

# THE TRUTH ABOUT COVID-19 IN NYS PRISONS:

**NEW YORK'S 52 STATE PRISONS PUT PEOPLE AT EXTREMELY HIGH RISK OF CONTRACTING AND DYING FROM COVID-19.** Prisons are hotbeds for viruses and diseases. Social distancing in the crowded, controlled, and closed environment of a prison is impossible. Medical care is sorely lacking. Hygiene and sanitation products are not readily available. As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout New York State, it will also continue to spread throughout the state prison system. This will have devastating consequences for incarcerated New Yorkers, their families, prison staff, and entire communities throughout the state. Despite the crisis at hand, New York State's government has failed to provide transparent and accurate information about how COVID-19 is affecting New York State prisons and how they plan to protect incarcerated people. Here are the facts based on the limited information made available by DOCCS and Governor Cuomo, information from legal service providers, and reports from inside prisons.

## COVID INFECTIONS

As of **May 4, 2020, 401 incarcerated people and 1117 prison staff tested positive for COVID-19.** Twelve (12) incarcerated people and 4 prison staff have died with the virus. Sing Sing and Bedford Hills Correctional facilities in Westchester County, Green Haven, Fishkill, and Otisville Correctional Facilities in the Hudson Valley, and Great Meadow and Wende Correctional Facilities in the North Country and Western NY have the **highest numbers/rates of COVID infections**, indicating the spread of COVID in NYS prisons is statewide. Despite testing far less than other states, **New York ranks in the top 10 highest infection and death rates** of all prison systems across the country.

## SOCIAL DISTANCING

The social-distancing protocol that NYS businesses must adhere to under threat of arrest and \$1000 fine is impossible to achieve in prisons. Shy of decarceration, social distancing is impossible in prison dormitories, yards, and cell blocks. Without social distancing, the Coronavirus is running rampant throughout prisons across the state, needlessly infecting and killing incarcerated people and prison staff.

## FACE MASKS

Despite the fact that all New Yorkers must wear a face mask in crowded spaces, DOCCS employees are not required to wear a mask in prisons. While most prison staff are wearing PPE, there have been many reports of security and medical staff not wearing PPE. People in prison are issued a surgical-type mask only after they are under quarantine. Those in the general prison population are only allowed to wear a small, state-issued handkerchief. Loved ones, advocates and attorneys cannot send them masks. Without free, readily available masks, and required use by staff and incarcerated people, the virus will continue to rapidly spread throughout prisons.

## TESTING

**Only 1% of all people incarcerated in NYS prisons have been tested for the virus.** Governor Cuomo recently announced that all prison staff will be tested. However, he and the administration haven't announced the total number or percentage of staff who have been tested. Far more incarcerated people have been tested in the federal bureau of prisons and other state prison systems. Without comprehensive testing protocols, there is no way to gauge the severity of, or appropriately address, the COVID-19 crisis in prisons.

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## RACIAL DISPARITIES ARE MAGNIFIED.

Structural racism in New York State prisons is compounded by COVID-19. Black and Latinx New Yorkers are overrepresented in prison, **disproportionately denied parole release** at the end of their sentence and more often placed into solitary confinement. **COVID-19 is particularly life-threatening to** Black men and women in prison because they are known to have higher rates of asthma, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes than other groups—**all preconditions known to make COVID-19 a death sentence**. In New York, early data reveals COVID-19 is twice as deadly for Black and Latino People than other groups. That vulnerability is amplified with age. People of Color make up approx. 75 percent of **New York state's prison population**. New York State's lack of action to release people in prison means that a disproportionate number of incarcerated Black, Latinx and people of color will die from COVID-19.

## HAND SANITIZER, CLEANING AND HYGIENE PRODUCTS.

Hand sanitizer, cleaning and hygiene products are not readily accessible to many incarcerated people. Hand sanitizer is only available to people incarcerated in some prisons; others have none. Meticulous sanitation procedures are impractical, implausible, and far-fetched. The most commonly accessible and used personal and facility cleaning product DOCCS issues is diluted bleach. Without free and unrestricted access to hand sanitizer, cleaning and hygiene products, incarcerated people are forced to eat, move through, and live in an environment that is destined to make them sick.

## HOSPITAL AND HEALTH CARE CAPABILITY.

Prison hospitals are incapable of delivering effective medical care to incarcerated people plagued by COVID-19. A recent investigation by The City found that **1 in 4 prison medical staff positions in New York State were vacant**. Prison infirmaries in many facilities are already overcrowded with COVID patients, as are many of the outside hospitals some incarcerated people go to. Prisons are in no position to lean on local hospitals to care for coronavirus patients from prisons. Solitary confinement units are being used to quarantine people. Solitary confinement is inhumane and unacceptable at any time, and is certainly not an acceptable solution to the Coronavirus spread in prison. Solitary confinement causes mental and physical deterioration and is associated with increased rates of heart disease, psychosis, and death. Entire housing units with hundreds of incarcerated people are under quarantine combining people with serious symptoms, mild symptoms, and no symptoms, guaranteeing that the virus will spread.