

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

Art and Writing from Inside Prison Walls during COVID-19

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Prisons, jails, and detention centers are a prime environment for the spread of COVID-19. Crowded conditions do not allow for social distancing and access to hygiene products and medical care is unreliable. Poor conditions within prisons also lead to [high rates of chronic health conditions](#) for incarcerated people, including asthma, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, increasing their chances of complications if they contract COVID-19.

As of January 19, 2021, [almost 356,000 incarcerated people had tested positive for COVID-19](#), and more than 2,000 had died. But that's probably an undercount, as many facilities don't provide testing.

Incarcerated people and correctional staff know that COVID-19 is a major threat to their health, safety, and wellbeing. Anxiety, fear, and stress escalate as lockdowns limit human interaction and the ability to stay active, get fresh air, attend classes, and see family and loved ones.

Prisons are not detached from the larger community. Prison staff are vulnerable to transmitting sickness to their families and communities. Incarcerated people's families are also deeply concerned for their loved ones' health, recognizing that these facilities are not adequately equipped to prevent the spread of the virus.

Vera's [Restoring Promise](#) initiative has asked people who are incarcerated to share how their lives have been impacted. The art they have shared calls on us to recognize the humanity, hardships, and hopes of those suffering silently in prison.

Vera is producing guidance, working with government partners, and drawing attention to best practices to support justice systems in responding swiftly to protect people from COVID-19, while preserving due process for everyone. As the pandemic rages on, it is clear that justice system actors need to prioritize releasing as many people as possible in order to protect public health and save lives. Vera is also urging state and local government leaders to be bold and divert others from entering detention to begin with, as a way of directly addressing overcrowding and prioritizing safety for all.