

Prison Reality: COVID-19 Quarantine

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For so many, quaranting has been nothing more than a minor inconvenience, at least as far as staying home is concerned. You can still move around the rooms, watch TV, get online, breathe in the fresh air, whenever you want. I don't have any of those options here in prison. I'm not asking anyone to pity my circumstances; I put myself in here and am paying the due penalty. I do however desire to give a view from behind the razor wire.

As I write this, we are entering week 7 of quarantine. Beto is no longer the most infected unit in Texas; at least I don't think so. The last numbers I heard given by Kat Powers (KYYK, Palestine, Texas) included over 1,000 positive tests throughout the entire TDCJ system (over 100 units). By the publication of this, the total confirmed number of cases will have spiked due to the mass testing being done on ALL Inmates and Employees.

My cell is exactly 6x9 and contains 2 bunks, a desk, lockers, and a stainless steel toilet/sink combo. Factor in fans, clothes, and other stuff on the floor, the actual area to move around in comes roughly 4x6. There are 2 of housed in here and we almost could not stay 6ft. apart if we wanted to. For over 7 weeks I have been cooped up in a cell the size of a bathroom, only being allowed out for showers. In 42 days, I have been allowed out of my cell a grand total of 21 hours! That amounts to a measley 30 minutes daily.

Nothing like being cooped up like a chicken to find out how strong one really is mentally. Lesser people have allowed this place to break them, no doubt; but somehow I manage to hold my sanity close. Part of the reason is likely from retaining a schedule. Every morning without fail I get up between 5:30 and 6:30, do a crossword puzzle, listen to the news on the radio and attend to my hygiene. Throughout the day I will work out, read, write and study. I strive not to take naps because it keeps me up late. My schedule seems to help me to stay grounded in reality.

Unfortunately, there's only so much of the same activities I can handle, and depression will creep in. It wouldn't be so onerous if I could only see the light at the end of the tunnel. We went several weeks before an act of Civil Disobedience brought Warden Gorsuch down and after speaking with us, opened up the phones; though calls are only 5 minutes and 1 per 24 hours. Whether Huntsville got on his butt or not I have no idea, but he has been behind the curve in every action he has taken, though he is not fully to blame.

While I cannot speak on the situation at other units or in other states, I would like to extend a heartfelt "Thank You" to all medical personnel who have stepped up to do what is necessary to keep the virus from spreading unchecked throughout the halls of the various prisons. At the same time, I would also like to say "Thank You" to every Correctional Employee who has continued going to work, never knowing what kind of situation they are about to walk into. Dealing with inmates is not easy during the best of times, much less a crisis full of so much uncertainty.

Hopefully I, and others, in prison will be able to look back to the COVID-19 quarantine and realize how much we grew as men and women. It has certainly provided an excellent opportunity to ruminate on the past and consider further the direction of life in the future.

If you happen to know anyone locked up or have someone in your immediate circle of family or friends, take the time to reach out and check on them. Your letter could be the difference between their despondency and contentment; a bad day or a good one.

We are fellow human beings too. Just because we broke the law should we be consigned to a status that is less than human? We would do well to consider this question in light of the quarantine.