

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/covid-19-if-prison-walls-could-talk>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Personal stories about COVID-19 and incarceration

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Inside crowded prisons, jails, and detention centers, people wait. They know the coronavirus will find its way in, a possible death sentence. Like waiting for a hurricane to hit, said one incarcerated person from Florida. Like a toxic gas release, said another in Ohio. Fear, stress, and tempers rise as lockdowns curtail recreation, family visits, and three hot meals. Social distancing is impossible. Access to hygiene products and medical care is unreliable. On the outside, families are desperate for information as they advocate for their loved ones. As of [October 1](#), more than 137,000 incarcerated people had COVID-19, and more than 1,100 had died. But that's probably an undercount, as many facilities don't provide testing.

Vera asked people involved in the criminal legal system to reflect on how the pandemic has impacted them. These stories bring us behind prison walls and into emotional lives. The photos were taken by family members and friends.

Chalana McFarland was halfway through a 30-year sentence at FCI Coleman Camp, a women's minimum security facility in Florida, when the pandemic hit in March. Her health was already rundown, and the threat of the virus sent her anxiety through the roof. In March, the U.S. Attorney General ordered the Bureau of Prisons to release the most vulnerable people behind bars to home confinement. McFarland had a shot to go home. In June, she was transferred home to serve out her term. She's not free; she wears an ankle monitor limiting her movement to the house and 25 feet around its perimeter. She fears for the friends she left behind. By July, Florida was a global hotspot for COVID-19, and cases in prisons surged. Coleman Camp was no exception.

When the pandemic hit, **Ronnie Lauderdale** was serving life plus 30 years at FMC Lexington in Kentucky, where everyone has medical conditions: cancer, diabetes, heart disease. Maintaining six feet of social distance was impossible. He sat two feet from fellow prison industry workers, stood one foot from others on the line for medications. Someone returned to the unit from outside after a parole violation, and rumors flared. The virus felt very close. By early June, Lauderdale was battling COVID-19. Before falling sick, he'd met a guy in the law library who was filing for compassionate release due to the virus. The man helped Lauderdale put together a petition 40 letters and five inches thick. It worked, miraculously. On June 26, less than two weeks after recovering, Lauderdale tested negative and was put on a bus for home.

Shonda Hayes, a nurse living in Racine, Wisconsin, was worried about safety at the Columbia Correctional Institution (CCI) even before the virus made its way to the Midwest. Her son, Isaiah, is incarcerated in the maximum-security men's prison. At age 17, he was charged as an adult after causing a devastating accident. By October, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections reported that six men incarcerated at CCI had tested positive for the virus. Isaiah texted his mom, "We're on lockdown because of COVID. It finally got in our institution. CANT LEAVE THE ROOM!" Isaiah is 19 now, serving a sentence of 36.5 years. Hayes is at home, serving every day of Isaiah's sentence with him.

Charles Robert Joseph was fighting deportation at Mesa Verde immigration detention center when the coronavirus reached the surrounding community of Bakersfield, California. He worried the virus could slip in with an officer or arrive with someone transferred from state prison. He spoke up for people he thought especially vulnerable and challenged operating procedures. He issued a protest letter and organized a hunger strike. Joseph was released to home confinement, but by August, more than half the people detained at Mesa Verde had tested positive for the virus. Joseph now lives with his wife and two daughters in Sacramento, where he continues to fight his deportation and the prison-to-ICE transfers that threaten those he left behind.

Chazidy Bowman, a mother of four in Cincinnati, Ohio, is consumed with her fight for her husband Rufus Bowman's well-being in the Toledo Correctional Institution. Unsatisfied with the information she was getting from the facility, she organized a Facebook group called Ohio Prisoners Justice League. COVID-19 cases besieged Ohio's overcrowded prisons. The network of frightened family members grew. They wanted information. They wanted their incarcerated loved ones to be safe. It's a fight they fear they are losing. By August, **Rufus Bowman** was terrified he'd contracted the virus. He was in and out of quarantine and frustrated that he had no results from his test.

Editor-in-Chief: Cindy Reed, editorial strategy director, Vera Institute of Justice

Writer/Producer: Gail Ablow, multimedia journalist

Video Editor: Josh Granger, editor/director

Web Design: Michael Mehler, web engagement director, Vera Institute of Justice

Reviewers:

Raf Jefferson, vice president, communications & external affairs, Vera Institute of Justice

Chris Choi, digital engagement director, Vera Institute of Justice

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