

Testimony from US and Canadian inmates exposes deadly conditions inside prisons

By Sam Dalton
11 April 2020

Prisons and detention facilities throughout the US and Canada are developing into COVID-19 hot spots across the continent. The foul conditions which already existed in these facilities have left inmates and prison workers at extremely high-risk of infection and death. The close quarters and overcrowding means that once the virus enters a prison or detention facility, it can rapidly spread to a large population.

The Bureau of Prison's has officially reported that only eight federal prisoners have died from the virus; five of those deaths were of people incarcerated at one federal prison facility in Oakdale, Louisiana. State prisons in Illinois, Georgia, Michigan, Massachusetts and New York have also seen at least one death.

The true number of deaths and infections amongst incarcerated individuals is undoubtedly much higher. Many harrowing accounts have emerged in the form of videos and written testimony from prisoners outlining the conditions they face in the last two weeks.

One young prisoner at Elkton Federal Prison recorded a video on a smuggled phone which was posted on YouTube on April 5th. The prisoner, whose identity is unknown, begins:

"Sh*t was all good a couple of days ago, then all of a sudden everyone started getting sick and dying. Three guys I know have already been taken out of here dead. The rest of us are sick as hell. They are literally leaving us to die. They keep talking about social distancing, but we... can't even social distance, look at this."

The speaker then turns the camera to his room. He is on the bottom bunk of a bunk bed, the end of which is pushed up against another bed. The man lying in the other bed is wrapped up in a blanket, wearing a surgical mask and is unresponsive to the speaker's questions.

He continues, "This motherf**ker over here is dying from coronavirus, they got him in my room. How the f**k am I supposed to live?" The prisoner then reveals that his cellmate on the bunk above him is also infected.

"They told us to stay 6 feet, gave us these masks [surgical masks] and said, 'good luck.' I've got a light drug sentence

and now they are trying to kill me. I was trying to keep the phone situation low-key, but this is too serious. Everyone is dying."

He then leaves his cell and goes into a communal area and turns the camera to show an inmate who is unresponsive and audibly having extreme difficulty breathing. "He can't breathe, this motherf**ker is literally dying. I don't know what to do. I don't want to die in here, I've got under a year left."

Later in the video the speaker says that, "The nurse came today, he told me to be prepared, 'half of the unit is going to die' he said. They are already stacking up bodies in the tent." At another point in the video the inmate goes to a window to show a large tent that has been constructed in the prison's basketball court.

Towards the end of the video the speaker begins to list names of his friends and family, saying goodbye as he fears he will never see them again. He adds, "F**k all of this advice, we need to get out of here! Andrew Cuomo we can't social distance! If I don't make it, this is all for prison reform, don't let anyone else die for this. If I die, share this to everyone. Share this!"

He finishes the recording by stating, "There is no protection for inmates, they are going to throw you into that tent, and they are going to phone your parents and tell them there isn't anything they could have done about this. But there is something they can do! I'm here on a light drug charge, I meet all the criteria for the CARES Act and compassionate release, why can't I get out? Someone has got to answer that! But they want the money.

"They might send me to the hold for this [the recording of the video] but what else can I do? Spread awareness of people in prison, we [referring to his cellmate] only got drug charges and this is what they are doing to us. He is on his deathbed."

The fate of this inmate and those shown in the video are currently unknown. On April 6, a day after the video was leaked, Republican Ohio Governor Mike Dewine called the national guard to Elkton Federal Prison, just east of Canton,

Ohio.

On April 4, a letter was published on twitter, by an attorney on behalf of their anonymous client, an inmate at Rikers Island Jail Complex in New York.

The letter, which is dated March 21, begins: “I will not be stating my name for fear of retaliation and repercussion. I’m currently being held on Rikers Island as a detainee until my case is resolved [the author is therefore awaiting trial and yet to be convicted of a crime].

“In the past few months, I’ve been watching the news every day on the COVID-19 pandemic. And I’m also watching how our governor [Andrew Cuomo] continues to lie on saying there were no cases of COVID-19 on Rikers Island. That is a complete lie. There were 28 that I know of so far.”

On the same day as this letter was written, Mayor deBlasio announced that 21 inmates had tested positive. Until then only one case confirmed on March 18 amongst Rikers inmates had been reported by city authorities.

The day after the letter was published it was confirmed that Michael Tyson, aged 53, was the first Rikers inmate to die from COVID-19. Tyson had been incarcerated on February 28. He was awaiting a hearing on a parole violation. The most recent numbers at Rikers include at least 273 inmates infected with the virus—a rate of infection seven times higher than New York City, now the world epicenter of the pandemic.

The letter from the inmate continues: “Every day there’s more and more people coughing and sneezing having flu-like symptoms and no one is being tested. We sleep in horrible conditions only two feet apart. We’re receiving no masks, gloves or even enough soap. We are not getting the extra phone time the mayor promised us when visits were shut down.

“Everyday we live in fear of this virus and the staff are also very afraid. No one here deserved a death sentenced for the crime they’re accused [emphasis in original] of. We should be released with ankle monitors to give us a fighting chance. At least let us spend what can be our last days with our loved ones who are worried to death about us. Every day we sit and watch as ‘our’ mayor and governor lie.”

At the Laval correctional facility in Montreal, Canada, a number of prisoners are currently on hunger strike protesting the conditions of their incarceration. News of the strike spread to Burnside Prison in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Prisoners from the institution penned an open letter in solidarity with the hunger strikers which states: “Leaving marginalized people in prison during a pandemic is a violation of human rights that is targeted to the least powerful in society. The people who argue for us to be held in these facilities can sit safe at home while they condemn us to be left to sicken or

die if infection breaks out.”

Pointing to the gross injustice of thousands of migrants who have been imprisoned and facing deadly conditions the letter continues, “Prison is never safe or healthy. We particularly condemn incarceration of people who have committed no crime: people who have simply come from one place to another.

It concludes, “Free the Laval Strikers! Solidarity with all prisoners across the world!”

One migrant who is locked up at the South Texas Immigrant and Customs Enforcement Center, which is run by the private for-profit GEO group, gave the following plea to an attorney, “Help us, we fear for our lives. GEO doesn’t want us to know anything here.”

The increased risk to older prisoners and those with pre-existing conditions has also been highlighted by desperate inmates. In a letter to Governor Dewine, one Ohio inmate wrote, “I have four months left and I have asthma. This virus that is going around can kill people like me. I have two kids and a wife. I know there are others in here that have not done things that bad that we could all be put on house arrest or probation for the rest of this time.”

The inmate continues, “We are in groups of 210, could be more, and we sleep next to each other and we eat off the same plates. All it will take is one of us to get this and the whole prison will have it.”

Mass incarceration has been one of the major weapons utilized by the capitalist class, both Democrat and Republican, for the last forty years of social counter-revolution.

No society in human history has incarcerated as many of its own citizens as has the United States. The COVID-19 crisis has only sharpened the deadly consequences of this practice.

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