

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/two-years-in-jail-never-convicted-of-a-crime-now-vulnerable-to-coronavirus>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Shonday Williams knows what coronavirus feels like. It put her in the hospital, killed her mothers fianc, and now, she fears, may threaten her brother. He is among the two-thirds of [people](#) in local jails more than 490,000 across the United States who have not been convicted of a crime. He had been held without bail for more than a year until January, when New Yorks bail reform law required that he be offered bail. It was set at \$100,000 cash, \$100,000 bond, or \$200,000 partially secured bond, which his family cannot afford.

Social distancing is impossible in facilities like the Genesee County Jail in upstate New York, where Plush Dozier is imprisoned as he waits for his trial. He says he is innocent of the accusation that he set a fire that seriously injured a woman. His pretrial detention will have lasted two years in June.

Dozier has suffered severe mental illness since he was a child. When Genesee County Jail could not treat his mental health issues, he was sent to Attica Correctional Facility, a maximum-security state prison, where he was placed in solitary confinement and experienced a breakdown. A judge determined that he was not competent to stand trial and sent him to a forensic hospital. When his mental health improved, he was sent back to the Genesee County Jail.

His mothers fianc, Alvin Simmons, had been helping Dozier cope and keeping him motivated. He would tell Plush, This is something you are going through, Doziers sister Shonday Williams said. You are going to make it out in the end. He and Simmons planned to play basketball together after Doziers trial was over.

But Simmons ended up being the first person in Monroe County, New York, to die of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. After a long search for employment, Simmons had finally gotten a job cleaning rooms at Rochester General Hospital. He was so excited, said his fiance Lisa Williams. He dreamed of eventually getting a job in patient transport.

When Simmons went to the doctor with a cough, he was told it was pneumonia and given antibiotics. The drugs did not help, and he ended up in the emergency room vomiting blood. Not long after, he died.

Shonday also contracted the disease. Whenever she took a breath, she said she felt pain in her chest. She was dizzy, her head pounded, and she soaked her bed in sweat.

Seeing what the disease did to her fianc and her daughter makes Lisa Williams terrified of what will happen if the virus hits the jail where her son is confined.

This virus is very serious, and his life is in jeopardy, she said.

Jails are veritable petri dishes for COVID-19, with thousands of people incarcerated in close proximity and hundreds of officers and staff coming and going from the facilities daily. The Vera Institute of Justice has, in a series of [guidance briefs](#) directed at justice system actors, urged jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities to release as many people as possible to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Doziers attorney, Frederick Rarick, said that the coronavirus has spread great fear among the jailed: All my clients are reaching out to me to get them out of custody.

Judge Charles Zambito, who presides over Doziers case, has taken steps to decrease the population of the Genesee County Jail. He terminated all intermittent, or weekend, sentences to try to prevent the introduction of COVID-19 into the jail. For new arrests, new protocols were enacted to ensure people are not unnecessarily incarcerated. Bail applications have been reviewed, and some pretrial detainees were released. Dozier was not among them.

Doziers trial had been scheduled for July 13, but the with courts shut down indefinitely, the actual date is likely far off in the future. He will likely spend more than two years behind bars before any verdict in his case.

His mother believes his Sixth Amendment rights are being denied, and now his life is at risk. This is not speedy, she said. Or fair.

NEWS

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

