

Incarceration is Not Quarantine: A Reflection on the Effects of COVID-19 on our Prison and Jail Systems

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It seems that everyone has something to say about the effects of the novel coronavirus. Social media bombards us with people's thoughts, opinions, suggestions, and humor. Television and other media are constantly updating us with the latest news, statistics, restrictions, and updates that this pandemic has caused. It is overwhelming.

Having said that, sharing a blog seems rather paradoxical. Yet, I write to give voice to many people who are not being heard, have no access to social media, and are isolated and often forgotten. It is estimated that there are more than two million people incarcerated in jails, prisons and detention centers in the United States. Many of those who populate our local jails are pending trial and have not been found guilty of the crimes with which they have been charged. They cannot make bail and so they are forced to languish in jails, while losing jobs and being separated from families.

What is most distressing is the fact that infectious diseases like COVID-19 are highly contagious within in correction facilities. In many ways, our prisons and jails are incubators for viruses. At present, many correction facilities are on lock-down with no visitation permitted and the cost of phone calls is prohibitively high and shamefully inflated. All of this results in more isolation, greater anxiety, and rising anger in those being held behind bars and razor wire fences.

What can be done about this? Here are some suggestions:

- One thing that comes to mind is the need to assess how the United States has become the largest overseer of the world's prison population, particularly disproportionately affecting people of color. This is a long-range problem to be addressed and resolved.
- Today, we can ask our judges, county attorneys, and prosecutors to release those in our jails who are being held because they are too poor to make bail. This would allow people to return home and safely quarantine themselves as well as significantly lower the jail populations.
- In addition, we can ask our corrections departments to expedite parole for those serving non-violent offenses, again dramatically reducing our prison population.
- Another action to consider is to write notes of encouragement and care to those incarcerated. If you know someone who is incarcerated, this is one of the best place to start. If you don't know anyone, each state has a website that lists those who are incarcerated. You can randomly select someone to whom to write. Simply being remembered can be an important antidote to the isolation and fear that prison brings.

- Include those incarcerated and imprisoned in your prayers. Yes, they have committed a crime or have been accused of committing a crime, but they remain beloved children of God. Pray for them.

If you need help in getting started in any of these suggested ways to address this concern, please contact me. You can reach me [here](#). May we all remain safe during this unique time in our world. Lenten blessings.

As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at www.nbaca.org.