

Coalition For Prisoners' Rights Newsletter

Vol. 47-D, No. 11

PO Box 1911, Santa Fe NM 87504

November 2022

Times are for Hard for So Many

At any given moment in the U.S. approximately 2.3 million human beings are locked up, at least a quarter of whom have not been convicted of any crime. Data from the National Registry of Exonerations shows that Black people are more likely to be wrongfully incarcerated for crimes they did not commit than any other group in the country. Black people are reported as just over 13% of the population, but are 53% of the roughly 3,200 exonerations since 1989. For example, there were 64 people exonerated in Virginia since 1989; half of them were Black men.

A Virginia Innocence Project estimates that between 40,000 and 230,000 prisoners in the United States are actually innocent. The most common reasons given are: mistaken witness identification (which is more likely to happen to Black defendants) misconduct by police and prosecutors, and false or misleading evidence. Additionally there were inherent biases from police prosecutors and judges, which can influence arrests, convictions and sentences.

Since 1989, of the over 2 million people behind bars at any one time, only 3,250 have been exonerated. A dramatic way to look at that is to realize that in total, they were wrongfully imprisoned for over 28,000 years. Women of color are increasingly caught up in the punitive U.S. criminal legal system. In the last 30 years, the number of incarcerated women has increased by more than 475%. Of those exonerated since 1989, only 281 have been women.

An even less optimistic situation is revealed by the number of incarcerated people who have died in prison from 2015 to 2019. In Louisiana at least 786 people died during that period while incarcerated. None of them were judicially sentenced to death row. All were either detained before their trial, serving a judicially determined sentence, or were detained for a parole or probation violation. Black men ages 55-60 doing sentences post-conviction, are the largest impacted population by deaths behind bars, making up 11% of the total. The overwhelming majority of these people died of medical causes, heart disease and cancer the two most common.

Approximately half of known medical deaths were related to a pre-existing medical condition - indicating that half of medical related deaths were due to conditions first diagnosed by jail or prison medical staff. Suicides were approximately 6% of these deaths and more likely to occur in parish jails. Within those jails, half the deaths occurred in segregation - that is in solitary.

Of the 786 known deaths from 2015 to 2019, Black people were 58% (459) and "white" people were 39%. Of the remaining 14 deaths, 7 were listed as Hispanic and the remaining were listed as "other" or "unknown."

Of the 786 death records reviewed, over 95% were for men (750) and 4.45% for women (35). Medical deaths were the leading cause of death for both women and men, followed by suicide. Deaths as a result of drug use or accidents were exclusively male. Known deaths of this group of imprisoned people range in age from 13 to 96 years old (we repeat: 13? 96? !!!). People aged 55-60 make up just over 19% of the deaths. People 61-66 make up just over 19%, those ages 61-66 at 17% and 49-54 are just under 16% of the deaths.

Approximately 85% of known deaths behind bars were of people doing sentences for convictions. Pre-trial deaths are just over 14% of the total and include two juveniles. Of the deaths, over 85% were related to medical illness. The leading causes of medically-related deaths of those imprisoned are cancer and heart attacks. Deaths due to violence were one of the least common forms of deaths behind bars in Louisiana. Of all these tragedies - many without a doubt avoidable - we must note that 14% of the deaths were of people who had only been accused of a crime.

Reliable estimates find that between 40,000 and 230,000 of those imprisoned in the United States are actually innocent. The most common reasons for these errors are: mistaken witness identification, misconduct by police and prosecutors, and false or misleading evidence, as well as bias by those involved in prosecutions. In other words disproportionate numbers are in prison for racism and poverty.

Solo Cinco Semanas Mas Para El Título 42

Juez federal de Estados Unidos otorgo al Gobierno de Biden un período de transición de cinco semanas para que deje de aplicar una política implementada durante la presidencia de Trump con base en el Título 42 del Código de Regulaciones Federales de Estados Unidos que desde 2020 ha permitido expulsar a más de dos millones de migrantes sin el debido proceso en la frontera de Estados Unidos y México. El 15 de noviembre, el juez Sullivan había bloqueado la política y ha había calificado de "arbitraria y caprichosa", pero este miércoles acordó aumentar hasta el 21 de diciembre el plazo para que el Gobierno de Biden ponga fin a dicha política.

THE LEAST READ PART OF THE NEWSLETTER

To receive the CPR Newsletter by postal mail monthly, send us a self-addressed stamped envelope for each month's issue you are requesting. Five pages (= 1 ounce), can be sent for one Forever stamp. Ten pages (= 2 ounces and can be sent for a 20 cent stamp more.)

Please continue to send us your address changes, including both your old and new addresses.

NONE OF US ARE LAWYERS OR LEGAL WORKERS. Letters sent to us marked "Legal Mail" are NOT going to a lawyer. PLEASE DO NOT MARK YOUR MAIL "LEGAL MAIL"! NO MATTER HOW DESPERATELY YOU NEED LEGAL ADVICE/ ASSISTANCE, WE DO NOT HAVE ANY.

Many, many thanks to the Real Cost of Prisons Project, which posts our Newsletter on-line, monthly, for free downloading and distribution. All issues since 2009 are on its great site: realcostofprisons.org

Send us Holiday/Calendar Card Designs

Imprisoned Readers: Please send us a black and white drawing for the CPR 2023 New Year's card & calendar. All designs must be respectful of our diversity: We cannot use any with racist, sexist or religious symbolism.

The deadline is upon us. We need more entries. This is an opportunity to have your art widely distributed across the country. Submission of a drawing serves as the artist's permission for our use which will, of course, be credited. Prize: books of choice to the extent possible.

Within the next year, the state's contemporary art museum will be presenting an exhibit composed of prison art from around the country. We hope to be able to increase the number of pieces they have to choose from for possible inclusion.

THE BIG THREE

(Prison Health News, Issue 50, E. Macks)

Thanksgiving. Christmas. New Year's. "This is when I find myself missing my family the most..." You can find your own way to commemorate the season...For one example find ways to reach out. You could write a letter to someone you don't communicate with very often as one possibility.

Over time we can become able to recognize what are rational thoughts and what are not and to negate the irrational and cultivate the positive. We only lose if we don't try. We are not stupid and we are capable of making new friends, learning new things, and doing old things new ways.

There are specific steps to take that can help: make a list of things you want to get done. Create projects for yourself for each day. Do a little at a time, even if it's only one or two things. Find a way to reward yourself.

Working out can help us as it releases feel-good endorphins in our brains. In addition, some people find "self-prayer" helpful. This is when you set aside time to push all the negative thoughts out of your mind. And slowly start replacing them with positive affirmations about yourself and your situation.

Go out of your way to talk to someone else even if it's asking how that person's day is going. You might make a point of talking to people who are not very social, as that may well make someone else's day better as well.

With the "Big Three" right around the corner, there is no better time than now to consciously try something we have not already built into our daily routine. Many of us have been battling with depression for many years. We know it is hard to overcome. Which makes it all the more worthwhile to develop a personal set of steps with the goal of reducing it. Yes, it does take some time, and some effort. But it is absolutely true that quality of life, for now and for the future, can improve -- even in a place that may often and with reason - be depressing.

To summarize (from Michael J. Nichols) Do the time, don't let the time do you. Exercise, read, learn new things. Focus on topics that "sharpen" with others involved, like, spirituality, history, business and legal issues. Learn to observe but not respond to the antagonism of prison employees, always leave your cell whenever there is an opportunity to (yes, it is true that guards will take your things sometimes), write letters, file legitimate grievances, always practice your faith in a variety of ways: praying, meditating, reading.