

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/a-view-from-the-inside-what-its-like-to-be-incarcerated-during-covid-19>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In Maine, reports say that [the state prison population](#) has been cut by more than 8 percent in response to the novel coronavirus, that cleaning and sanitation has been ramped up, that people are being released early on a Supervised Community Confinement Program (SCCP), and that those displaying symptoms are being quarantined and tested. As the Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC) circulates information, people incarcerated in its facilities have become increasingly frustrated that the reality they're living is severely different from what's being painted in the media.

I am one of them.

Accessing medical attention or personnel is even more difficult than it was before the virus, and masks are provided for us to wear whenever we leave our cells as if they are a force field against COVID-19. Unfortunately, few staff consistently wear masks or gloves and can also be seen interacting in groups with little caution about possibly spreading the virus to the incarcerated population. Cleaning increases when incarcerated people take the initiative to do it, but a culture of helplessness builds as many staff seem not to take the virus seriously, leading some incarcerated people to do the same. Toilet paper and cleaning supplies run low, just like elsewhere in the country, and necessary products like bleach and hand sanitizer are not allowed into facilities, making us question how reliable the same old cleaning products are. People joke about how those supplies didn't stop regular flu outbreaks recently, but were all eerily aware that COVID-19 is no laughing matter.

After a staff member at one MDOC facility contracted and tested positive for COVID-19, reports said that incarcerated people who came into contact with the staff member were quarantined, tested, and monitored; in reality, none of the above (except for the occasional temperature check) occurred. Whether the misreporting resulted from ignorance, assumption, or intentional deception, incarcerated people remain concerned that society truly doesn't know how vulnerable and unprotected we are. Local advocacy groups, families, and state representatives continue to push for the release of some incarcerated people, while those with months left on their sentences sit in limbo, wondering if they will be released or if they will contract the virus when it inevitably invades their prison.

Governor Janet Mills has explicitly stated she [will not use her power of commutation to release people](#), no matter how high their risk of contracting COVID-19 or minimal the risk to public safety. Incarcerated people are growing agitated as widespread testing is not happening, people are being frivolously denied for SCCP, and connection to family and community is becoming painfully distant. Volunteer-based programming remains shut down, phone access has been increasingly limited, and all visits were cancelled for more than four months.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness permeate facilities as frustration cannot be hugged out during visits with loved ones. Aggravation mounts as the power dynamics in prisons prevent incarcerated people from asking important questions and disseminating necessary information within their community. When asked for updates, line staff reply that they are not included in discussions among the higher-ups who make decisions.

Inside the prison, my own frustration builds. I hear staff consistently threaten incarcerated people with disciplinary measures for not wearing their masks, even when social distancing is possible, while the very same staff don't wear their own masks. I've watched staff cook food without wearing gloves or masks; outside deliveries from truck drivers without any personal protective equipment; groups of staff gathered two feet apart, laughing and chatting without face coverings. The situation breeds resentment and frustration, and tensions are running higher each day as I know that I can contract the virus as a result of their recklessness.

State prisons like [Ohio's Marion Correctional Institution](#) have been hit hard by the pandemic, demonstrating just how precarious a position incarcerated people find themselves in: helpless to fend off the virus when it finds its way through prison fences and behind walls, scared about conflicting and confusing information on preexisting conditions and preventive measures, and confused by rhetoric regarding the release of incarcerated people.

Conversations are useless without transparency. We need to listen to incarcerated people, counter misleading and inaccurate depictions of the reality of COVID-19 behind bars, and do everything we can to address the massive outbreaks we are seeing in institutions across the country. Comprehensive plans to release low-risk incarcerated people are essential to keep everyone who lives and works in prisons safe, especially in states like Maine where the government hides behind lower incarceration rates.

Brandon Brown holds a masters degree in conflict analysis and resolution from George Mason University. He currently resides in Maine.

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