

CORONAVIRUS

NJ prisons remain in coronavirus lockdown as state reopens, raising mental health concerns

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On his busiest days, Russell Owen was out of his prison dormitory up to 14 hours a day.

After being sentenced to 30 years for murder in 1991, Owen built a life of service behind bars. He was enrolling students and performing clerical work in East Jersey State Prison's education department by 7 a.m. He was tutoring fellow incarcerated men or helping lead services at the prison's Church of the Reconciled as late as 9 p.m.

"My son is a workaholic," said Mae Owen, his mother. "He was active."

Owen kept the routine for years until the coronavirus pandemic forced the state's prisons into various states of lockdown in March, shutting down schoolrooms and the chapel where Owen serves as assistant pastor. For three months, Owen's world has been reduced to the dormitory he shares with about 80 other prisoners.

As New Jersey eases social distancing restrictions and begins to reopen, the state's incarcerated population remains limited in movement and largely confined to cells or dormitories. Programming has been suspended. Classes, religious gatherings and work opportunities have been put on hold. Visits from loved ones are not allowed.

"There needs to be a recognition that to serve time in prison today is very different than it was in February because the conditions of confinement are so much harsher," said Alexander Shalom, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey. "On top of the mental anguish that comes from isolation, there's also the specter of death that is hanging over people. They see their friends, they see people they've been living with leaving in body bags and that constant fear of death and infection makes it that much more difficult."

The state's prisoners have died from complications of COVID-19 at the highest rate in the nation, with 25 deaths per 10,000 prisoners, according to an analysis of national data compiled by The Marshall Project. New Jersey is second only to Tennessee in the rate of inmate infection, with 1,355 cases per 10,000 prisoners. About 2,550 of the state's 18,400 incarcerated people have tested positive for the virus and 46 have died as of Wednesday.

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Health officials had warned that the nation's overcrowded correctional facilities, where social distancing is nearly impossible and access to cleaning supplies is tightly controlled, would become vectors in the pandemic.

Efforts to mitigate the spread by temporarily releasing certain at-risk prisoners in New Jersey have moved at a glacial pace. Only a few hundred of the 3,000 people eligible for furloughs under an executive order Gov. Phil Murphy issued in April have been released to home confinement, according to the ACLU-NJ. The state Supreme Court mandated the Department of Corrections this month to expedite the process by allowing incarcerated people to advocate for their own release.

Among those left behind bars, the fear of infection and frustration with confinement is palpable, according to interviews with family members of the incarcerated.

"I can hear it in his voice," said Paula, the mother of a 31-year-old inmate at South Woods State Prison in Bridgeton, in Cumberland County. "He's upset, and then I calm him down and talk to him. I say, 'Tony, you can't change this situation, it is what it is.' It just breaks your heart."

She asked that her last name not be used to protect her son from retribution.

Advocates worry how prolonged isolation and restricted movement will impact incarcerated people. Nearly half of state and federal prisoners experienced either "serious psychological distress" or had a history of mental health problems compared to 24% of the general U.S. population, according to a survey published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2017 and data from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

“Prisoners are more likely to have depression, they’re more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse disorders,” said Megan Perrin, a neuropsychologist who frequently works with the state’s Office of the Public Defender. “When you’re under significant stress created by a lockdown, a lack of social support and more restrictions than you’re used to, symptoms can reemerge. You can’t vent to people, it’s hard to cope.”

The Department of Corrections is working on a plan to ease restrictions in phases, said spokeswoman Liz Velez. She did not provide specific dates.

More than 88,000 Americans have developed anxiety or depression due to the pandemic and its economic fallout, raising fears that the pandemic will cause an epidemic of suicide, according to a Mental Health America report this month. Nearly 40% of adults in New Jersey have reported symptoms of anxiety or depression since the end of April, according to a U.S. Census Bureau survey.

Perrin recently trained the state’s public defenders to be more empathetic when speaking to their clients and spend more time listening to how they are feeling. Attorneys can sometimes be prisoners’ only connection to the outside world, she said.

“Everyone in the country right now is anxious about possible exposure or anxious about the impact it could have on our loved ones, especially elderly loved ones,” Perrin said. “You have to realize these inmates have no control, they can’t just call every time they’re concerned and reach out to people. It’s even harder for them.”

That concern is magnified for incarcerated people of color, she said. COVID-19 has hit minority communities especially hard, causing disproportionately more deaths among Black people in particular, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 62% of New Jersey’s incarcerated population is Black.

Russell Owen, 50, began calling his 76-year-old mom and 82-year-old dad every day when the pandemic began. The calls are short — there’s just enough time to ask how they’re doing and let them know that he’s OK, said Mae Owen. He urges his parents to stay inside their Pine Hill home. He frets about catching the virus and never seeing his daughter or grandchildren again. He also leaves much unsaid, she said.

“He doesn’t want to add additional stress for us,” Mae Owen said. “I think sometimes the men don’t tell you exactly what’s going on because they don’t want their family members to worry.”

What Mae Owen does know is her son is not getting enough sunlight — daily recreation time has been reduced to an hour every other day — and has no computer access. Russell Owen is earning his second doctorate degree in divinity and is now writing 15- to 20-page papers by hand, she said.

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He misses ministering and mentoring but remains committed to his studies, knowing the 1,200 men incarcerated at East Jersey State Prison will need him once life goes back to normal, she said.

“When the lockdown is lifted, he has to be ready to minister to their emotional and mental needs,” Mae Owen said. “Going to church is an encouragement for them, it’s a huge aspect for a lot of the men.”

Faith has long been a source of comfort for Russell Owen. He faces a maximum sentence of life in prison for fatally stabbing a man in Pemberton Township, and after being denied parole last year, will next become eligible for release in August 2021. He starts every morning with bible reading and prayer.

“His saving grace — the one thing he knew he could do in every situation — is pray,” Owen said.

To help inmates cope with isolation, the Department of Corrections announced in March that it would provide free phone calls and increase access to phones and JPay kiosks, which allow inmates to receive money transfers, email, videos, music and educational material via tablets. But some families say they talk to their loved ones less, not more.

Paula said her son Tony, who is serving a 29-year prison term for manslaughter, competes for access to 12 phones and two kiosks, one of which is frequently broken, in a unit with 123 other men. The men are taken out of their cells 25 to 28 at a time and some will inevitably miss their chance to connect before they are locked back up, Paula said.

For months during the pandemic, Tony left his cell for just 20 minutes a day and shower for 10 minutes every other day, she said. South Woods recently added more yard and recreation

time, but inmates remain in their cells for 20 to 23 hours a day and jockey for phone and kiosk time when they get out, she said.

“The men get frustrated not knowing what’s going on with their families and they get in fights,” she said. “This corona is not going away so how long is this going to go on for? These inmates will get to the point where they’re not going to take it anymore and they’ll uprise against the prison.”

Heightened restrictions have stoked tensions in prisons around the world. Inmates rioted in 30 Italian prisons in March after visitation rights were suspended. Perrin, the neuropsychologist, said people tend to act out when they’re restricted and are more likely to engage in aggressive rule violations that can turn violent.

Paula said she has pressed the Department of Corrections to give inmates newer tablets that would allow them to make calls whenever they wanted and access email without connecting to a kiosk.

“I haven’t seen Tony since all this started but at least when I can talk to him or get an email from him, it just soothes me, it makes me feel relaxed and I know he’s alive and he’s OK,” she said.

Faye Ploppert’s son, Matthew Ploppert, 55, is also at South Woods, serving a 30-year sentence for murder. In 2017, Matthew Ploppert tried to overdose on fentanyl after he was denied parole and given an additional 15 years in prison.

He received no mental health treatment after his suicide attempt but has since busied himself with work, managing the freezer in the prison’s kitchen from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., Faye Ploppert said. Matthew Ploppert spent those hours packing, keeping count of meat and repairing broken machinery. His ability to fix just about anything earned him the nickname, “MacGyver” — a reference to the problem-solving TV character.

Now without work, Matthew Ploppert sits idle, spending most of his day watching TV.

“I don’t know what the impact of that mentally will be,” Faye Ploppert said. “He’s doing nothing. He said it makes the time go slower.”

Perrin said prisons need to do routine screening for depression, anxiety and trauma to catch psychological issues early and mitigate harm as restrictions stretch on.

“Trying to ramp up therapeutic options for prisoners would be very helpful,” she said.

Velez, the Department of Corrections spokeswoman, said virtual mental health services are made available to those in need.

Shalom, the ACLU attorney, said the various lockdowns put in place by prisons are appropriate and necessary to contain the virus' spread but the conditions of confinement need to be more humane, particularly for infected inmates placed in quarantine. Some medical isolation units can resemble the conditions of solitary confinement — a practice the state strictly limited last year due its heavy toll on the mental and physical well-being of prisoners.

One of Shalom's clients was recently put in quarantine without his television, food and other comforts of home after his bunkmate tested positive for the virus, Shalom said.

“Taking a person away from those things makes the conditions that much harsher and frankly makes people less interested in going into quarantine,” he said. “The problem with that, of course, is they're going to be less likely to report symptoms and that is exactly what we don't need if we're trying to stem the flow of infection. ”

Velez said the Department of Corrections makes "all efforts" to transfer inmates into quarantine with their property. COVID-19-positive inmates are housed in single cells unless there is limited bed space, she said.

A 33-year-old inmate serving time for drug and weapons charges at South Woods was held in a large room with other COVID-19 patients for two weeks this month, according to his mother. She asked that their names not be used because she feared retaliation from prison guards. The inmate told his mother that he did not receive any medicine or treatment and was only allowed out once a day to take a shower.

“They just threw him into a room with a bunch of other people who have corona and they were locked in 23 hours a day,” she said. “He says they treated them different, like they had AIDS, like he's a germ. Humans should not be treated like that.”

About 17% of the 3,300 inmates at South Woods, the state's largest prison, have tested positive for the virus, according to state data.

Velez said the prison is not currently quarantining any coronavirus patients in large rooms. Symptomatic inmates are regularly seen by medical staff and undergo temperature and symptom checks, she said.

The story continues below the gallery.

The inmate at South Woods is on the mend but his family worries about his medically fragile cousin, a 23-year-old who requires a urinary catheter. He arrived at the Central Reception and Assignment Facility, an intake center in Trenton, and has been stuck there ever since, said his aunt, Rosalind Ali. Inmates are supposed to be transferred out of intake facilities after two weeks.

Ali's nephew needs surgery to have his urethra rerouted but has only recently had an appointment with a doctor via video. He has been wearing the same urine bag, which requires changing every two weeks, for more than 50 days, Ali said. The Department of Corrections suspended all nonessential medical trips in March but said essential trips would continue.

“He’s had infection after infection after infection and they tell him they can’t deal with him because of the corona,” Ali said. “He was told he wouldn’t be able to go to a hospital until everything gets better.”

Shalom, the ACLU attorney, expects the pandemic to leave a profound and lasting mark on incarcerated people.

“This is going to have a hugely scarring impact on many New Jerseyans,” he said. “I think about lots of people who are not experiencing the infection and death rates that are plaguing our prison system and the longstanding effect it will have on all of them. I can’t imagine that the impact will be any less on people in prison who are facing the worst of this virus.”

The family members interviewed in this story are members of Women Who Never Give Up, a Camden-based nonprofit dedicated to helping families of the incarcerated.

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