

Zoë Bourne

Professor Holland

SMPA 2111W

December 14, 2021

The Psychological Effects of Imprisonment Have Long Preceded DOJ Reports on D.C. Jail Conditions, Experts Say



Photo of Department of Corrections Central Detention Facility by Zoë Bourne

WASHINGTON - In a sea of brick and concrete government buildings sits Washington D.C's only jail located in Southeast Washington. On any given day, the jail holds approximately 1,260 inmates, about 1,000 of whom are Black.

Research shows that the psychological effects of imprisonment span generations, having a significant impact on inmates and their families. These effects disproportionately impact Black people and communities, with Black individuals being [five times](#) more likely to be incarcerated

than their white counterparts on the state level. Specifically in Washington, about 85% of the D.C. Jail population is Black.

Recently, D.C. Jail has faced public scrutiny and increased government attention, with city officials describing the jail's living conditions as "[egregious](#)." While there has been a recent wave of public awareness surrounding the facility, the city's inmates, non-profit organizations and community members have been complaining about the conditions of the jail for years.

Upon entering jail, inmates are likely to go through periods of social withdrawal, experience a lack of purpose and heightened levels of anxiety and depression under standard conditions of incarceration. With inadequate care, these effects are likely to have a greater impact on inmates with a previous history of mental health conditions.

A [report](#) released by the U.S. Marshals in November found evidence of "systemic failures," stating that the D.C. Jail failed to meet "the minimum standards of confinement." Inmates have additionally cited experiences of discolored water, cell flooding, walls stained with feces, excessive violence from jail guards and severe neglect of mental and physical health conditions. The investigation was prompted after a series of complaints were filed by detainees sent to the jail from the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol attack.

Katerina Semyonova, special counsel to the director of the Public Defender's Service, shared statements from six incarcerated men in D.C. Jail at a public roundtable with the D.C. Council.

“[Three guards] started whooping me, uppercut me, put me in the bunk, broke my ribs, handcuffed me, pepper sprayed me,” one man said. “I didn’t understand how I was able to survive that level of pain.”

Another man stated that a trip to the hospital after being infected with COVID-19 was like “a golden ticket to the Willy Wonka factory.” The man said he was granted this trip after he “begged” the jail staff not to let him die.

“We have to remember that the punishment is being removed from society, the punishment is not to live in misery,” said David Pitts, senior research fellow at the Urban Institute.

The U.S. Marshals’ findings have led to the transfer of 200 detainees, some of whom are pretrial, to a federal prison in Pennsylvania. For these detainees, an additional 180 miles stand between them and their families, children and legal counsel. Additional reports state there has been ongoing confusion and a lack of transparency for families trying to determine if a loved one has been transferred to another facility outside of Washington.

The effects of incarceration have a considerable impact on the children of inmates. Research shows that having an incarcerated parent is linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, future physical health problems and increased levels of instability. The instability born as a result of a parent’s incarceration is correlated with “lower educational achievement” and “behavior, attention deficits, speech and language and learning [disabilities](#).”

“Children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely to be incarcerated themselves,” said June Tangney, professor of psychology at George Mason University.

According to the Vera Institute, about [2.7 million](#) children in the United States have at least one parent in jail, with Black children seven times more likely to have a parent in jail than white children. As of 2015, about [one in nine](#) Black children have a parent that has been incarcerated.

COVID-19 protocol acted as an additional barrier for inmates who were trying to get face time with their family, children and legal counsel. To limit the spread of COVID-19 throughout the jail, inmates were confined to their cells for 23 hours a day for about 16 months. In person visits were also restricted, with inmates having the choice to participate in limited video call hours.

And while the Department of Corrections states that COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, many inmates still say they are being denied recreation time.

“I’m still receiving concerning messages from advocates and residents who tell me that many incarcerated people remain in a COVID-19 medical stay in place posture that is equivalent to an extended period of solitary confinement,” said Robert White, D.C. councilmember.

According to the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), spending anywhere from 22 to 24 hours alone in one's cell leads to “detrimental” effects. Specifically, solitary confinement leads to increased rates of dizziness, heart palpitations, vision loss, irregular digestion, chronic pain, psychosis and suicide.

The effects of solitary confinement are almost immediate, with research showing that inmates are impacted as quickly as one day into isolation.

Christopher Geldart, deputy mayor for public safety and justice, stated that the DOC is working with the U.S. Marshals to “implement corrective action” and increase access and monitoring of the jail.

“The world isn’t made up of victims out here and perpetrators in jail and prisons, but the people who cycle in and out of the criminal legal system have all been victims themselves, ” Tangney said. “We have to start thinking of them as people.”