

Inmates at Michigan prisons exposed to COVID-19 in unsanitary conditions

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The COVID-19 virus is spreading rapidly through Michigan's prison system. As of May 2, almost 2,000 inmates have tested positive with 41 prisoners succumbing to the virus.

Additionally, 278 staff tested positive with two deaths, creating the risk of further spread through the surrounding communities. A recent study by the ACLU predicts an additional 100,000 deaths in the US prison system alone if the country's massive prison population is not significantly reduced.

As with other state and federal facilities, Michigan's prisons have become incubators for the coronavirus. Inmates are forced to live in unsanitary conditions where social distancing is impossible. Particularly troubling is the situation at Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan, where more than half of the population is elderly. Out of 1,400 inmates at the facility, 791 tested positive with 14 deaths.

A class action lawsuit has been filed by prisoners against the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) for its insufficient response to the virus, violating prisoner's Eighth Amendment rights to be free from cruel and unusual punishment. The lawsuit states, "Despite the ticking time bomb that COVID-19 represents, MDOC has failed to implement necessary or adequate policies and practices throughout its prisons."

Wanda Bertram of the Prison Policy Initiative stated, "It's the duty of every state to recognize that a prison sentence shouldn't become a death sentence just because of a pandemic."

Brandy, whose husband is housed at the G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan, recently spoke to the WSWs about the situation he and other inmates face. The Cotton prison has 655 positive cases. "He is currently housed in one room with 200 other inmates, like cattle. There is a rumor going

around that 500 body bags were delivered to the prison, so they are absolutely terrified."

Prisoners do not have the option to practice social distancing. One of the plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit, also at the Cotton facility, describes sharing a 10-foot by 12-foot room with seven other inmates, five of whom tested positive for COVID-19.

The living conditions are unsanitary, with shared washroom facilities, phones and communication kiosks which are not being properly sanitized. Inmates are afraid to report their symptoms to staff, as they are placed in solitary confinement to isolate.

"They don't want to advise staff for fear of being placed in disciplinary holding cells. Individuals in there constantly make noise, so they won't be able to call for help," Brandy told the WSWs.

Solitary confinement is recognized by the United Nations as a form of torture. A statement by Formerly Incarcerated Prison Experts says, for example, "Inhumane solitary confinement is not to be confused with medical isolation or quarantine. ... unsanitary conditions are even worse in cells designed for complete isolation." Isolation in one of these holding cells is likely to make the situation worse.

Robert Reeves, a prisoner at Parnall Correctional Facility, also in Jackson, states in the lawsuit that he was not given supplies to clean his cell and his requests for medical assistance were ignored. "He has not seen a doctor, nor did he receive medical instructions on what to do if his symptoms get worse, despite complaining of chest pain, coughing up blood, and having problems breathing," the lawsuit notes. "Reeves was told it was normal and to just endure it."

While the MDOC alleges that it is leading the nation for testing prisoners, as of this writing it has tested about 10 percent of the 41,000 prisoners held in its

facilities. Nearly half of those tested have been confirmed as positive for COVID-19.

This growing wave of wholly preventable deaths is being met with criminal indifference from the political establishment. There have been growing calls to release non-violent, pregnant or elderly prisoners to stop the spread, but Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has refused, potentially condemning thousands to death. Whitmer released an executive order with guidelines to slow the spread in prisons, many of which are being ignored.

Particularly troubling is that a significant percentage of the population confined to local jails are legally innocent, imprisoned for being unable to afford bail. The ACLU's Justice Division states that on average 66 percent of the jail population belongs to this group, doomed to a potential death sentence just for being poor.

William Garrison, who was sentenced to life without parole when he was 16, died two weeks before he was to be released from Macomb Correctional Facility after serving 44 years in prison. His sister Yolanda had prepared a room for him and was making plans to celebrate his 61st birthday.

Kelsey Kauffman, the director of education at Indiana Women's Prison, has stated that the failure to release inmates earlier "may be considered one of the great public health tragedies of our time."



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