



Locked Up with COVID-19: Steps to Support Incarcerated People and their Families during the Pandemic

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The U.S. is the world leader in incarceration with 2.3 million people imprisoned, and the conditions within the correctional facilities are ripe for the spread of the novel coronavirus. Due to a lack of social distancing and decreased access to cleaning supplies, The Equal Justice Initiative indicated that the known infection rate for Covid-19 in jails and prisons is about 2.5 times higher than in the general population. Thus far, more than 59,719 incarcerated people and staff have tested positive for coronavirus and 650 have died, leaving behind families and communities. Correctional facilities are responsible for the physical and mental wellbeing of incarcerated people. **Increasing testing, providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff and residents, and allowing for increased communication between residents and their loved ones are basic steps required to improve current prison/jail conditions.**

There are steps correctional agencies can take to ensure the safety of incarcerated people.* First, PPE should not only be allowed, but provided with expectations that staff and residents are to wear PPE. Also, increased testing in correctional facilities should also be in place across the nation. It is concerning that some states are not reporting testing or mortality data associated with COVID-19 at all.

It must also be remembered that for each of the 2.3 million people incarcerated, they leave behind an entire family system on the outside. A recent study by FWD.us indicated that approximately half of the U.S. population has had at least one family member incarcerated for at least one night. Having a loved one incarcerated during “normal” conditions is already a stressful experience, as the families face financial, emotional, and mental health consequences. Such stressors are heightened during the pandemic due to decreased communication with their incarcerated loved ones and increased uncertainty about their health and status.

To that end, enhanced communication must be a priority. To reduce undue stress, incarcerated individuals and their family members need to be updated regularly about the safety of the prison, any changes in protocols, and what steps families can take to stay in regular contact with their loved one(s) who are incarcerated. In order to enhance communication, it would be ideal to place a freeze on fees associated with familial communication. Notably, some states allow for tablets in cells, which enables frequent communication between loved ones. Rehabilitative and educational programming can also be made available virtually through tablets.

These are some of the necessary steps to ensure the safety and the basic needs of all humans, regardless of their situation, during this devastating public health issue facing the world.

*These implications were developed based upon an ongoing mixed methods study in the U.S. conducted by myself and Dr. Meghan Novisky.