcerated individuals described the harrowing conditions in jails and prisons.***

[I-TEAM: Inmate claims coronavirus 'spreading' fast at Duval County jail](#)

*News 5 Jax | July 24, 2020*

- "It's spreading down here real fast...They are putting people in cells who don't have coronavirus with those that have it."
- "My roommate tested positive for coronavirus.... And I've been in the cell with this dude for two weeks."
- "The living conditions...when they come through and spray (the cells), they put you right back in the cell...The cells are contaminated and they put you right back in the cell."

[San Quentin Prisoners Go On Hunger Strike Amid Massive COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

*The Appeal | July 1, 2020*

- "I'm holding my breath in the shower...The buildings are notoriously poorly ventilated. I'm literally standing in a crowd of sick men in like a sauna, and this disease is communicated through droplets. And I'm terrified."

- “Over half of the building is sick...They have nowhere to move sick people, so literally if your cellmate gets COVID, if he turns out to be positive, you’re just stuck in a cell with him.... It’s terrifying. They’re making very little effort to separate us from people who are positive.”
- “[T]he cells are filthy and we are not being given cleaner to maintain them.... Some of us are being housed together when the whole thing is to keep us six feet away from each other.”
- “It’s bad, it’s bad, please get the word out.”

### [In the Middle of a Pandemic, Prisoners at San Quentin are Punished for Being Sick](#)

*The Appeal* / June 23, 2020

- “When I was sent to Carson [solitary confinement], I was given one bed sheet the whole 10 days. The cell was filthy. The showers looked like they were never cleaned, so I took bird baths in my cell.... The way I was treated made me feel like I did something wrong. My property was taken, and as of today, I still haven’t gotten it all back.”
- “The first six cells on the first and second tiers have sliding glass doors and they are filthy.... I don’t think that’s the place you’d want to send someone who has this killer disease.”
- “If people are more worried about staying out of The Hole [solitary confinement] instead of getting medical help, then there’s something wrong.”

### [Lompoc Prison Inmates and Families Describe ‘Cruel’ COVID-19 Conditions](#)

*Santa Barbara Independent* / May 6, 2020

- “They are taking off those COVID-19 positive inmates who have ‘apparently recovered’ from the list of reported cases, when in fact none of them were ever re-tested.”
- “I felt hopeless. I was listening to men throw up and cough all night.”

### [From the inside: BCCX inmates share their experience during COVID-19 outbreak](#)

*News Channel 9* / May 4, 2020

- “It’s ridiculous. They still have some people in with people who tested positive. If they would’ve done this from the jump, I wouldn’t be in the position I’m in right now.”
- “They just lock you in their cell. Nobody’s been moved around.”
- “They were actually having us all go eat together. And you’re supposed to have your mask on, and you’re eating right next to everybody. And of course you have to take your mask off to eat.”

### [“I do not want to die in here”: Letters from the Harris County Jail](#)

*ProPublica* / May 1, 2020

- “As far as jail conditions are concerned, they still are not providing us with sufficient Soap to wash hands. One 2 oz. bottle of soap per week. I wash my very own clothes because I have multiple times seen people catch a staph infection from the so called clean laundry they pass out whenever they decide that they want to do Clothes change out which isn’t that often. From what I’ve read and my previous experience with diseases and health care in jails, there’s most definitely a high probability of me getting this disease.”

- “We’re all scared of this place getting infected it only takes one guard or the wrong inmate for it to be spread in here like fire in a barn. They say they’re trying to release some of us but doing very little.”
- “I am being forced to be incarcerated, as if this is a death sentence. I am no public safety threat/high risk as to a history of violence or any past violent crimes on my prior history.”
- “And each day that I wake up I’m in fear of my life. Our bunks are about 8 inches apart. And the tank next door is quarantined, there is a doorway between us...that is not sealed.”

[Wisconsin inmate sends letter to reporter describing COVID-19 from inside prison walls](#)

*Channel 3000 / April 30, 2020*

- “The biggest issue going on at WRC is that staff aren’t using PPE. The on unit staff don’t wear masks, and while they have people doing temperature checks every morning, the staff who do them don’t wear masks and speak in our faces after coming in close contact with every inmate in the facility.”
- “I just hope we get through this and that it makes us better as a result.”

[Arizona Inmates Ask Gov. Ducey for Early Release Due to Coronavirus Fears](#)

*KTAR News / April 20, 2020*

- “60 to 120 individuals live in common areas, in very confined spaces, whose beds are only 2 to 3 feet apart from each other.”
- “[D]uring this pandemic, places like these represent nothing less than a time bomb.”

[Report from Inside Angola Prison Paints a Troubling Picture as Coronavirus Grips Louisiana](#)

*The Appeal / April 10, 2020*

- “We are still packed in like sardines. The prison doesn’t supply anything for us. No sanitizer, no masks, no hand soap, nothing.”
- “Everytime you look up, one of the people that work here is sick. They rushed one of the kitchen workers out of the kitchen a few days ago, so I am very scared to go to the kitchen.”
- “Today all the guards showed up to work with masks on to protect themselves from us, when it is us that needs protection from them. We are not the ones that go in and out of the prison, but we’re being treated like we are the infected.”
- “Everything is really about a dollar. If you don’t have outside support, it’s really hard to survive....We are in a dire situation here. To these people here in Louisiana, this is just business as usual. No caution for human life, no compassion, no love. It’s a business and I understand that, but what about our lives?”

***“Social distancing” is impossible behind bars.***

[Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count](#)

*The New York Times / July 26, 2020*

- “I am very concerned.... There’s no way to social distance. We all eat together. We have a communal bathroom. There’s no way to address a public health issue in an overcrowded facility.”

### [At San Quentin, Overcrowding Laid the Groundwork for an Explosive COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

*The Appeal* / July 21, 2020

- “No partitions have been made available, nor seem to be coming.... The environment I’ve been housed in has created stress and anxiety.”
- “I don’t feel safe here because of the living conditions.... I believe we’re too close together.”
- “We’re jammed in like sardines in a can.”

### [The Prison Was Built to Hold 1,500 Inmates. It Had Over 2,000 Coronavirus Cases.](#)

*ProPublica* / June 18, 2020

- “Prison is not designed for social distancing.... That’s not the system’s fault. That’s not the prison’s fault. It couldn’t have been designed with the vision of one day having to social distance for 6 feet.... It squeezed as many of us in here as it could.”

### [Inside the Deadliest Federal Prison, the Sleeping 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.***

### [Coronavirus infecting America’s prison inmates 5 times more than outside, new study finds](#)

*ABC News* / July 8, 2020

- “I made my own mask out of undershorts.... One of the guys here who sews really good I gave him some brand new undershorts and he made it for me.”
- “Oh no. Prison don’t work that way.... You know, as far as trying to save people. It’s cheaper to let you die.”

### [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.***

### [Coronavirus Cases Rise Sharply in Prisons Even as They Plateau Nationwide](#)

*The New York Times* / June 16, 2020

- “It’s like a sword hanging over my head.... Any officer can bring it in.”
- “We need more testing here so everyone knows for sure.... And for me, my body has been compromised, so I don’t know how it is going to react. That makes all you don’t know even scarier.”

- “I had chest pains. I couldn’t breathe.... They told us it was the flu going around, but I ain’t never had a flu like that.”

[More Alabama inmates quarantined, but prison coronavirus testing remains low](#)

*Montgomery Advertiser / May 5, 2020*

- “We are the ones at a higher risk and should be isolated from the rest of the population, but still the guards allow others to come in from other dorms to do their trading and dope deals. There’s nothing being done to protect us. We feel like trapped rats waiting for death to come.”

[Inside the Jail With One of the Country’s Largest Coronavirus Outbreaks](#)

*ProPublica / April 30, 2020*

- “I was in the medical part of the jail because I was pregnant. And a lot of women were taking high blood pressure medicine or diabetes medicine. I remember the conversation clear as day. We said, ‘We need to get up out of here before we die.’ We were scared. Some of us was crying.”
- “It’s hard for me to sleep. I’ve been putting in request after request to see my mental health care professional. Prior to this whole crisis, you can drop a medical slip for anything and they would call you and treat you. But now it’s like we’re just left to fend for ourselves. It’s really, really frightening.”
- “It’s disturbing when we look outside the window and we see ambulances coming out of the county jail because it makes it feel like, ‘OK, when is it gonna be my turn?’”
- “We have several elderly people here. They don’t have energy and their chest hurts. And staff only take their temperature and they tell them, ‘OK, since you don’t have a fever, nothing’s wrong with you.’”

[Sick, elderly and fearing coronavirus: Life inside Fort Worth’s women’s federal prison](#)

*Fort Worth Star-Telegram / April 20, 2020*

- “I’m full of anxiety.” (Marie Neba, incarcerated with stage four breast cancer and diabetes.)
- “They are trying to separate us but there is no way to (be) separated because of the overcrowding.” (Kimberli Himmell, incarcerated with stage five kidney failure and stage three breast cancer.)

[I’m in prison. I may never get to see my family again due to coronavirus](#)

*The Guardian / April 10, 2020*

- “[T]here is a mood of unease and anxiety gripping the inmate population. Our main fear is that a staff member will contract Covid-19 on the outside, then bring the deadly virus into the prison. Inmates are walking on eggshells because everyone knows that there aren’t enough ICU beds or ventilators in the prison’s hospital to treat an influx of Covid-19 patients. The unspoken fear is that many inmates will die alone in their prison cells without access to proper medical treatment.”

### [‘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.***

### [Inmates talk of COVID fear and helplessness after transfers bring ‘the beast’ to San Quentin](#)

*Los Angeles Times / July 22, 2020*

- “The fear echoed through the cell.... Lots of grown men who aren’t scared of much were really scared.”
- “We knew it was only a matter of time for us.”
- “All they really did was say, ‘Here, take some Tylenol,’ and that’s it...We were just kind of on the wish system: You wish you don’t have it. You wish you don’t get sicker.”
- “It was very scary.... Guys would yell, ‘Man down in 246! Man down!’ and it would be someone who fell out or got so sick they had to come and send them out of there. You’d hear that five or six times a day, and you’d say, ‘Am I next?’”
- “I pride myself on not being scared of anything or anyone on death row, not even death itself...But this virus is more than just dying or death. It’s a torturous death, like lethal injection is.”
- “I social distance, I wash my hands regularly, clean this cage that I am forced to live in on a regular basis.”

### ['Obsessed with staying alive': Inmates describe a prison's piecemeal response to a fatal Covid-19 outbreak](#)

*STAT / June 12, 2020*

- "I have become obsessed with staying alive,"
- "Do [we] prisoners still have a federally protected right to safe and humane conditions?"
- "I'm not a lifer nor am I sentenced to death.... So are you telling me, with only a few months left, that me and everyone else here just has to sit here and wait to die?"

### ['People are sick all around me': inside the coronavirus catastrophe in California prisons](#)

*The Guardian / May 20, 2020*

- "The minute I toughen up and convince myself that everything will be OK, I'll hear crying or fear coming through the walls from other rooms.... I feel like we are being punished."
- "'We are forgotten in here and no one can speak up.' If you do, you get retaliated against."

### [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.***

[Coronavirus inside prisons doesn't just affect inmates. It affects communities of color.](#)

*NBC News* / July 9, 2020

- “He told me it's impossible to keep his hands clean, they can't keep 6-foot distance from one another and six people sleep in the same room.”
- “I had a huge fear. I couldn't communicate with her... I didn't know what was going on...I don't want my mom to not get out because of something she can't control -- this virus.”

[He was supposed to be in prison less than a year. Instead, he died after catching the coronavirus.](#)

*The Texas Tribune* / July 7, 2020

- “We never thought this would happen...He was going to get out, he was being fine...He was only sentenced to six months.”
- “Within one week, he's died...I don't even know what from yet. Maybe another stroke? Maybe COVID?”

[Grim Stories from Inside an Arkansas Prison Capture the Toll of COVID-19](#)

*The Appeal* / June 15, 2020

- “I have been in tears and wanting to give up cause he called and said they shook him down—threw pictures of his kids on the floor and walked over them—threw letters on the floor and he told me don't you dare give up—I need you to keep fighting to be my voice!”
- “It would be so much easier to give up but if they aren't giving up then neither am I.”
- “Our voices are definitely being heard. We just have to keep going ladies and stay strong,”

### [‘Mom, I just don’t know how to stay well’: Inside the nation’s worst known outbreak of coronavirus at a youth prison](#)

*The Washington Post* / April 23, 2020

- “He said, ‘Mom, I just don’t know how to stay well anymore.’ That would break any mother’s heart, because I didn’t know what to tell him, either.”
- “You’ve already had your child taken from you, so you’ve gone through absolute hell. Then they’re saying I can’t see my kid. All of the sudden, they’re locked inside their room for 23 hours. It’s almost too much.”
- “He’s written, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to get through it.’ That’s alarming and concerning, because it shows he’s not getting the social engagement. I’m not getting letters saying, ‘I talked to my therapist today.’”

### [‘Something Is Going to Explode’: When Coronavirus Strikes a Prison](#)

*New York Times* / April 18, 2020

- [Regarding the federal Bureau of Prison’s reports that Patrick Jones, who died from COVID-19 while incarcerated at F.C.I. Oakdale, had “long-term pre-existing medical conditions”]: “They lied. He did not have a longtime chronic illness. No asthma. He did 100 push-ups a day.” (Alice Jones, Patrick Jones’s mother)
- “He was as healthy as a bull. I always heard in prison the doctors don’t properly take care of them. If they fill out a piece of paper saying they sick, they wait a couple of days to get permission to see the doctor. And then they wait until they get damn near to their deathbed.” (Claudette Crumpton, Patrick Jones’s former girlfriend)

### [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](#).*