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Accounts from Inside Washington, D.C.'s Jail During COVID-19 Reveal a Perfect Storm of Squalor and Neglect

by [Valerie Kiebala, James Ridgeway, and Lawrence Ukenye](#) | December 30, 2020

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I was coughing up blood for two days this week, M said. I have not seen a doctor. I have been telling sick call but they just walk past me. M, held at the District of Columbia jail, was describing his life behind bars as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

Ms. [written](#) statement is one of several submitted to the federal District Court in D.C. in [a lawsuit filed in March](#) by the Public Defender Service and ACLU of D.C. against the D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC). The complaint cites a range of violations in the jail, including substandard medical care, abysmal sanitation, failure to conduct proper testing, and lack of basic protective gear and social distancing measures.

Located less than two miles east of the U.S. Capitol and Supreme Court, on a stretch of Anacostia riverfront long [eyed hungrily by real estate](#) developers, the D.C. Jail stands as a monument to the persistent racial and economic inequities of the capital city and the nation it represents. D.C. has a [higher incarceration rate](#) than any state in the union, outpacing nearest rivals Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi. And while the District has grown both [whiter and richer](#), the population of the jail has remained close to 90 percent Black and mostly poor. This means the health risks posed by the jail's horrific conditions are compounded by underlying racial disparities in the impact of COVID-19, which make [African Americans three times more likely](#) to contract the virus and two times more likely to die from it.

The ACLU and Public Defenders found that conditions in the jail led to an exponential spread of the coronavirus, which has so far infected hundreds of people and killed one incarcerated person and one correctional officer. Their complaint states that when the virus hit the jail, DOC staff had no masks, insufficient gloves, no gowns, no disinfectants, and no comprehensive cleaning occurs on a regular basis.

One of the plaintiffs [investigating doctors found that](#) the jail was dangerously under-equipped and ill-prepared to prevent and manage a COVID-19 outbreak, which would result in severe harm to detained individuals, jail and prison staff, and the broader community.

G, who has a job in the jail's kitchen, [reported that](#) other kitchen workers kept coughing and one showed flu-like symptoms, but they continued to work without being seen by sick call or the infirmary. If I tell a CO [correctional officer] that I am too sick to go to work, I am told to go to work anyway, he wrote in a statement. We are forced to work sick or we face punishment.

According to the complaint, instead of receiving medical care, incarcerated people who tested positive for the virus were locked in a solitary confinement unit with no emergency buttons and often several hours between staff rounds.

The situation was so bad that the correctional officers union, fearing for their members' own safety, filed an amicus brief in support of the prisoner lawsuit. In an [April press conference](#), Corporal Jannease Johnson, who has worked for the DOC for 29 years, said, I can say that without exception, these are the absolute worst conditions I have ever experienced. The DOC has not reported accurately the number of infected inmates. Management has left the staff and inmates to become infected, sick and/or die.

Chaos in the Big House

Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly responded by appointing experts to [inspect the jail](#), and [she concluded](#), in mid-April, that the DOC had exposed incarcerated people to an unreasonable risk of damage to their health and shown deliberate indifference to their health and safety. She ordered the jail to implement emergency measures to combat the virus outbreak, including improved medical care and sanitation, adequate testing, humane conditions in the isolation unit, and confidential legal calls.

But by mid-May, the number of infections at the jail had [increased 25-fold, to more than 180, and the rate of infection was 13 times higher than in the District as a whole](#). The courts' experts found that incarcerated people were waiting days for medical attention, even when they reported serious symptoms including fever and shortness of breath. In June, the judge issued [a preliminary](#)

[injunction](#) demanding swift action, but the DOC appealed, claiming it had already improved the conditions sufficiently.

The judge declined to order the release of any individuals held at the jail, a move that is by far the most effective at controlling contagion, and one that has been taken by jails in many other cities. She did direct the U.S. Marshal Service and U.S. Parole Commission to come up with a detailed plan for reducing the jail population, with a deadline of July 1. More than five months later, a plan has yet to be completed.

While the legal process grinds on, the dire problems outlined in the lawsuit continue to plague the facility. Steven Marcus, staff attorney in the Public Defender Services Special Litigation Division, said that a resident who called him in early October reported being provided with just one disposable paper mask in a couple of weeks. He's been asking for a new one, but they haven't given it to him.

In early December, Marcus said that attorneys had observed in clients' online hearings some staff not wearing masks or wearing them below the chin. While the jail administration set up an ad-hoc testing operation in the jail parking lot, staff were not required to get tested. From the tests that were conducted, the number of staff infected with the virus has risen in the first weeks of December.

Barred from in-person visits, the Defenders must now rely on sporadic phone and video calls with their clients. Overall, Marcus said, he is still hearing really disturbing reports about sanitation conditions. On a couple of the housing units, in particular, it seems like they don't have access to cleaning supplies. As of mid-December, the DOC has failed to appoint a sanitation expert, as ordered by the court.

Mustafa Zulu, who survived COVID-19 while in jail, agrees that little has changed. This joint was fertile ground for the coronavirus because it was filthy in the first place, he said in an interview. By the time any precautions at all were taken, it already had spread. And it spread like wildfire.

Conditions That Turn Men Into Animals

In its early days before the Civil War, many of the people held in D.C.'s jail then located in Judiciary Square [were slaves](#), some runaways and some sent to the jail by their owners for safekeeping. The first [jail on the current site](#) was opened in 1872 and was still in use in 1972, a year after the Attica rebellion, when incarcerated people took over the jail and held twelve staff members hostage, including the District's corrections commissioner.

That uprising ended peacefully when negotiators agreed to let a group of incarcerated men meet with a federal judge, who would later rule that the jail violated the 8th Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. These conditions simply are not to be tolerated in a civilized society, much less in our national capital, [the judge wrote](#), citing the jails overcrowded, vermin-infested cells, neglect of people with mental illness, and lack of recreation or family visits. These are conditions which turn men into animals, conditions which degrade and dehumanize. In some senses the punishment they inflict is more painful and enduring than the stocks or the rack, long since discarded as barbaric or primitive.

A new jail building opened in 1976, but was overcrowded from the start, and the jail continued to be plagued with violence, drug-trading, unsanitary conditions, medical neglect, staff abuse, and what its inhabitants labeled mayhem.

Dominic Stewart, who is now in federal prison but was a juvenile in the D.C. Jail in the 1990s, recalled that things were so bad that an officer told him, "You better get a knife or know how to fight. Many men, adults, hanged themselves in [the jail's] lockdown unit," he wrote in an account of his time there. They could not take it, it was 24 hours of lunacy. The screams from the mentally ill who banged on their wall with their desk stool. The feces thrown. The screams of prisoners getting raped, beat up, crying.

In 1997, the District closed its only prison, in Lorton, Virginia, and signed over control of residents convicted of felonies to the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), to be dispersed among the 122 federal prisons across the country. [The D.C. Jail still holds](#) people who are in federal custody, awaiting hearings or transfer by the U.S. Marshals Service. Others have been picked up on parole violations or convicted of misdemeanors or low-level felonies. But many are being held pre-trial, and are legally innocent.

Over the years, the jail has floundered through one reform effort after another with little real change, though the DOC's budget has steadily increased. Five years ago, a special investigation by the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights (WLC) resulted in [a scathing report on the D.C. Jail](#), including its crumbling and squalid physical conditions, inadequate mental health care, and harsh treatment of incarcerated youth.

The report concluded that the jail facilities were unsalvageable and should be razed. But the WLC [criticized subsequent proposals](#) for a new jail, which would be better but also larger, for its failure to address a more enduring problem: D.C.'s legacy of over-policing, over-incarcerating and dehumanizing its most vulnerable community members—a problem that would not be solved by building hundreds of pristine cages.

The D.C. Jail also has a history of excessively using solitary confinement. [A DOC memo](#) on the use of restrictive housing reported that in 2017, nine percent of people were held in solitary at any given moment. And in 2018, eight percent of people were held in solitary. This is roughly three times the national average of people held in solitary in jails across the country, according to a [Bureau of Justice Statistics report](#) released in 2015.

All that was before coronavirus infected the jail, turning a hellhole into a Covid-19 hotspot. Mustafa Zulu was being held in the D.C. Jail awaiting transfer in April when he caught the virus and is still there. In a phone call, Zulu described the medical isolation unit at the jail as a madhouse where people struggled to keep alive with little to no medical attention. He was held in solitary confinement 23 hours a day, given a measly half an hour outside of his cell in the middle of the night, and fed half-cooked hot dogs, nasty macaroni and cheese, and mushy mystery meat the incarcerated men call the gulag.

Heading South

In response to COVID-19, local governments across the country reduced their jail populations by an average of 30 percent between

March and May 2020, according to the [Prison Policy Initiative](#). They achieved this by reducing arrests and prosecutions, loosening bail policies, and releasing people accused or convicted of low-level crimes or nearing the end of their sentences.

The D.C. Jails population initially fell from [1,739 in March to 1,260 in June](#). But In July, the numbers had already begun to climb again, and by the end of November, the [population reached nearly 1,500](#). The Vera Institute of Justice [reported that](#) D.C. lags behind decarceration efforts in other cities, including San Francisco, where the jail incarceration rate is half that of D.C., and New York, where the rate is four times lower.

Much of the blame went to the federal government, which holds the power to both approve jail releases and reduce new admissions. [A brief filed in the lawsuit](#) asserted that the U.S. Parole Commission continued to detain people on minor technical violations who presented no danger to public safety, while the U.S. Marshal Services actions actually resulted in additional incarceration and the further spread of COVID-19.

According to the Public Defenders Steven Marcus, as many as 150 people from the D.C. Jail were not released, but simply transferred by the U.S. Marshals to other prisons, including a privately-run prison in Tutwiler, Mississippi, that was the site of a rampant Coronavirus infection.

That prison, the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility, is owned and run by CoreCivic, the largest private prison corporation in the United States. CoreCivic (then known as Corrections Corporation of America) previously ran part of the D.C. Jail and was ousted only after an intense struggle by advocates.

The transport to Mississippi alone was a nightmare, according to declarations by incarcerated men filed with the court. Donnell Howard, a 51-year-old from D.C., [wrote in a statement](#), When I left D.C. Jail, they put me on a bus. About 32 other people were on the bus with me. Some of the people were coughing. The bus was packed. Every seat was full. Howard said he was not tested for the coronavirus before leaving the jail.

At Dulles Airport, according to Howard, the 32 of them were loaded onto the same plane. U.S. Marshals patted us down before we got on the plane, he said. The marshals were not wearing masks. Nor were the other marshals that ushered them off the plane in Tennessee for the drive to Mississippi, or the staff at the Tallahatchie facility.

Howard said he was never tested for the coronavirus at Tallahatchie, but was told he would remain at the prison for a 14-day quarantine period; instead, he was there for months.

Twenty-year-old James Guillory also [testified](#) that the U.S. Marshals were not wearing masks. One marshal escorting people onto the plane was chewing tobacco and spitting into a bottle, he said. The same marshal then directed us where to sit on the plane. When he got on the plane with us, he was still not wearing a mask. He was still chewing tobacco and spitting into the bottle on the plane.

At Tallahatchie, Guillory said, The CCA staff directed us all to go into the cells. They tried to put fifteen to twenty people in each cell. When the men refused to go into the crowded cells, CCA brought in their SORT team, which is like an ERT team or a SWAT team. The SORT team had paintball guns but the guns had mace in them. They are pepper ball guns. The SORT team threatened to shoot anyone who didn't go into the cell. Everyone went into the cells when the SORT team got there.

The Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility has also held individuals from the Mississippi, South Carolina, Vermont, and Wyoming DOCs. In August, local news outlets reported that [80 percent of the incarcerated men from Vermont](#) at Tallahatchie had tested positive for the coronavirus, and many were [complaining of inadequate medical care](#).

The transfer of individuals from the D.C. Jail to Mississippi was never reported by the media.

Since it happened, the men from D.C. have been dispersed to other federal facilities, and the U.S. Marshals have ended their contract with the Tallahatchie facility, replacing it with another [CoreCivic transfer center in Oklahoma](#).

Bowser and Booth Go AWOL

In [a news conference on March 31](#), Mayor Muriel Bowser said, I will assure you, it is our expectation and what we will confirm with jail staff that we are following every safety and health protocol with the cleaning of the jail.

On June 1, D.C. Councilmember Charles Allen held a [budget oversight hearing](#) where DOC Director Quincy Booth testified under oath. Booth declared, DOC prides itself on continually ensuring the public safety of the District residents is provided by a safe, orderly, and humane environment for its residents who are entrusted in our custody.

Booth went on to commend the Mayor, the DOC, and various partners for helping to mitigate the spread of the virus at the jail and following the best and promising practices and us[ing] data to inform our decisions to keep the residents and staff in our care safe. He mentioned enhanced cleaning to their cells, as well as the whole housing units, coupled with out-of-cell time that allowed them the opportunity to connect with their loved ones, as well as comprehensive information about the virus provided by medical staff and enhanced signage throughout the jail.

Booth also praised the private company, Unity Health Care, that provides medical services at the jail, saying that any incarcerated person who experiences COVID symptoms can put in a sick call and one of the Unity staff members will immediately, within the day come down and provide testing for them as well.

Both incarcerated people and correctional officers provided a very different picture of the jail during the pandemic.

In an April 1 [press conference hosted by the correctional officers union](#), Corporal Benjamin Olubasusi said, Sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) is not being provided to our staff. Social distancing is actively discouraged. Olubasusi said staffs requests for PPE were

continually ignored, and DOC leadership refused to participate in a daily conference call to address the crisis and to hear our input. Olubasusi recalled a conversation with Mayor Bowser, in which she threatened him with criminal prosecution if he left the jail or encouraged his co-workers to do so. He said, The leaders are now leaving us to die.

Corporal Jannease Johnson told the press, Management directs cleaning staff to only clean the management areas in the facility, but not the areas where incarcerated people live.

We have not seen the director in the building in about two to three weeks now, she said. Hes staying away from D.C. Jail and CTF. Thats very unusual. [Normally] hes over here, the deputy director is over here on a regular basis. Now, we dont see them at all. I dont think theyre here because I dont think they want to be contaminated with the COVID-19 virus. They are afraid to come to the facilities.

In a rare acknowledgment of common interest and common fate, Olubasusi said, Inmates are not being protected, officers are not being protected. If they are not safe, then we are not safe either. Our families are not safe either.

Aint Nobody to Call

G, a man held at the jail, [described the signage Booth had referenced](#): There are signs up in our unit that describe COVID-19. The signs do not tell us what the symptoms are. The signs tell us not to spread misinformation about COVID, but the signs do not give us the correct information we should know.

Fifty-year-old [Eric Smith](#), who was held in jail during the pandemic, wrote in a declaration, It takes days before anyone can get medical staff to come see them, even if you say you are having trouble breathing. [Another man](#) wrote, If I put in a sick call slip, I will not be seen by sick call for two to three days.

[Kamal Dorchy](#), 46, recalled a new policy introduced in March for handling the coronavirus. The new policy was that inmates were not allowed hand sanitizer. There were hand sanitizer dispensers mounted on the walls. They were taken down and given to COs.

Soon after, a lieutenant announced that we would be restricted to our cells 23.5 hours per day, Dorchy wrote. A lot of inmates are locked in with their cellmates. There is no sink in my cell and no toilet in my cell.

People at the jail complained that the food and drinks provided by subcontractor Summit Food Service were inedible and contaminated. An anonymous man wrote, The food they bring us from the jail is cold and the milk is spoiled and not kept on ice. I am afraid that if I drink the milk I will get sick.

Smith said, Every day they bring a big cooler of juice for people on the unit to drink. All-daylong inmates dip their cups into the top of the juice cooler to get ice out of it. If anyone on our unit has the virus, all of us either already [has] it or will get it soon.

Mustafa Zulu believes that many more people, many more inmates caught the coronavirus than it is on record. Whatever the numbers theyre saying it is, its probably almost double that. He says people have often hidden their symptoms for fear of being sent to solitary confinement. A lot of guys just didnt want to go to isolation. They already had heard what was going on down there. They were just taking us and throwing us in a cell.

Zulu now thinks he would have been better off if he had not reported his symptoms, and had treated himself in the regular housing unit. Locked in the North 2 isolation block with no emergency buttons, There aint nobody to call, aint nobody to yell to. Its almost like an empty building [If you pass out and] none of them happen to be around, then youre fucked.

Dorchy testified, There are not enough medical supplies to go around if we are all left in here.

As someone with fragile health, he said, I am afraid that I will die in [here]. I am preparing for my death. Other people have told me they are afraid they will die in here if no one helps us. People need to be sent home.

Banner photo credit: Washington Area Spark, Prisoners Shout Demands During Rebellion 1972.

Valerie Kiebal is a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in The Root, Truthout, the Chicago Reporter, and Shadowproof. James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Lawrence Ukenye is a former Solitary Watch intern and also worked as a breaking news intern at The Daily Beast. He is a journalism major at Temple University and serves as the editor-in-chief of The Temple News, the university's independent, student-run newspaper.

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September 29, 2022

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