

News ||||| Inside

“I know that I have basically NO rights at all . . . But I have a two-year-old daughter that I must be there for, and I will not give up my fight for justice.”



Hudson Link for Higher
Education in Prison students at
Sing Sing Correctional Facility
in Ossining, New York. BABITA
PATEL FOR THE MARSHALL
PROJECT AND SLATE



Left: Sing Sing Correctional Facility, NY
Above and right: Ohio Reformatory for Women, ANDREW SPEAR FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT



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A Letter from Lawrence

When I was serving my 27-year prison sentence, spring came with sunny thoughts of freedom. But today, even though I'm free, I don't have those pleasant thoughts. Part of me is still in there with you as you struggle to survive in the coronavirus era.

To help you fight COVID-19, we're presenting a survival guide co-developed with M.D.s Brie Williams and Leah Rorvig of Amend/UCSF (page 13). For a look at how sheriffs, prosecutors and public defenders are scrambling to move people out of jails to slow the spread of the virus, read "Coronavirus Transforming Jails Across the Country" on page 21.

Even as COVID-19 dominates the conversation, News Inside remains committed to bringing you a deeper view of the criminal justice world. "What Do We Really Know About the Politics of People Behind Bars?" is the first of a series driven by the political opinion survey we featured in Issue 3. Impressively, over 8,000 of you in 25 states responded.

My sincere thanks goes to all who filled out the questions, free-wrote your thoughts and photocopied the surveys for your friends. Special thanks goes out to the ambassadors who spread the word about the survey and to the jail and prison administrators who supported it.

In this issue, you will also find "Trade Your Prison Sentence for a Smartwatch?" (page 19). It's an investigation into a for-profit company that claims it can get people released earlier through a new kind of electronic monitoring. Then there is "Newsrooms Rethink a Crime Reporting Staple: The Mugshot" on page 24, which explores one media outlet's stance against modern-day "scarlet letter" branding.

The last article I want to point out is "How to Fix Our Prisons? Let The Public Inside." It demonstrates the value volunteers bring into facilities with art, education, therapeutic exercises and more. I know how valuable this work is as I once participated in a theater program called Rehabilitation Through the Arts where I learned the right way to stand on a stage, how to use voice projection and other skills that proved useful on and off the stage.

I will never forget the little bit of good I experienced in a place I didn't want to be. Because of that, when prison officials invite me to go into facilities to discuss my work and re-entry experience, I jump at the chance. Now people look at me the way I used to look at volunteers who took time out of their day to help me help myself. I truly appreciate the opportunity to give back.



Lawrence Bartley

Lawrence Bartley is the Director of News Inside. He served a 27 years-to-life sentence and was released on parole in May 2018.

Letters to the Director

Congratulations on an excellent publication with flawless, captivating articles. I look forward to more of your success.

L. Gonzalez
California

I am writing to express my gratitude after reading the December issue of News Inside. I am 14 years in on a 30-year sentence. It's great to hear of progress towards the many problems with prison in general. For most of us stuck in the system there just isn't much in rehabilitation offered to occupy our time productively and news is hard to come by.

Justin
Florida

When I was walking through the day room I stopped to check the community table, as I always do. With an insatiable thirst for reading material, I dug through the pile of old Sports Illustrateds to come upon your [publication]. In truth I was going to just pass it by when the yard bell rang, signaling those of us not going to the yard to lock back in. So I just grabbed your publication out of fear of being locked in without any reading material. Admitting I was slightly disappointed expecting another collection of poems and ramblings. Boy was I pleasantly surprised. I found truthful articles packed full of valuable information. I admit to taking some notes before placing your magazine back on the table with the hopes that someone else could benefit from the reading

James
New York

I would like to . . . subscribe to your magazine because I see a lot [of] information that[s] encouraging and educational [pertaining to] criminal justice policies [affecting] incarcerated people.

Martha
Texas

What Do We Really Know About the Politics of People Behind Bars?

More than 8,000 people responded to a first-of-its-kind political survey. Here is what they said.

Nicole Lewis, Aviva Shen and Anna Flagg
Series Produced by Nicole Lewis and Lawrence Bartley

A simple question at a Bernie Sanders town hall last spring sparked a debate new to prime time: Should incarcerated people be allowed to vote? Sanders said yes—his home state of Vermont (and its neighbor, Maine) are the only states to give all people in prison that right. Later, Joe Biden said no.

Yet in a country awash in political polling, the views of those who are most affected remain a mystery: the 2.3 million people behind bars. Do they want to vote? If given the right, who would they vote for? What issues do they care about most? No one's ever really asked.

This is why The Marshall Project partnered with Slate to conduct the first-of-its-kind political survey inside prisons and jails across the country. Now that criminal justice is a campaign issue and many states are restoring voting rights to those convicted of felonies, we asked thousands of incarcerated people across the country for their opinions on criminal justice reform, which political party they identify with and which presidential candidate they'd support. We heard from more than 8,000 people. Here's what we found:

- A plurality of white respondents back President Donald Trump, undercutting claims that people in prison would overwhelmingly vote for Democrats.
- Long stretches in prison appear to be politicizing: The more time respondents spend in prison, the more motivated they are to vote, the more they discuss politics, and the more likely their opinions are to evolve.
- Perspectives change inside prison. Republicans behind bars back policies like legalizing marijuana that are less popular with GOP voters on the outside; Democrats inside prison are less enthusiastic about an assault weapons ban than Democrats at large.
- Political views diverged by race. Black respondents are the only group pointing to reducing racial bias in criminal justice as a top concern; almost every other group picked reducing the prison population as a top criminal justice priority.

Many respondents' answers reflected the crucible of their own experiences—offering new insights into issues often discussed from a distance on a debate stage.

"I once believed in gun ownership," wrote Helen Gately, who is incarcerated at the J. Aaron Hawkins Senior Center for Women in Arkansas. "But when I killed my abuser with a gun, I knew had there not been a gun in our house I would have never killed him. I would have never had the heart to stab him. But a gun made it impersonal, easy

and quick. Now he's dead and I'm here."

This country is still a long way from granting incarcerated people the right to vote, and polls show the idea is unpopular. But the thinking on who deserves these rights is changing. In the past two years alone, more than a dozen states reconsidered their felony disenfranchisement laws, often restoring voting rights to people on probation and parole or clarifying the rights restoration process.

The Florida primary on March 17 will bring one of the most significant tests of this new landscape. It is the first major contest since Floridians voted in 2018 to restore the right to cast a ballot to an estimated 1.5 million people with felony convictions. Before the measure, Florida had one of the strictest disenfranchisement laws in the country, which left 1 in 10 voting age adults unable to vote. The historic measure was the greatest expansion of the franchise in decades, but it was obstructed by the Republican Legislature, which passed laws requiring payment of fines and fees before restoring rights. The partisan legal battle is ongoing. However, our survey suggests that granting the right to vote to those currently or formerly incarcerated may not overwhelmingly benefit one party over the other.

Overall, the survey responses reflect a diverse and often contradictory set of beliefs from people who, should they ever get the right to vote, cannot be seen as a single bloc. While some disdain politics, more respondents say they now see the ballot as a way to advocate for their interests.

"Before coming to prison I really did not think it was all that important to vote or even care what was going on in the government," wrote Antonio Ayers, who is incarcerated in Arkansas. "But now that I have time to sit back and watch what goes on, I know that as a citizen it is very important to let what I want to be known by the people in charge."

To reach people whose access to the outside world is severely limited, we inserted a survey into The Marshall Project's print publication, News Inside. This magazine is distributed in more than 500 prisons and jails across the country. (Prisons house people convicted of felonies, while jails house those awaiting trial or who were convicted of misdemeanors.) As more results come in and the general election kicks into gear, we plan to return to respondents for their thoughts.

Roughly half of the 8,266 respondents identified as people of color or mixed-race, with 20 percent identifying as black, 14 percent as Latino, 17 percent as Native American and 19 percent as Asian or other races. The remaining 41 percent identified as white alone, and 8 percent did not give any race information. (The numbers exceed 100 percent because mixed-race respondents could select multiple races.)

Most have completed high school and are between 26 and 45 years old. Eighty-five percent are men, 14 percent are women and 2 percent are gender non-conforming. Sixteen percent have not been convicted and are awaiting court dates in a county jail, or did not know whether they had been sentenced or not. Most of the rest will spend anywhere from five to more than 21 years in prison.

Our survey is intended to be a snapshot of politics behind bars, but it has limitations. Since this was a voluntary survey, it's important to keep in mind that responses are coming from a self-selecting group of people who may already be politically engaged and following the news.

Respondents skewed whiter than the overall prison population, and were disproportionately incarcerated in red states. State prisons hold a disproportionate number of black and Latino people. (Thirty-three percent of state prisoners are black, while black people make up 13 percent of the United States population, for example.) As a result, the survey is not representative of the overall prison population. So instead of focusing solely on the respondents as a whole, we looked for trends across race, gender, party affiliation and other demographic categories to ensure our reported results were meaningful. We also surfaced as many individual voices and opinions as possible.

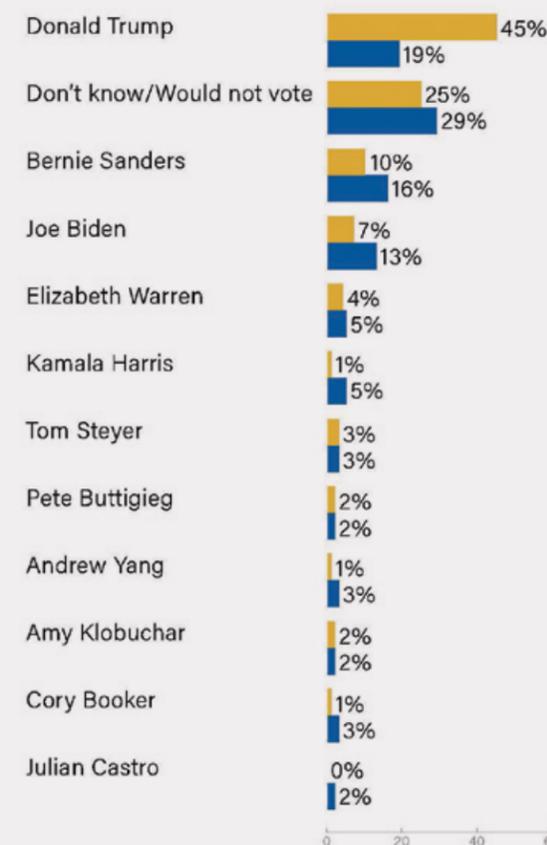
Which Candidates Do They Back?

Just like the country, respondents were divided. Forty-five percent of white respondents said they'd support Trump for president, with white men showing the strongest support. That undermines conventional wisdom: Conservative media and politicians often regard incarcerated people as potential Democrats, citing research into the voting habits of formerly incarcerated people. About 30 percent of white respondents chose a Democratic candidate, while 25 percent said they would not vote or did not know which candidate to back.

For people of color, no single candidate prevailed, but 20 percent of black respondents chose Biden as their top choice,

If the election for president were being held today, who would you vote for?

Percent of **white** versus **people of color** who said...



with Sanders coming in second at 16 percent. Almost a third of respondents of color said that they didn't know who they would vote for, or they wouldn't vote at all. The survey was distributed in December, before several candidates dropped out.

Regardless of who they'd vote for or which party they back, the majority of respondents had little faith in elected officials. More than 80 percent do not believe politicians are generally acting in their interest. This disenchantment crosses racial lines.

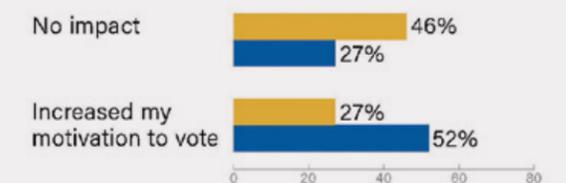
"I grew up being told in history class and school that politicians could be trusted to do what is best for the working class and poor, and overall for the country, only to get older and realize the corruption in both major political parties," wrote Allan Martin, a white man who is incarcerated in Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan.

Despite the widespread disillusionment, many respondents described how their time behind bars led them to become more politically engaged and shaped their views.

Those who identified as Democrats or Republicans each believed their own party was most committed to criminal justice reform. Several respondents applauded Trump's support for the bipartisan First Step Act, which reduces the length of some automatic federal prison sentences, gives federal judges more discretion to ignore mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines and retroactively reduces prison sentences for people convicted of federal crack cocaine offenses before 2010.

What impact has incarceration had on your motivation to vote?

Percent of those incarcerated **under 1 year** versus **21+ years** who said...



Marselia Smith, who is incarcerated in Florida's Calhoun Correctional Institution, voted for Sanders in the 2016 primary and considers himself on the opposite side of the political spectrum from Trump. But even he credits the president with signing the First Step Act. "What the federal government does, eventually, the states follow," he wrote.

Race and Incarceration

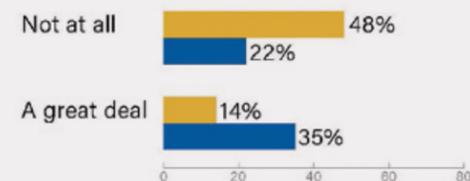
For black respondents in particular, issues of race loom large. Two out of 3 black respondents said that their race informs their political beliefs, and black people, more than any other group, say prison has increased their motivation to vote. By contrast, almost half of white respondents said race does not matter at all when it comes to politics.

Many black respondents pointed to racism in society at large, and racism embedded in the criminal justice system, to explain why their political views are intertwined with their race.

“Being a black man from the inner city, I see firsthand that the politics are not structured to help me,” wrote David Young, who is incarcerated in Lansing Correctional Facility, in Lansing, Kansas. “When laws are passed to take funds away from education and put into prisons. When I can look at a flawed system that targets young black males instead of helping them.”

How much does your racial identity inform your political views in prison?

Percent of **white** versus **black** respondents who said...



Inside / Outside

Our results show some intriguing contrasts between the perspectives of those inside prisons and jails and those outside. Most of those who identified as Republicans in our survey oppose an assault weapons ban (unlike Republicans outside prison, who do support such a ban).

Notably, incarcerated Republicans embraced some policies usually labeled as liberal. Three-quarters of Republican prisoners supported a minimum wage hike and marijuana legalization. That’s far higher than the 55 percent of Republican voters in favor of marijuana legalization, or the 43 percent who back a minimum wage increase.

The support for a higher minimum wage is likely a reflection of incarcerated people’s economic realities. Poor people are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and although many people work while incarcerated, they usually receive far less than the minimum wage. In the general electorate, lower-income Republicans are more likely to back a minimum wage increase than their higher-earning Republican peers.

“Our economy is the most important thing I worry about. No one should be homeless, or jobless, unless they choose to be,” wrote Jimmy Tyrrell, who identifies as a Republican and is incarcerated at Marion Correctional Institution in Ocala, Florida. “We need to do more to help our own impoverished citizens.”

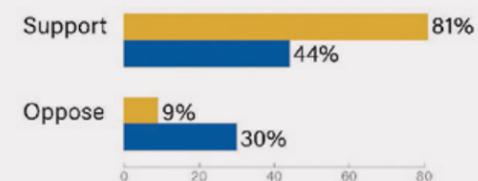
In contrast to Republicans behind bars, incarcerated Democrats expressed views that are closer to those of their counterparts outside prison. Democrats inside prison often supported tighter border security, and strongly backed marijuana legalization and increasing the minimum wage. However, a bare majority support an assault weapons ban, far lower than the 88 percent of Democrats outside prison. Republicans and Democrats inside prison are still far apart on issues like gun control and immigration.

As they do on the outside, most white respondents identified as Republicans or independents,

while most black respondents said they were Democrats or independents. Survey respondents were more likely to identify as independents than the U.S. population overall.

How do you feel about policy tightening border security?

Percent of **Republicans** versus **Democrats** who said...



Voting Rights

The results suggest that many incarcerated people are still interested in politics despite being temporarily (or in some cases permanently) stripped of their right to vote. Many said they get their news by watching local TV stations or cable news and said they discuss politics with family or friends occasionally (as opposed to very frequently, frequently, rarely or never).

However they differ politically, there is one issue most agree on: 76 percent supported restoring voting rights to currently incarcerated people regardless of their crime. (People in jail who have not been convicted can still vote.)

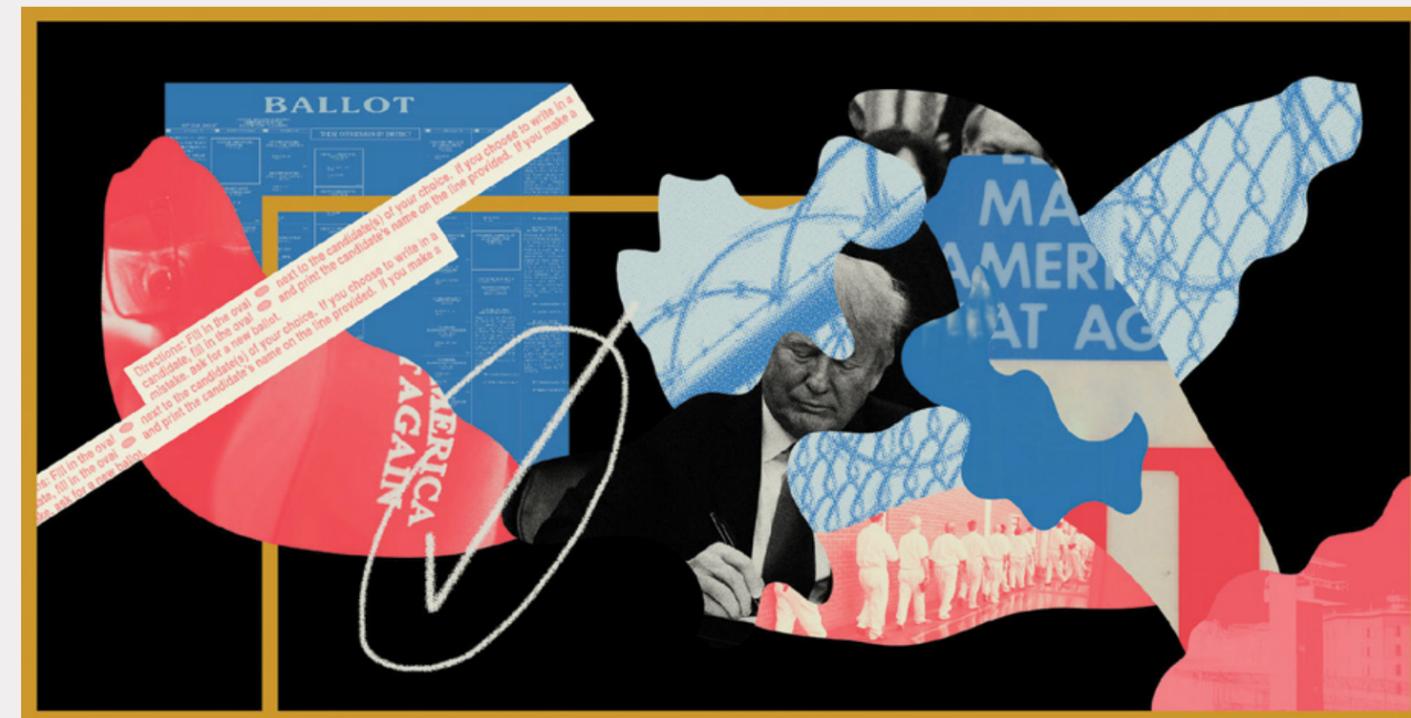
Should the respondents ever get their way, that could be a huge shift in the American electorate. As of the most recent presidential election, roughly 6.1 million Americans, both in and out of prison, could not vote because of a felony conviction. Their exclusion has lasting repercussions for American democracy, said Christopher Uggen, a professor at the University of Minnesota and co-author of “Locked Out,” which examines the consequences of the nation’s felony disenfranchisement laws.

The needs of the disenfranchised are often not considered by elected officials—so they have no leverage to push candidates to back issues they care about like free education, restoring federal Pell Grants that pay for a college education in prison or reducing long sentences. The exclusion is especially acute for black and low-income people, who are disproportionately swept up into the criminal justice system.

Reintegrating the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated into politics won’t be easy. Once released, they often struggle to find jobs and stable housing. Many also face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to getting their rights back, such as repaying court-ordered fines and fees. Given such obstacles, voting tends to fall low on the list of priorities.

But while a majority of respondents said they’d never voted before, half said incarceration has increased their motivation to vote. Only 12 percent said their desire to vote has decreased.

Many said that watching the news for the first time, becoming sober, talking to their cellmates, receiving an education or simply growing older had increased their political



EREN SU KIBELE YARMAN FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT AND SLATE; PHOTO BY MARJORIE KAMYS COTERA/ALAMY

awareness. Many explained how their political beliefs are inextricably bound up with their desire to get their lives back on track.

“I know I have an uphill battle to get my time back,” wrote Jamil Houston, who is incarcerated in Gulf Correctional Institution in Wewahatchka, Florida. “I know that I have basically NO rights at all and have been reduced to a second class citizen upon my release. But I have a 2-year-old daughter that I must be there for, and I will not give up my fight for justice.”

Special thanks to John Dukes, Edovo and Marshall Project members for helping with this project. Additional data entry by Karla Arroyo, Kayla Boone, Francis Difiore, Allison Dikanovic, Madeline Faber, Terrence Fraser, Skanda Kadirgamar, Victoria Mba-Jonas, Zinhle Ngema, Michaela Roman, Jacob Wasserman and Rawan Yaghi

Trump's Surprising Popularity in Prison

Many incarcerated white people said they'd re-elect the president—if given the chance.

Nicole Lewis and Christina Cauterucci with data analysis by Anna Flagg

Series produced by Nicole Lewis and Lawrence Bartley

Before prison, John Adkins, 43, didn’t care about politics. He watched the news regularly but said he mostly wanted to see reports about the ongoing gang violence in Southwest Detroit, where he lived. Now, after 23 years in a Michigan

prison for murder, Adkins is an ardent Republican and supporter of Donald Trump.

He credits conservative media for his political education. In prison, Adkins began watching the news again but soon grew sick of “the demonization of straight, white, Christian men on CNN and MSNBC and just about all mainstream media,” he wrote, using the email system at Macomb Correctional Facility, where he is incarcerated. So he found himself drawn to right-wing shows such as “The O’Reilly Factor” and “Tucker Carlson Tonight.” The hosts’ positions on key issues such as abortion (against) and gay marriage (also against) won him over. But above all, Adkins says, he identifies as a conservative because he feels under attack by the left.

“I am so tired of the double-standard of the left in the country,” Adkins wrote. “Their rhetoric is what is divisive in this country, not Donald J. Trump’s!”

It is widely believed that the majority of people in prison are Democrats—and some Republicans who oppose restoring voting rights for released prisoners have expressed fears that they would vote Democratic. Black people, who consistently favor Democrats, are in fact overrepresented in prisons. Although white people are 64 percent of the total population, they only account for 39 percent of people in state prisons.

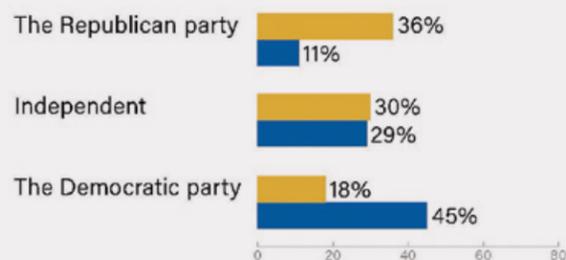
In a first-of-its-kind political survey of the incarcerated, The Marshall Project and Slate found that a significant share of white respondents called themselves Republicans and would vote to reelect Trump in 2020—if given the chance. Forty-five percent of white respondents backed Trump, about 30 percent picked among Democratic candidates, and the remaining 25 percent said they did not know or would not vote.

The survey is the most comprehensive snapshot of currently incarcerated people’s politics to date, but it has limitations. Respondents skewed whiter than the

overall prison population, and many respondents are incarcerated in red states. As a result, it is not representative of the overall prison population. Instead of only focusing on the respondents as a whole, we looked for trends across race, gender, and other demographic differences to ensure our reported results were meaningful.

Which party do you most identify with?

Percent of **white** versus **black** respondents who said...

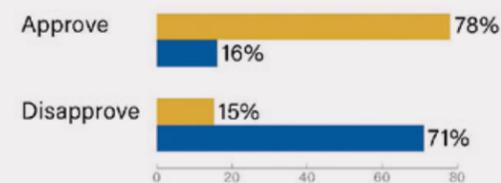


Inside prison, reasons for supporting Trump vary. Some of the reasons reflect the particular circumstances of prison life: Most prisoners share a cell, making it difficult to tune out conservative cellmates or right-wing media, or to even control which channel is on. Prisons are also notoriously segregated and can be a breeding ground for white nationalists.

Others are ideological: Some respondents are attracted to Trump's tell-it-like-it-is personality and feel targeted by what they call political correctness on the left. And some are drawn to his policies, citing the president's record on criminal justice and the economy.

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?

Percent of **Republicans** versus **Democrats** who said...



Many survey respondents said they now spend significantly more time consuming news and following politics than they ever did before they entered prison. Some credited their political development to listening to Rush Limbaugh on a personal radio or watching Fox News on a shared television.

Christopher Shelton-Jenkins, 27, picked up his political views from a Trump-supporting cellmate. They would often discuss the news or the legal cases his cellmate had reviewed in his work at the prison law library. "I

remember he talked about the Democrat and Republican stances on the wall on the border—that Democrats wanted to be all open arms, which was nice, but the Republicans thought it was just not practical in terms of managing our economy and social systems," Shelton-Jenkins wrote in a letter. He considered his cellmate "very intelligent" and respected what he had to say. "He broke some things down to me. ... That's when I realized I had wrong and ignorant impressions."

Before he was incarcerated, Shelton-Jenkins, who has a white mother and a black father, didn't spend much time thinking about politics. But he felt loosely affiliated with the Democratic Party, "only because my mom labeled all Republicans racists who want to keep the rich rich and the poor poor."

In the six years he's been in prison in Kansas after he was convicted of murder, his understanding of politics has changed. "A lot of incarcerated, poor and black people identify as Democrat because we're told that Republicans want to keep us poor and incarcerated," he said. "But now I believe the opposite: that Democrats want to keep us spoon-fed by the government and Republicans want to wean us off."

Criminal justice reform is broadly popular among Americans across the political spectrum, though Democrats are more likely than Republicans to support substantial changes to the current system. While some incarcerated Trump supporters don't know or care what the president is doing—or not doing—on the issue, others applaud his pardoning of people convicted of nonviolent drug offenses and his signing of the bipartisan First Step Act.

The 2018 law reduces the length of some automatic federal prison sentences, gives federal judges more discretion to ignore mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines and retroactively reduces prison sentences for people convicted of federal crack cocaine offenses before 2010, among other changes. Thousands of federal prisoners have been released as a result of the law, and more could see their sentences reduced in the future.

William Robinson, a 39-year-old black man who has been incarcerated in Arkansas since 2012 for negligent homicide, points to the contrast between the punitive crime bill signed by President Bill Clinton in 1994 and the First Step Act as evidence that Trump is doing more for incarcerated people than Democrats have. Robinson also praises the Trump administration's support for expanding the Second Chance Pell Grant program, an Obama-era initiative that allowed Robinson to earn an associate degree. He was delighted that Trump commuted the sentence of Alice Marie Johnson, who'd served two decades of a life sentence for a nonviolent drug crime.

"These things matter," Robinson wrote in a letter. "Trump is a leader that makes hard decisions, sets trends," while Democrats "keep playing politics." That's exactly the message Trump has been broadcasting as he seeks reelection. "Politicians talk about criminal justice reform. President Trump got it done," said a campaign commercial that aired during the Super Bowl earlier this month. The ad also showed Johnson thanking Trump through tears on the day of her release.

Like many Americans, some incarcerated Trump supporters are motivated by the way he's handled the economy. Neal Stephen, a 44-year-old white man who's been in an

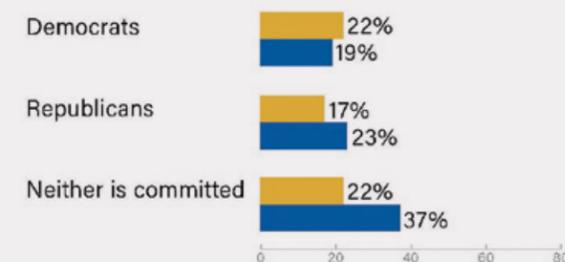
Oklahoma jail for less than a year on a domestic assault and battery charge but has spent more time incarcerated on other charges, hopes the First Step Act will help the economy by saving taxpayers the cost of lengthier prison sentences. "I really can't tell you anything that the Democrats have done in recent years, as far as criminal justice reform is concerned, that has had an impact comparable to President Trump passing these new laws," he wrote in a letter.

Before Derek Bedford, 46, was convicted of murder, he didn't think politics affected his life. "I was living a carefree lifestyle," he said in a phone interview. Once he entered a Kansas prison, he started paying more attention to the news—he prefers the Wall Street Journal and Fox News—and soon became concerned that his work hours might get cut if companies that employed prisoners began sending jobs overseas.

Bedford has watched presidents come and go during his more than 20 years in prison, at times feeling disillusioned by their performance. "I was thinking that Obama was gonna do some things positive for the country, and he turned out to be a puppet for big businesses and for the rich," he said. "I don't see Donald Trump as being anyone's puppet. From what I've been seeing and hearing, he's given businesses some tax cuts for bringing jobs back, so that's helping the small people in this country."

Which party do think is more committed to criminal justice reform?

Percent of those incarcerated **under 1 year** versus **21+ years** who said...



Still, respondents' enthusiasm for Trump doesn't translate into optimism about the government as a whole. Four out of 5 Republican respondents say politicians rarely, sometimes or never act in their interest.

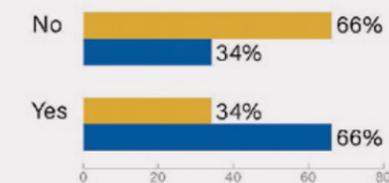
While some survey respondents call Trump a "hero" and "the best president" they've seen in their lifetimes, others temper their praise with caveats. Many who indicated that they'd vote to reelect Trump clarify that they don't love everything about him, especially if their politics are more moderate. They still credit the president with trying his best to change the country for the better, even if his rhetoric is too extreme. "I would vote for President Trump again, but not because I like him. To be honest, I think he is kind of a fool," wrote William True, a 26-year-old white man who's been in prison in Maine for a little over four years.

True, who was convicted of murder, believes the Republican Party is less inclined to make strides on criminal justice reform but identifies with the party anyway, in part because "the Democrats demonize white males." If some Trump poli-

cies, such as the border wall, seem a little radical to True, he still approves of their underlying principles: "If we get to the nitty gritty, he is right. Illegal immigration is a problem."

Have your political views changed since being incarcerated?

Percent of those incarcerated **under 1 year** versus **21+ years** who said...



Stephen isn't so concerned about the brash comments and confrontational tweets that give some of his fellow incarcerated Trump supporters pause. A former member of the Army National Guard, he thinks Trump is more apt to use economic incentives and sanctions to advance U.S. interests, without projecting weakness, than to carelessly rush into war. "A strong country like the U.S. needs strong leaders that won't back down from a fight," he said. "I also appreciate his honesty, not being afraid to speak his mind. At least you know where you stand when you deal with a man like that."

For Those Serving Long Sentences, Politics is a Lifeline

Respondents who've spent decades behind bars were more politically engaged than their peers, but they're also the most cynical.

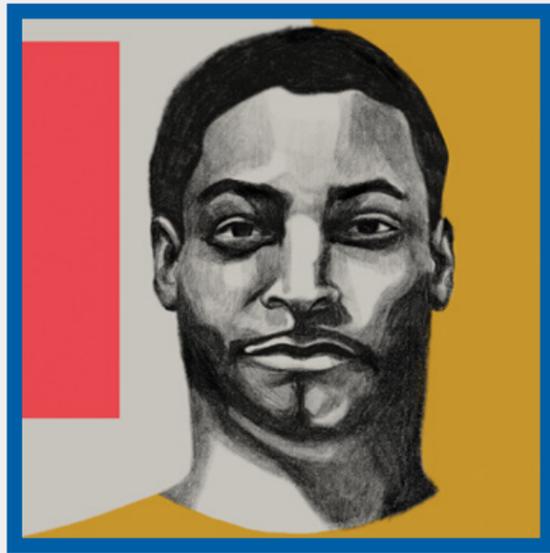
Nicole Lewis, Rachele Hampton and Anna Flagg

Series produced by Nicole Lewis and Lawrence Bartley

When Pedro Santiago was arrested in 2003, he didn't know how to read or write. He was 30 at the time and had been selling drugs for two decades, first in New York and then in Maine, where, in 2005, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

It was while he was waiting for his trial that he says his bunkmate sat him down and told him that he needed to learn to read so that he could understand evidence about his case unearthed during the discovery process. While he was in the county jail, a volunteer came in weekly to teach him.

"It was an awakening," Santiago, 46, said in a phone interview. "That got me interested in politics." But he says that when he was transferred to state prison



But Santiago also says moments like that are proof that “we do care about what’s happening out in the real world. It does affect us. It affects us all.”

Spending decades in prison could easily result in a total withdrawal from politics. But in a first-of-its-kind survey, The Marshall Project and Slate found that people who have spent more years behind bars are more politically aware than their peers who’ve been incarcerated for less than a year. Respondents with long sentences were more motivated to vote, more likely to change their political views and more likely to discuss politics than those who had spent less time in prison.

For many, prison is more regimented than the lives they left behind. Others become sober for the first time and use their newfound clarity to follow the news or get an education.

In particular, for people sentenced to life in prison, the interest in politics is pragmatic. Often, legislative changes to their state’s criminal code are their only hope for release. Incarcerated people in most states can’t vote, so they can’t elect officials willing to grant some prisoners a “second look” or to restore parole. Instead, they write op-eds, mail letters to legislators or advocacy organizations and encourage their family and friends to vote on their behalf.

Yet if those in our survey who’d spent more time in prison tended to be more politically engaged, they were also most cynical about politicians’ commitment to criminal justice reform.

Roughly 30 percent of respondents have spent 21 years or more in prison. While this survey is, to date, the best account of their political opinions, it has some limitations. The survey was voluntary and may represent a self-selecting group of people who are already politically engaged and following the news. As such, it is not a fully representative sample of the overall incarcerated population and may not reflect the views of people whose long sentences have deepened their alienation and who declined to respond.

Here are the stories of three other survey respondents who have spent long stretches behind bars.

Joseph Badagliacca, 43, Florida

In his darkest moments last year, Joseph Badagliacca battled thoughts of suicide. He had served nearly two decades of his life sentence for murder—with no hope of getting out because there is no parole in Florida.

“I may never have the opportunity at a real life out there,” he wrote. “I understand most people would say that my victim never got a chance to complete his life because of my involvement. There are times I agree and wonder if I deserve to get out, or to even live right now.”

Struggling with the prospect of growing old and dying behind bars, Badagliacca found purpose in politics. He’s contributed to a campaign to create a path to reentry for the incarcerated who have demonstrated they’ve truly changed.



“I’ve lost everyone except my mom as a result of my incarceration and just like anyone else, I don’t want to die alone in here. So ... I fight,” he wrote.

Badagliacca entered prison at 26. “It was surreal,” he wrote, recalling his initial shock. “It was like I was in a dream with everything moving outside of myself.”

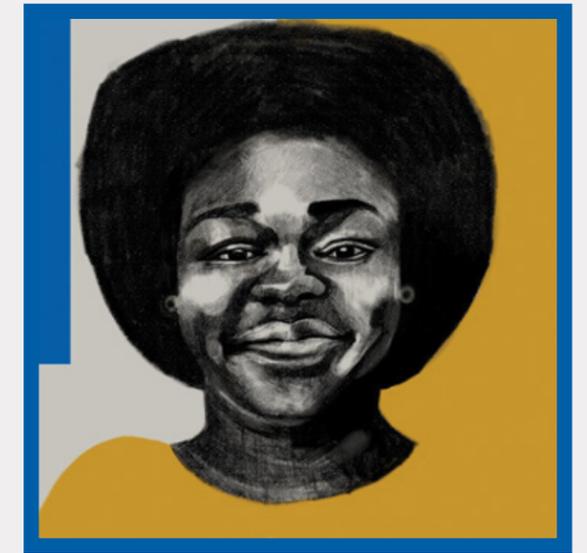
Over his 17 years in prison, he’s learned to speak Spanish while incarcerated, earned a paralegal certification and is working on his bachelor’s degree. He says the focus on self-improvement is common for those facing long terms. “Emotionally, spiritually, morally, educationally, physically ... we are more focused on the things that matter,” he wrote.

Demonstrating rehabilitation has political value, too. The Florida Legislature is working to fix the state’s overcrowded and expensive prison system, but several reform bills have not gotten much traction. He understands the lawmakers’ hesitation. With nearly 100,000 people in prison in Florida, many aren’t getting the programming they need to be productive on the outside. Badagliacca says lawmakers are scared to risk letting some violent offenders out for fear they’d commit new crimes.

“It’s political suicide,” he wrote.

The public may be cynical about criminal justice reform, he says, but he suspects that attitude stems from misinformation and a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of prison.

“We were removed from society AS punishment,” he wrote. “Mistakenly, a lot of people (including some of the officers in here) believe we are here FOR punishment. Some of us are really just regular guys who are defined by the worst mistakes of our lives instead of our innumerable contributions. We want to be better, show others we’re better and, of course, convince the lawmakers we’re better.”



Vegas Walker, 25, Kansas

As a kid growing up in Wichita, Kansas, Vegas Walker said she was exposed to prostitution, guns and drugs at an early age. By the time she was 11, she started smoking weed and hanging out in the streets. By 13, Walker said she was in and out of jail.

Life at home was chaotic. Her mother went to jail when she was 5 years old, and her father was rarely around, forcing Walker to stay with her alcoholic grandmother for several years. Walker says she remembers going to school dirty because her grandmother couldn’t look after her.

Nonetheless, she’s grateful her grandmother insisted that Walker get a high school diploma.

“As much as I couldn’t stand my grandma, she had five kids by the age of 18 and still managed to graduate from high school,” wrote Walker, who is black and serving time in Topeka Correctional Facility. “And that’s all she wanted from us. That’s the only thing I managed to do correctly.”

In the chaotic years before Walker went to prison for stabbing an ex-boyfriend during an argument, she said she didn’t pay much attention to the news or politics. She was absorbed in selling drugs and trying to stay alive as a woman in an arena typically dominated by men.

“It’s hard on the streets for anyone, but for a woman it is 10 times harder,” Walker wrote. “We are viewed as an easy target. I had to fight harder and be 10 times more scandalous than the next person or I would have been eaten alive out there.”

It wasn’t until she landed in prison that Walker said she first started thinking about how politics shapes people’s lives. Walker said many of her political views are shaped by the unfairness of the criminal justice system. She believes prisons in Kansas are designed for people to fail and return. Practices like stop and frisk, she said, allow police to harass innocent black and brown people. And when a judge sentenced Amber Guyger, the Dallas police officer who shot and killed Botham Jean in his own home, to a relatively short 10 years in prison, Walker said, it felt “like there are two sets of rules for people of color and white people.”

after his conviction, he ran afoul of prison rules. His behavior led him to be classified as a security threat, and he was consigned to solitary confinement for about two years. In solitary, he realized he had a choice to make.

“I said, ‘Wait a minute, I can go home when I’m 65 or I can die here.’ That was eye-opening for me.”

That turning point led Santiago to politics as an antidote to despair. When he got out of solitary, he focused on his education, and in 2015 he passed a high school equivalency test. Though he entered prison as a registered Republican, his views changed as he spent more time watching the way coverage differed between news stations like MSNBC, Fox News and CNN: “They all want us to believe a certain thing.”

As he learned more about what he describes as a corrupt system, his motivation to participate in politics increased.

Maine is one of two states that allow all people who are incarcerated to vote (although few exercise that right, often because of low literacy rates and little access to information). Still, Santiago credits his ability to vote from prison as galvanizing, along with Barack Obama’s historic candidacy in 2008.

“[Obama] coming from a broken home, single mother, and all that, made me realize in a way that you make your own destiny...To see the first black president up there was a tearjerker for me,” said Santiago, who is Puerto Rican.

Santiago now identifies as an independent and voted against Donald Trump in 2016. And though he said he would love to see the first female president, he currently supports Sen. Bernie Sanders. “I love all his talking points,” he said. “I believe that this man could make things happen like taxing the rich and Medicare for all.”

Political arguments in prison, he said, can get heated. He remembered tensions escalating after Trump’s comments following the death of a protester during a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.

Walker is set to be released next March. As that day approaches, she's started to worry about how she will make a living with only a high school diploma. There aren't many opportunities for education or skill-building in women's prisons, she said. Walker said she is drawn to Bernie Sanders because of his focus on improving poor people's lives. But even if he wins, she isn't sure it will make a difference.

"I do believe that it's important to vote and have a say," she wrote. "But I don't really believe that candidates can actually make half the things they say come true."



The public may be cynical about criminal justice reform, he said, but he suspects that attitude stems from misinformation and a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of prison.

Samuel Byrd, 46, Florida

Samuel Byrd said some of his friends in prison have told him he's too conservative to be black.

He doesn't support illegal immigration, aid to foreign countries or financing an extravagant lifestyle with credit cards. He does believe in marriage before children, college education and keeping dollars on American soil. He admires the conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh too, although Byrd does not identify as Republican.

His political convictions have strengthened during his nine years in Okeechobee Correctional Institution in Okeechobee, Florida. He said he's surrounded by people who "only know what they learned in the streets, on the block or at the trap," and that most barely finished high school and aren't interested in bettering themselves. Byrd, by contrast, has a few years of college under his belt. Listening to others

blame "the system" for their problems has pushed him further to the right.

"There are very few inmates who I can hold a serious conversation with that don't involve committing felonies or sports," Byrd wrote. "Politics, even the ones that directly affect them, are not a major topic. Most blacks hate Trump but can't tell you why. Most whites think he's doing a better job than Obama but can't tell you how. Both groups defend their positions by simply misquoting what they heard somewhere."

Before prison, Byrd said he spent his time "being a broke playboy," spending his money on strippers and romancing other men's wives. In 2010, he was charged with attempted murder and ultimately sentenced to life in prison.

Now Byrd works in the law library helping others with their cases. He prefers to focus on people with short sentences, pushing "them to admit to what stupid way of thinking landed them in prison" and encouraging them to think about "what are they willing to change and give up once released."

Byrd can't vote, but he says he would choose Michael Bloomberg to oppose Trump "because he, like Trump, is a billionaire businessman." (The survey was distributed in December, before Bloomberg dropped out.) Byrd isn't persuaded by the promises made by progressive candidates like Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren. He believes that education is key to a productive life, but he doesn't support free college education.

Instead, Byrd is in favor of personal responsibility, not government assistance, even when it comes to keeping people out of prison.

"This country was built by those who climbed the ladder of success that the forefathers erected, not by those waiting for someone to throw them a rope," he wrote. "I believe that we should focus on increased education not reducing mass incarceration. I want to see prevention through education, not treatment by the government."

COVID-19: A Survival Guide for Incarcerated People

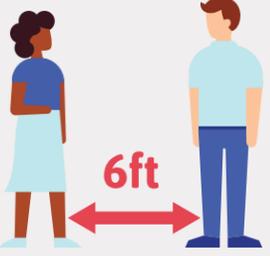
Tips on how to protect yourself from the virus within the limits of prison or jail.

By **LAWRENCE BARTLEY, BRIE WILLIAMS, M.D., M.S., LEAH RORVIG, M.D., M.S.**

COVID-19, has spread throughout the world with deadly impact. In the United States, many communities are scrambling to treat the sick with limited resources, the streets are empty and people are trying to stay healthy under challenging circumstances.

The most common symptoms include fever, dry cough, fatigue, loss of appetite, loss of smell and body aches. More severe symptoms include high fever, severe cough, shortness of breath, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, sudden confusion and bluish lips or face.

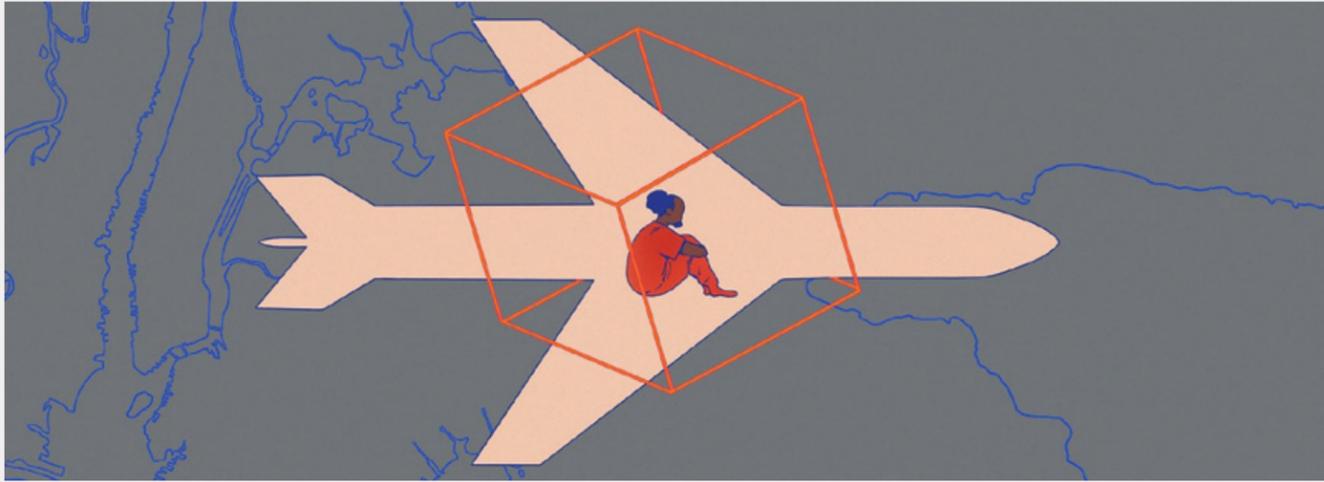
People infected with the virus may not show symptoms for two to 14 days after exposure. The Centers for Disease Control and other reputable public health organizations have issued safety practices to help people avoid infection that you've probably heard about by now:

<p>Safety practices to avoid infection</p>	 <p>Wash your hands with soap frequently, for at least 20 seconds each time.</p>	 <p>Cough and sneeze into your elbow.</p>
 <p>Regularly clean surfaces that multiple people touch daily.</p>	 <p>Practice "social distancing," which means staying 6 feet away from other people as much as you can.</p>	 <p>Refrain from touching your eyes, nose and mouth—all parts of your face where COVID-19 can enter your body.</p>

Incarcerated people would be best served to use the same prevention practices, but the actual nature of prisons and jails, combined with restrictions on supplies can make it more difficult to ward off the virus. That's why News Inside teamed up with Brie Williams, M.D., M.S. and Leah Rorvig, M.D., M.S., medical experts from the University of California San Francisco who specialize in criminal justice. Williams also runs a prison reform program called Amend at UCSF. Here, we answer your coronavirus questions while being considerate of your unique circumstances.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LAURA REEN

Question	Medical Advice	Prison/Jail Adaptation
<p><i>Should I be scared about getting released?</i></p>	<p>Most places outside of prison have a lower risk of infection than any type of group- living situation. This is because it is easier to stay 6 feet away from people you don't live with when you are out in the community. Also, it might be easier to get cleaning products and to stay away from others who are sick.</p>	<p>This is a scary time, but you've improvised while incarcerated. In the free world you will have more space and access to safety and cleaning equipment.</p>
<p><i>I've heard that handwashing is the best defense against getting and spreading the virus. How do I keep my hands clean if hot water is unavailable or inconsistent in my cell or dorm area?</i></p>	<p>While hot water is better than cold for hand washing, your technique matters most: Wet your hands all the way up to and a little past your wrists. Rub soap on the front and backs of your hands and wrists, and scrub for 20 seconds. If you have access to clean paper towels, use one to turn off the faucet and throw it out immediately. If soap and water aren't available but hand sanitizer is, it has to be at least 60% alcohol to work. Use the same technique: Cover the fronts and backs of your hands and wrists with sanitizer and rub them together for 20 seconds.</p>	<p>Fill bottles in the shower specifically for handwashing. Heat your water using a hot pot, stinger, slop sinks, or a bowl you place on the radiator. Insulate buckets of warm water with blankets and towels for longer-lasting use. Try to wash or sanitize your hands every time you leave and return to your cell.</p>
<p><i>How can I shower safely in a communal setting?</i></p>	<p>Try to stay 6 feet away from other people and be sure your hands are clean before touching your face.</p>	<p>If it's possible, remain 6 feet apart in the shower. Skipping showers isn't ideal, but if you live in a cell, wash up in your sink using soap, water and a rag.</p>
<p><i>Is it safe to sit on a toilet that 200 people in my dorm share?</i></p>	<p>Getting COVID-19 from sitting on a toilet seat is unlikely. However, the toilet handle, stall divider and sink faucets could be dirty. Be sure to wash your hands before and after using the bathroom. The toilet handle, faucets, and other frequently touched items such as the door should be disinfected at least daily.</p>	<p>Before and after toilet use, clean the seat and flush handle with bleach diluted with water if it's available. If you don't have bleach, do the same with a rag lathered up with soap. When possible, place a clean towel on the seat. Wash and dry the towel after use. Place it directly in front of a fan—if you have access—to speed up the drying process.</p>
<p><i>How do I protect myself from COVID-19 when I am outside of my cell or off my bunk? Do I need a mask?</i></p>	<p>Wash your hands frequently, don't touch your face, try to avoid crowded spaces and stay at least 6 feet away from others at all times. If there are some people you can't distance yourself from, try to keep this group as small as possible. Some research suggests that a mask you make out of two layers of cotton cloth (from, say, a sheet) can reduce the risk of you and others spreading COVID-19 to each other.</p>	<p>Against the rules, but it might be worth asking the COs on your tier/unit to make an exception: Before leaving your cell or bunk, protect your eyes with shades or glasses. Cover up your nose and mouth with a clean—cotton if available—T-shirt, durag, scarf or knit hat with the top seams torn open. Women can repurpose head scarves and bras into masks. If your prison industries program is making masks and other protective gear, consider signing up for it.</p>
<p><i>Can I get COVID-19 from an object someone has sneezed or coughed on?</i></p>	<p>It is possible to get the virus by handling an item that someone with the virus has coughed or sneezed on and then touching your mouth, nose and eyes.</p>	<p>Don't touch your face. As often as you can, wear disposable gloves over your washed hands and remove them after you touch surfaces. If you lack disposables, wear your exercise or winter gloves over clean hands. After you remove your gloves, wash and dry them. Speed-dry gloves by placing them directly in front of a fan, if you have access.</p>
<p><i>Many of the items I purchase from the commissary or canteen are packaged in cardboard or plastic. How can I protect myself?</i></p>	<p>The virus can stay "alive" on plastic or metal for up to 72 hours and on cardboard for up to 24. Try to disinfect or wash with soap any packages. Remember to wash your hands whenever you touch things from a common area. Wear disposable gloves while handling your items. If you don't have any, use your exercise or winter gloves. Throw away any cardboard boxes and plastic packaging before you enter your cell or bunk area. Store exposed food in small garbage bags.</p>	<p>Wash and air dry the net bags you use to carry the items you bought after you unpack them. And wash and dry your gloves and hands before relaxing on your bunk.</p>
<p><i>I live in a cell with bars for doors or an open dorm. How do I protect myself from people coughing and sneezing at night?</i></p>	<p>Unfortunately, reducing risk in open-air dorm rooms is difficult. To protect oneself and others, anyone with symptoms should be immediately evaluated by medical staff and housed alone until they have received results from COVID-19 testing.</p>	<p>Against the rules, but it might be worth asking the COs on your tier/unit to make an exception: Before going to bed at night, cover bars with a clean sheet, garbage bag or the plastic from a new mattress. In double-bunked dorms, people at the bottom can hang the barrier from the top bunk to create a tent. Top bunkers should lay under a sheet as much as possible.</p>
<p><i>What's the safest way to use the community phone?</i></p>	<p>Phone receivers, buttons and cords should be disinfected at least daily. Still wash your hands before and after you make a call. If you choose to wrap the receiver with a clean sock or piece of cloth, don't touch your face with the side that covered the receiver. If you take your makeshift cover back to your cell, wash it with soap and water thoroughly. Don't use it again until it is completely dry; germs thrive on moisture</p>	<p>Wash your hands before and after you make your call. If you have access to disinfectant, clean the receiver, buttons and cord before and after you use the phone. If you cover the receiver with a clean sock or cloth, follow the medical advice to the left.</p>
<p><i>We have community TVs here. If I don't watch television, I'll go crazy. Am I putting myself at an outsized risk?</i></p>	<p>It's important to do the best you can to reduce the amount of stress that you are feeling and to get enough sleep. Watching TV may help you do both.</p>	<p>If you feel compelled to convene around the TV, ask your CO if you can try to keep yourself safer by: Covering eyes with shades/glasses, use T-shirts, or scarfs to cover nose and mouth.</p>
<p><i>Should I purchase stolen mess hall gloves?</i></p>	<p>Proper hand washing is more important than wearing gloves. If you do wear gloves inside your cell, make sure that you don't touch your face. The gloves will have the same germs on them that your hands would. If you wear gloves outside of your cell, throw them out when you get back or wash them with soapy water and let them fully dry before using them again.</p>	<p>Ask the CO in your area if you can wear plastic or rubber gloves provided by the facility. If you cannot, wear your exercise or winter gloves before touching surfaces. After taking off the gloves, wash and dry them. Place them directly in front of a fan—if you access—to speed up the drying process.</p>
<p><i>What should I do if someone who prepares food has symptoms?</i></p>	<p>Currently there is no evidence of transmission of coronavirus through food. However, anyone with symptoms should be immediately evaluated.</p>	<p>Respectfully ask the food handler to consult with the medical department. Remember that we are all in this together. There is no need to be rude to symptomatic people who may be afraid and vulnerable.</p>



OLIVIA FIELDS FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

I Did My 25 Years. Now I'm Fighting Another Sentence—Deportation

I barely remember my birthplace, Jamaica, and I have no family left there. Frankly, I'm terrified.

By COLIN ABSOLAM as told to AKIBA SOLOMON

I was only 11 years old when I moved from my grandparents' home in Saint Mary Parish in Jamaica to my mother's one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, New York. I don't remember much about where I was born, besides the country living. And yet, after serving 25 years for a murder I committed when I was 19 and earning parole, I may be deported to a place that I haven't as much as seen in more than three decades.

Because my deportation is automatic due to the fact that I committed an aggravated felony, my only hope of staying in the U.S. is if the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, grants me an executive pardon. With the help of The Defenders Clinic at the City

University of New York School of Law, I filed a formal petition in

November. Now all I can do is wait at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility to hear about what will happen to the rest of my life.

Here's a short version of why, instead of returning home to my family in New York City, I'm in an ICE facility hundreds of miles away.

When I came to the South Bronx in the '80s, adjusting to junior high was difficult. I didn't speak or dress the way everyone else did, and I was bullied every day. I would get blamed for the fights I got into and my mother—who worked as both a housekeeper and an aide in a nursing home—had to come up to the school to get me. I also had to defend my little brother.

The Bronx finally began to feel like home in high school. I had learned how to fight and made friends with older kids. Nobody was telling me to “go back on the banana boat” anymore.

I was also involved with two women at the same time. Both were pregnant by my senior year. My job at a fast food restaurant wasn't enough to support children, so with a little convincing from friends, I dropped out of school and started selling drugs. When my mother found out what I was doing, I left home in shame. My girlfriend and I started living in a broken car that belonged to a friend.

On June 23, 1992—two months before my first child was born—an older, bigger dealer ordered me to stop selling in the same building as him. When I ignored him, he smacked me in the face. I left the area, but later when I came back to see my girlfriend,

I encountered him again. He assaulted me and blocked my exit. That's when I went and got a gun a friend was holding for me and fatally shot him.

Thinking I was the victim, I turned down a 7 1/2-to-14-year plea deal and opted for a trial. I spent three years on Rikers Island awaiting trial and one out on bail. Finally, at age 24, I was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 25-to-life.

Now, this may sound contradictory, but considering the life I was living, my incarceration was a blessing. In Sing Sing Correctional Facility, where I spent most of my time, I was fortunate to meet individuals who took responsibility for their crimes and dedicated their time while incarcerated to improve their lives and the lives of others. These men later told me that they saw the potential in me for change and took a liking to me. They urged me to get involved in all the therapeutic and educational programs offered in order to keep me from being overcome by the pitfalls of prison.

One program I participated in was the Alternatives to Violence Project. A friend of mine, an older gentleman, signed me up for it. I developed ways to address problems without resorting to violence. After a lot of introspection, I was able to address my regrettable past and rebuild my value system.

And Alternatives to Violence set me up to get educated. At the urging of another friend, I earned my GED. In 2017, I got a bachelor's degree in behavioral science from Mercy College. Last year, I earned a master's degree in

professional studies from the New York Theological Seminary.

Hoping to give back to the community I harmed, I co-founded a group at Sing Sing called the Forgotten Voices Committee. Our mission is to redefine what it means for incarcerated people to pay a debt to society. We have brought kids ages 10 to 17 into the facility, not to “scare them straight,” but to listen to them and help them deal with violence arising in their communities. We also formed Voices From Within, an anti-gun violence initiative that resulted in a video series of the same name.

For many years I also ran Prisoners for AIDS Counseling and Education, a program that serves 400 clients a year. I was responsible for day-to-day operations and trained dozens of staff and peer educators. I also did curriculum development and coordinated with college professors to ensure that the science was state-of-the-art.

In June, I was granted parole. If things were different, I would have gone home to my family and entered the Justice-in-Education Scholars Program at Columbia University.

Instead, I'm in the ICE detention facility near Buffalo, which is more restrictive for me than Sing Sing. There are two bunks per cell here, and we're locked in most of the day. Even if my family could travel more than 300 miles to get here, there are no contact visits. You talk on a phone in a booth and struggle to hear what your loved one is saying.

Since arriving here on Oct. 24, I've had plenty of time for my mind to race. Frankly, I feel terrified.

Yes, I spent 25 years in prison, but

I'm still worried about how I will survive in Jamaica. When I got to this facility one of the staff members gave me a manual that explained what I should be concerned with when returning to Jamaica. Part of it is broken down into do's and don'ts.

The do's include advice like “try to be Jamaican” and “use local accents and dialect to avoid attracting negative attention.” Given that I haven't as much as visited Jamaica for 35 years, I don't see how I can do these things.

Some of the don'ts are equally frustrating—and repetitive: There's “don't sound like a foreigner” and “don't go off to strange areas” and “don't accept assistance from a stranger.” But to me, everyone is a stranger in Jamaica.

My father passed away. My grandparents passed away. I don't have any relatives left. Besides overwhelming me, not having any family there may make it physically impossible for me to leave the facility where I will go for processing after I get off the plane. I've heard that someone with a Jamaican address has to sign the individual out, so I could be stuck there.

I'm also worried about my physical safety. If no one takes me in, I may end up on the streets of Kingston, which are not so nice. Organized crime pretty much runs the place. For a hint, just Google “Dudus” or Shower Posse. That first day I'm out of state custody, I have no idea what I'm going to do for a meal, and I don't know where I'm going to sleep.

Then there's the stigma of being a “deportee.” Being called a “deportee” in Jamaica is like being referred to

as a “felon” in the United States. The community sees deportees as individuals who had an opportunity to come to the U.S. and squandered it. They're not accepted as law-abiding citizens or individuals who deserve a second chance. This damages your employment opportunities.

My family is also suffering. My mother is elderly, and she was anticipating my coming home to take care of her. She's been taking care of me my entire life, and now it's supposed to be my turn.

My daughter feels like she's being punished a second time. First, she had to grow up with me being in prison. Now she feels like she's losing me again. She often cries when I call home, and sometimes she doesn't want to speak because it bothers her so much.

I have two grandchildren. One is an infant that I haven't yet met because of distance, and the other is a 7-year-old who I talk to on a daily basis. She has also been crying ever since she found out that I'm not coming home.

I fear for my son the most. He hasn't been the same since my other son, Kino, was killed at age 17 in his presence. While I was inside counseling other individuals and children, I wasn't able to protect my sons.

My sons were close, and since the murder, the one who survived has been making a lot of irrational decisions that place him in contact with the criminal justice system. He's facing five years. If I was there physically, I would be able to help him deal with his situation. But I'm not.

My brother, nephew and sister-in-law who have supported me through-



Colin Absolam, who was facing deportation after being released on parole from prison, was pardoned by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

out my entire incarceration, are upset because there is nothing they can do.

I know some people think I deserve to be sent back to Jamaica because of what I did. But during the 25 years I was incarcerated, I took responsibility for what I did. I helped other individuals, got educated and gave back to the community that I harmed and left behind. A lot of time and energy has been invested in my becoming the person I am today. Deporting me to a foreign land will be like extracting a valuable asset out of this society only to throw it away.

Update: Colin Absolam, 46, was granted parole on June 10, 2019, after serving 25 years in New York State prisons for second-degree murder. Facing felony deportation to Jamaica, he filed an application for an unconditional executive pardon with Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Nov. 21. Absolam's application was granted moments before he was to be placed on a plane for Jamaica. He was released—in the U.S.—on Feb. 14, 2020.

How to Fix Our Prisons? Let The Public Inside.

We need a broad national effort to recruit and place volunteers to educate and counsel incarcerated people.

By NEIL BARSKY

Decades after the prison population began its growth surge, criminal justice reform has finally moved into the national conversation.

Last December, President Trump signed the First Step Act, reducing federal prison sentences. Democratic presidential candidates are proposing far-reaching reforms on bail, sentencing, punishments for drug-related crimes and voting rights for incarcerated Americans. New York City is set to close its notorious jail

complex on Rikers Island. And Philadelphia, Chicago and other major cities have elected progressive district attorneys.

Unfortunately, what happens inside the walls of the nation's prisons has not changed at all. They can be stifling in summer and freezing in winter. The residents are often belittled, abused and cut off from anything resembling rehabilitation. Constitutional protections are virtually nonexistent; solitary confinement, to pick one example, is considered torture by much of the world, but is business as usual inside America's state and federal jails and prisons, home to roughly 2.1 million people.

Here is what the next president, or President Trump, can do to reform mass incarceration: Open up this hidden world to the public. I call my proposal "Let Us In."

The public should see firsthand the conditions within the walls, to meet the men and women who reside in our prisons, to look them in the eye, shake their hands and teach them skills they can use once they are released. After all, 90 percent of them will end up back among us.

Recent college graduates should receive stipends to teach prisoners languishing with few opportunities for instruction in math or history. Retired school teachers could teach literature or science classes. Local college students could receive credit for prison work. And people released from prison should be invited back to tell the men and women they left behind about life on the outside.

Yes, some prisons already have programs that allow outsiders inside the walls for teaching and counseling. But there aren't enough of them. What I'm talking about is a thorough effort to bring down the wall separating the incarcerated and the free. Let Us In could change the relationship between the public and the imprisoned. Like President John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps, it could inspire a generation of Americans to engage in the betterment of our fragile world.

This is how it would work.

First, the president would state clearly that mass incarceration is a failed system. It created, in the words of Michelle Alexander, author of "The

New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," a "racial caste system" that has disproportionately punished a generation of young, usually male, people of color. The president must speak to people's pain, and acknowledge that we imprison too many people for too long, and at a cost to taxpayers of billions of dollars a year.

Because only 10 percent of incarcerated Americans are in federal custody, the president has limited scope for shrinking the prison population. What the president can do is use the office as a bully pulpit to change the criminal justice narrative, and to adopt what a report by the Vera Institute of Justice proposes: a policy of incarceration whose "foundational value" is "human dignity."

To that end, the president would assemble a diverse group of criminal justice experts—including corrections and law enforcement officials, former inmates and their families, defense lawyers, judges and inmate advocates—to develop a national program to create paths for trained volunteers and professionals to work inside prisons wherever safety allows.

Let Us In must be more than "tourism within walls"; for the volunteers to be able to go inside the walls to dispense their skills and knowledge, serious consideration must be given to training and safety.

Within two years, the organization could be spun off from the government, and a nonprofit corporation would take its place. Imagine former Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama as honorary chairmen. Eventually, the program would be financed by a combination of government grants and nonprofit contributions, much like the Corporation for Public Broadcasting or Americorp's Vista program.

I've already witnessed the power of such programs on a smaller scale. At Green Haven and Fishkill Correctional Facilities in New York, I watched theatrical performances by incarcerated men sponsored by Rehabilitation Through the Arts. At San Quentin State Prison in California, I met with the prison newspaper's staff and attended a finance class led by a self-taught instructor serving a life sentence. While visiting the Osborne



St. Clair Correctional Facility in Alabama in 2017. WILLIAM WIDMER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, VIA REDUX

Association's parenting program at Sing Sing prison in Osborne, N.Y., with a group of family court judges, I witnessed incarcerated men plead for visitation privileges with their children. "When I see you men taking these programs, I know you are serious," said one judge.

I've met graduates and instructors from Bard and Bennington Colleges' degree programs in prisons. And at my organization, The Marshall Project, two members of our staff received degrees from Mercy College while in prison through the Hudson Link Program for Higher Education in Prison, which provides college education in prison.

Several years ago, I was at San Quentin to participate in a series of TEDx talks. I invited an editor friend who lived nearby. He sat next to an incarcerated man who worked on San Quentin's magazine, and he invited my friend to help as a volunteer. For the next two years, my friend went twice a week to San Quentin to help the staff publish their magazine. "This was a life-changing experience," he told me.

As inspiring as these programs may be, they aren't enough to meet the monumental need. Each year, 3,000 volunteers pass through the doors of San Quentin, in densely populated and liberal Marin County, offering everything from yoga to computer training to psychotherapy classes. But in many prisons around the country, particularly those in remote locales, volunteers can

be hard to come by.

Let Us In must not be a substitute for more difficult prison reforms. The bail, sentencing, policing and parole systems still cry out for radical changes, and reform efforts will require a deliberate, state-by-state process.

But, if executed properly, Let Us In would achieve several goals at once.

It will provide tools for the incarcerated to lead healthy, productive lives once they leave prison. It is shameful that they are often released as damaged men and women, with few skills to cope in society. Educational and other programs offer incentives for the incarcerated, which enlightened superintendents will embrace.

And finally, Let Us In would create a generation of prison reform proponents—volunteers who will take their experiences back to their communities, who will vote and who will one day employ the formerly incarcerated when they rejoin their communities.

The civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson says there are four things necessary to confront injustice in America: getting close to the issue, changing the narrative, fighting hopelessness and getting uncomfortable.

Let Us In will go a long way toward achieving these goals, and it would hold participating institutions accountable to the citizens who routinely pass through its doors.

It might also make the rest of us a little uncomfortable. And that's O.K. too.

Trade Your Prison Sentence for a Smartwatch?

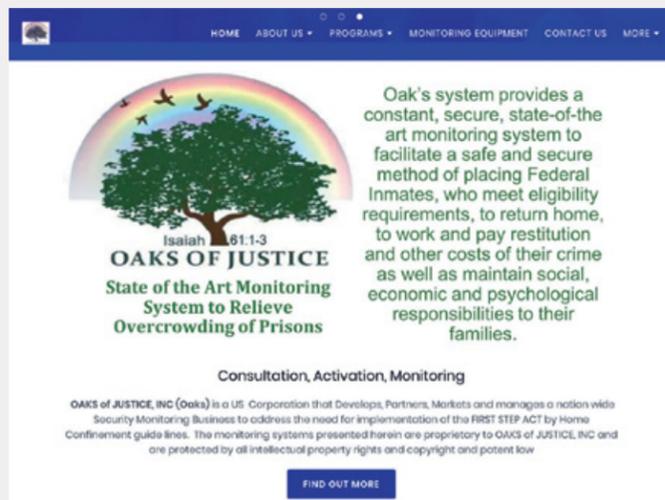
Another dubious get-out-early offer is spreading through federal prisons. Lawyers say it's a fake.

By CHRISTIE THOMPSON

Last summer, Delores Wallace's sister, who was serving a 3 ½-year sentence in federal prison, asked her to look into a company that was all the buzz on her cell block. The company, called Oaks of Justice, claimed it could help people get out of federal prison early and serve out their sentences at home while being monitored by a state-of-the-art surveillance system.

Wallace was skeptical. Her sister had just spent over \$6,000 on another early release promise that went nowhere—one that claimed she could shave time off her sentence by enrolling in rehab. "At this point, I'm nobody's fool," Wallace said. But her sister was hopeful, so Wallace agreed to contact the founder of Oaks of Justice, a woman named Jo Morgan.

In emails to Wallace, some of which were shared with The



Oaks of Justice's website claims it can help people get out of federal prison early and serve out their sentences at home while being monitored by a surveillance system

Marshall Project, Morgan explained that her program allowed people convicted of nonviolent offenses to go home if they agreed to be tracked by an electronic monitor worn on their wrist like a smartwatch. It sounded like a good deal for everyone involved: Participants would return to their families while the federal government would save “billions” on incarceration. Morgan has claimed in emails and phone calls with potential customers that officials with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and President Donald Trump himself support the program.

But attorneys familiar with the federal prison system and a former bureau official said, based on their years of knowledge and experience, that a program of this kind would never happen. A spokesperson for the

an email to The Marshall Project that the agency has no such deal with the company. And a reverse Google image search shows the photos of the company's “proprietary” new tracking devices appear to be consumer GPS devices from the Chinese e-commerce site Ali Express, marketed to help monitor confused elderly people or teenage children.

In a phone call, Morgan—whose real name, according to court records, is Winnie Joanne Barefoot—insisted that the company was legitimate and was nearing approval from the Justice Department but that she could not provide proof. “The correspondence between my lobbyist and the federal government right now is confidential,” she said. “I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t fritter away money on something totally speculative ... I truly believe this will happen.” Morgan

said that the tracking devices displayed on her site may look the same as existing products on the market, but they have new technology inside.

The man Morgan identified as her lobbyist did not respond to a request for comment.

The widespread interest in Morgan's company shows how easily misinformation can spread in prison, where people are desperate for any chance to return home. At the same time, people inside often lack the ability to adequately vet the numerous companies and individuals targeting them with promises of shortened sentences. In emails sent to potential customers last summer, Oaks of Justice said it had nearly 1,000 applications. Law firms and nonprofits that work with people in federal prison say they've been inundated with questions about the organization. Attorney Shon Hopwood in Washington, D.C., estimated that about 100 people have reached out to him with questions about the program.

After her initial correspondence with Oaks of Justice, Wallace received a letter saying her sister had been accepted to the program. When the company received final confirmation from the Bureau of Prisons, Morgan wrote in the letter, they would contact her for the \$250 application fee. After that, according to letters sent by the company, the program could cost her thousands of dollars, depending on how much time was left on her sister's sentence and her conduct while being monitored.

Morgan said she has not yet taken money from any potential customers. Several families told The Marshall Project that Morgan told them to hold off on payment until the Bureau of Prisons gave final approval, which the company claimed was coming any day.

Harvard Law School professor Rebecca Tushnet, an expert in false advertising, said the company could be breaking federal law even if no money has been exchanged. “If the pitch is, ‘Eventually I’m going to ask you to send me money,’ then definitely that can violate the law,” Tushnet said. “She’s clearly causing damage. Most of that damage is not going to be economic.” In a follow-up email, Morgan did not comment on whether the company was engaging in false advertising.

Even if Morgan's company isn't

breaking any laws, she appears to be sowing false hope among hundreds of families whose loved ones are in federal prison.

“I will be so mad if this organization is not a real thing. They have told my family it is real—my mother has high hopes of me coming home before her mother passes away,” one woman in federal prison wrote in an email. She asked to remain anonymous in case the company turns out to be legitimate after all. “If the Oaks IS real, I don’t want to ruin my chances of being able to come home through their program. I need all of the hope I can get.”

Morgan, who has used several aliases, was released from federal prison herself in December 2016, after serving nearly five years for bank fraud for multiple white-collar crimes, according to court records. Among them was running a hyperbaric oxygen therapy business—a medical treatment to increase oxygen to the lungs—that billed insurers for hundreds of thousands of dollars of treatment that was never provided. In a phone call, Morgan denied profiting from false insurance claims, but said she took a plea deal to shield family members involved in the business from further investigation. She said her many name changes were because of adoption, marriages and nicknames, not to conceal her identity.

Nine months after she was released, while still on probation, Morgan registered the Oaks of Justice website under the name Joanne Barefoot Morgan. Three months later, she licensed the business in Pennsylvania. She opened Facebook and Twitter accounts for the company in 2018. She has acknowledged her incarceration in conversations with customers and said in a phone call with The Marshall Project that her probation officer is fully aware of the company.

“@RandPaul please get us 10 minutes with President Trump oaksofjustice.us is 1200 new jobs and 2billion saving to US Gov’t over 5 years,” she tweeted in January 2018. “We don’t free inmates, we free taxpayers wallets.” The senator did not reply or reshare Morgan's tweet.

On its website, Oaks of Justice details how its monitoring program is supposed to work. Participants must remain within boundaries, or a “geo-

yard,” which would be set at the time of their release. The monitors worn on their wrists would track their pulse, respiration and even alcohol and drug use, according to the website. The company claims that its program is part of the First Step Act, the federal prison reform legislation signed by President Trump in December 2018.

According to several people in federal prison, Morgan has advertised through letters and emails sent through Corrlinks, the private email service used in federal prisons. They shared their correspondence with The Marshall Project.

In recent months, Morgan has pleaded with would-be customers to be patient and stop emailing questions about when they will be sent home. “Please do not ask for updates. We just counted, and since August 15th, we have answered over 400 emails about this very subject,” she wrote in September, according to emails obtained by The Marshall Project. “BELIEVE us, we will tell you when it is GO time. NONE of you are more anxious than we are. If you think you are tired of waiting and getting depressed, please walk in our shoes.”

As sites including Ripoff Report and federal prison-related Facebook pages and listservs started to warn families about the company, Morgan also tried to wave them away. “PLEASE DO NOT CALL OR EMAIL US ABOUT THE CURRENT RUMORS. WE CANNOT take time to respond,” she wrote in an email to customers in July. “If someone is trashing Oaks, then look at what their motivation could be. Are we maybe cutting into their business model when we succeed?”

After receiving her sister's acceptance letter from Oaks of Justice, Wallace asked friends with law degrees for advice and Googled around for reviews of the company. She stumbled across a YouTube video by prison consultant Dan “RDAP Dan” Wise warning people about the operation, which convinced her it wasn't real. Wallace never sent Morgan any money, and the Bureau of Prisons moved her sister to a halfway house this winter as her sentence nears its end. But that meant leaving behind more than 20 women on her cell block who were still hoping that Oaks of Justice would work for them.

“Prison is like a trial run of death. You're still breathing, you're still get-

ting up, but you have zero decisions about yourself. You have nothing,” said Wallace's sister, who asked to remain unnamed out of concern she could be sent back to prison. “To have someone promising and promising and never come through—what can I believe?”

Coronavirus Transforming Jails Across the Country

Some sheriffs, prosecutors and defenders scramble to move people from local jails, potential petri dishes for infection.

By CARY ASPINWALL, KERI BLAKINGER, ABBIE VANSICKLE and CHRISTIE THOMPSON

In Houston, the massive county jail has stopped admitting people arrested for certain low-level crimes. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, people who usually spend their days fighting with each other—public defenders and prosecutors—joined forces to get 75 people released from jail in a single day. And outside Oakland, California, jailers are turning to empty hotel rooms to make sure the people they let out have a place to go.

Across the country, the coronavirus outbreak is transforming criminal justice in the most transient and turbulent part of the system: local jails. Run mostly by county sheriffs, jails hold an ever-changing assortment of people—those who are awaiting trial and cannot afford to pay bail; those convicted of low-level offenses; overflows from crowded prisons.

Even without a global pandemic, many local jails [struggle to provide adequate medical care for a population that is already high-risk: many people in jails suffer from addiction or mental illness. Some have died after lax medical care for treatable illnesses.

“Basically, the shit hit the



In the Bay Area, more than 300 people have been released from the Santa Rita Jail as coronavirus has spread. They included people nearing the end of their sentences, as well as older and medically vulnerable people. SALWAN GEORGES/THE WASHINGTON POST, VIA GETTY IMAGES

fan," said Corbin Brewster, chief public defender of Tulsa County. "COVID-19 is just a magnifying glass for all the problems in the criminal justice system."

Local officials' responses have run the gamut. In the crisis of the moment, some are adopting measures long urged by criminal justice reformers: declining to prosecute or freeing people who have committed drug offenses or nonviolent crimes; releasing the sick or elderly; trying to reduce the jail population. For example, officials have been temporarily transferring some at-risk detainees to housing units in Kent, Washington, which were built to house homeless people.

But others have stuck to tough-on-crime tactics or rhetoric. The sheriff in Bristol County, near Boston, argued the incarcerated would be safer locked up, as would the public.

Because millions of people each year cycle in and out of jail, experts have long warned that these lockups have the potential to be petri dishes of infection—an assertion coronavirus will test.

Already, at least one correctional officer and one prisoner at New York City's Rikers Island jail have tested positive for the virus; others are under quarantine after exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms. Quarantines are also underway in Silicon Valley, where a public defender who visited a Santa Clara County jail tested positive for coronavirus. The jail in Washington, D.C., began a quarantine of 65 detain-

ees starting March 13 after a potential exposure during a trip to court.

At last count, federal data showed 758,400 people held in 3,100 local jails—but that number is only a snapshot at midyear 2019. The Prison Policy Initiative, a research and advocacy group, estimates that 4.9 million people flow through jails each year.

"It's not like if there's an outbreak in the jail, it stays in the jail," said Jacob Reisberg, jails conditions advocate for the ACLU of Southern California.

Here are snapshots of how some of the largest jail systems in the country are managing in the coronavirus era.

California is home to several huge jails, including Los Angeles County's, which typically houses more than 17,000 people. On Thursday, California's governor ordered the entire state to shelter in place.

To get ahead of a looming public health crisis, judges and sheriffs ordered the release of hundreds of people from jails across the state.

In the Bay Area, the Alameda County Sheriff's Office has released more than 300 people from Santa Rita Jail, one of the state's biggest, with a population that hovers around 2,600 each day. Those released included people nearing the end of their sentences, as well as older and medically vulnerable people.

A sheriff's spokesman said the agency was connecting those released with no place to go with local hotels

that had empty rooms because the virus has decimated tourism.

"We have to be mindful that we're not sending people out the door without resources, shelter and the necessities of life," Sgt. Ray Kelly said. The office is also taking the temperatures of staff entering the jail; Kelly said he'd already had his checked twice that day.

Those who remain in custody have access to Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer. But because the sanitizer contains alcohol to kill germs, staff is squirting it onto inmates' hands, said Sheriff Greg Ahern. To keep the population down, the sheriff told deputies to issue citations for most low-level crimes, rather than booking people into jail.

The Alameda County Public Defender's Office released a statement supporting the moves.

"Until we get a handle on this public health crisis, any jail sentence right now could be a death sentence," said Public Defender Brendon Woods. "No one wants that."

Across the bay, San Francisco public defenders had voiced frustration that the county's jails had not yet released vulnerable groups. Aleem Raja, manager of the felony trial unit for the San Francisco Public Defender's Office, said on Thursday that courts were still handling cases one by one. On Friday, a judge signed orders to release 26 people. Raja said the decision left him feeling more optimistic.

In Texas, Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot told The Marshall Project he was frustrated about the slow pace of releases from the county's jail, among the largest in the country. The jail population is now almost 1,000 over its typical average of 5,000. All jury trials have been canceled, so Creuzot worried those numbers would swell. His office has been working with defense attorneys and judges to release eligible people on personal recognition bonds, he said.

In a city with a dire police staffing shortage and at least one officer testing presumptively positive for coronavirus, Creuzot also questioned why so many people were still being arrested for minor charges, like drug possession. Under state law, his office must be ready for trial within three months of an arrest.

"These drugs will not be tested within 90 days," he said, so there's no point in jailing people on those alleged offenses.

Because Houston's Harris County jail holds a population equivalent to "three cruise ships," Sheriff Ed Gonzalez says, he has worked to reduce the number of inmates ahead of a potential outbreak.

"Jails are perfect incubators for #COVID19," he tweeted Wednesday. "As proactive as I've been, an outbreak in our jail would spread like wildfire."

By that point, jail officials had already arranged to test six inmates for the disease; as of late Friday only two tests had come back—negative.

The sheriff's office said it would stop accepting people arrested for certain low-level offenses. Jail staff also started identifying those older than 50 who were awaiting trial on nonviolent offenses and then began asking courts if they could qualify for release. They also released half of the two dozen pregnant women in jail.

Gonzalez also began pushing for a broader compassionate release initiative that could see hundreds of nonviolent offenders let out—though that would require approval from the county executive, the sheriff's office spokesman said.

So far, between fewer arrests and more releases, the sheriff's office has managed to bring the daily average population down about 6.5 percent, to 8,500 people from 9,100.

"It's amazing," said Sarah Wood, a lawyer and policy director at the Harris County Public Defender's Office. "I figured Sheriff Gonzalez would take this seriously, but I did not expect him to go so far as to try to take it upon himself to figure out who needs to be outside of the jail."

Activity at Oklahoma courts began slowing this week, after the state's Supreme Court and Court of Criminal Appeals issued an order encouraging use of social distancing to reduce risk of the virus spreading among judges, court employees and the public. The state prison system has already stopped taking in new prisoners, so now those with recent criminal convictions must wait at county jails. Historically, the Tulsa jail has dealt with overcrowding by having inmates sleep in plastic beds shaped like boats on the floor.

Worried the delays in the court system would further pack the jails, the county's public defenders began reviewing cases of the 1,200 detainees, and found 128 people sitting in jail on misdemeanors. They got most out through plea deals, bonds or time served.

On Thursday, the public defenders spent all day in court blazing through 82 felony cases with the cooperation of judges and prosecutors. Six public defenders worked at the courthouse; four others volunteered to set up inside the jail during the hearings, to have clients sign paperwork. They did this knowing they would have to self-quarantine for two weeks, according to Brewster, the chief public defender.

Among those released? A pregnant woman who was being held for possessing a firearm after a prior felony conviction. She had been arrested because she was in a car with her boyfriend, who had the gun, Brewster said.

In Louisiana, New Orleans jail officials have suspended volunteer family and legal visits as the city grapples with one of the highest coronavirus infection rates in the country.

Orleans Parish officials say they're screening prisoners and staff, handing out soap and showing detainees "training videos" on how to wash their hands.

In recent weeks the jail population has dipped under 1,000, despite some

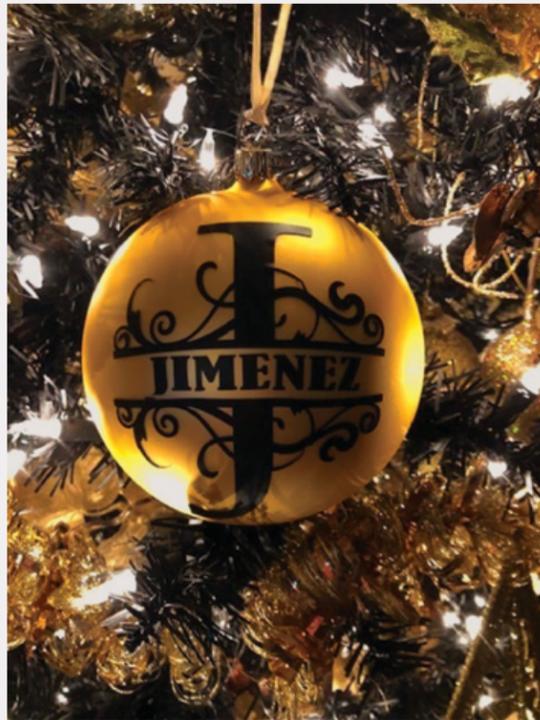
To get ahead of a looming public health crisis, judges and sheriffs ordered the release of hundreds of people from jails across the state.

objections from prosecutors. As of Thursday, the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office said it had released 23 people who'd been held on minor charges.

"We have no individuals in custody on traffic offenses," Sheriff Marlin Gusman said in a statement midday Thursday. "Our staff is reviewing a list of all state-law misdemeanors in custody and is individually contacting those respective judges."

Derwyn Bunton, the chief public defender in the parish, stressed that the jail could do more.

"You have to stop business as usual, and they won't commit to that," he said Friday. "The sheriff hasn't come out and said, 'We don't want the vulnerable, we don't want low-level offenses, and we don't want probation holds in our jail.'"



Jenny Jimenez sent photos of Christmas ornaments she had made to her husband in prison, so he could tape them to a 3-D tree that she mailed to him one section at a time. COURTESY OF JENNY JIMENEZ

because of the five-pointed star at the top. "No stars," they said. So I've been getting really creative. I learned to use this Silhouette machine to make these cutout Christmas trees that I send him, one at a time. Once he gets them all, they'll go together and make a 3-D tree. I sent him little pictures of all the ornaments on my tree so he can tape them to his 3-D version. He uses nail clippers to cut around the edges and make little round ornaments. They have these little circular indentations around them because of the shape of the nail clippers; he's not allowed to have scissors.

My latest project is a Shutterfly book for the 12 days of Christmas that moves when you flip through it. I put a puzzle filter over a photo of me where he can see my cleavage and the new "Mrs. Jimenez" tattoo I got on my chest. I sent it on nine different days so he could put the puzzle together and get a little surprise.

Jesse and I have always been different. After he ripped off his ankle monitor last year, we screamed and cried, but the damage had already been done. So we decided to take a road trip together before he had to go back to prison. We would go to Nashville to hear country music, and then to Memphis to see Graceland. We booked an Elvis-themed

room and everything. It would be our honeymoon. Then, we were going to go to turn him in. We were on our way to Memphis when a police car pulled us over for speeding. When we stopped, we looked at each other knowingly.

"Can you get away?" I asked. Then I said, "Go!" We took off. They chased us for what felt like an eternity.

Then the crash happened.

We were in the same ambulance together. I was screaming like a banshee in pain, holding on tight to him, handcuffed to the bed next to me. He kissed my hand before I was airlifted to the hospital with a spinal cord injury.

They took Jesse to a different hospital, and I didn't have my phone. He kept calling for days. He was so worried about me, and I was worried about him. Neither of us knew the extent of each other's injuries.

Later, someone brought my purse in from the wreckage. It was about a week from the day of the crash before I was able to pick up his call.

Now that Jesse is back in prison, we communicate as much as we can, but it's really hard. Earlier this year, they suspended my visits. I got a letter saying I falsified information on the form. Turns out there was a woman in the system who had the same name as me, and when she came up in the system

with a different birthday, they cut off my visits for four months.

We haven't been able to do video visits, either, because the terminals in the prison are broken. Recently, our phone calls have also been cut from 30 minutes to 20 minutes. It's only 10 minutes less, but that's all we have, so it feels so much longer.

Another way we stay connected is to watch TV together—our date nights. It helps us feel close knowing that we're both watching the same thing at the same time. I ripped out the list of all the holiday Lifetime movies they've been playing from a magazine, and I circled the ones I want to watch. He also picked out some of the ones he wanted to watch, and he sent it back to me. Each week we sit down and watch them at the same time. He watches them on a TV in his cell, and I watch them in my living room. I send him e-mails as we watch.

He doesn't see the messages right away because he has to check his e-mail on a barely functional tablet. But I'll still just send whatever comes to mind, silly things like, "Wow, look at her dress." Even if he doesn't get it for days, he'll know I was there watching with him. The limited communication has been one of the hardest things to get used to. I want him to know I am always here, no matter what.

Jesse can be so tough, but he has a heart of gold. It's difficult being in that horrible, egotistical environment. I think that without our communication, he wouldn't be such a divine, loving man anymore. He would become institutionalized and depressed.

Admittedly, I flooded the mailroom with letters, cards and books. But I want him to get something every time they do pass-out at the prison. He'll always be reminded that he is loved and not forgotten.

Jesse's release is scheduled for next December. When he gets out, we're going to finally have our big wedding ceremony. I just booked the venue—for Christmas Eve.

Jenny Jimenez is a wife, mother and pastry chef living in the Chicago area.

The Illinois Department of Corrections did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Gary Poindexter, left, and Christopher Brown leave the Tulsa County Jail after being released on Thursday. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, a special docket was created to expedite release of those locked up on low level offenses. MIKE SIMONS/TULSA WORLD



? Thinking Inside the Box

Give these questions a try after you've read the stories in this issue. We'll include the answers in the next issue.

- 1 How old was Colin Absalom when he left Jamaica for the Bronx?
- 2 Johnny Perez, a formerly incarcerated New Yorker, said publishing mugshots can disproportionately impact people of ____.
- 3 What kind of performances are sponsored by Rehabilitation Through the Arts?

4 What percentage of black survey respondents identify most with the Republican Party?

5 How many people responded to our survey?

6 When you return from the commissary/canteen, what should you do with your net bag after you have unpacked the items you purchased?

7 How much is the Oaks of Justice application fee?

8 Why did Jenny Jimenez book a venue for Christmas Eve?

9 What percentage of whites, who have under one year, think Democrats are more committed to criminal justice?

Last Issue's Answers

- 1 On a walk past the place, they lived when she got arrested. ("My Dog Didn't Forget Me When I Went to Prison")
- 2 500. (Should Prisoners Be Allowed to Have Facebook Pages?)
- 3 Massachusetts. (Making The Case Against Banishing Sex Offenders')
- 4 2 million. ("I Host a Popular Podcast. I'm Also in Prison")
- 5 Get paroled or get kicked out and serve the rest of your time back in prison. ("Working Their Way Home From Prison")
- 6 37,000. ("They Got Their Voting Rights Back, But Will They Go to the Polls?")
- 7 Warren supports ending cash bail but didn't explain how she would achieve it. ("2020 Democrats on Criminal Justice")
- 8 Half. ("Can We Fix Mass Incarceration Without Including Violent Offenders?")

is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system. We achieve this through award-winning journalism, partnerships with other news outlets and public forums. In all of our work we strive to educate and enlarge the audience of people who care about the state of criminal justice.

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