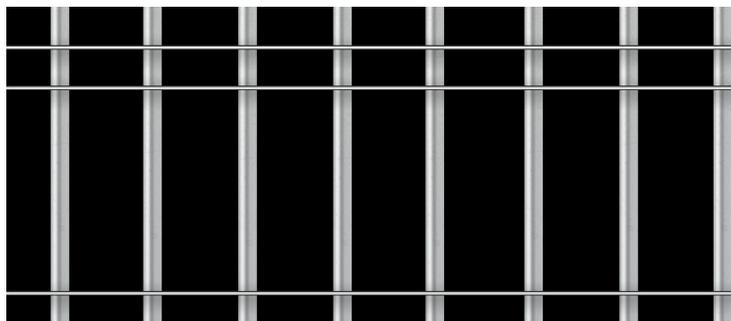


Quarantine within Quarantine

Sergio Hyland



BEFORE YOU READ: The word *quarantine* comes from the Italian *quaranta*, which means 40. It comes from an ancient Venetian policy to keep disease-carrying ships isolated for 40 days.

The coronavirus is extra frightening for me and the people I live with. I suffer from diabetes, and as a result, my immune system is weaker than the average person's. I live with many older people who also have weaker immune systems. We do not have access to good healthcare, we live in overcrowded conditions, and we have very little control over what happens to us. We are prisoners at the Chester State Correctional Institution in Chester, Pennsylvania.

Surviving the pandemic while in prison?

At some point, we were issued masks, and told to practice "social distancing." But how will that make a difference if we're still being forced to walk down crowded hallways? How will a mask help if we are forced to stand shoulder to shoulder in a line for food? Or there are 50 of us crowded in a medical department lobby built to hold 25?

Understandably, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) suspended all visits from our families and friends. This is a psychological blow to prisoners, but it makes sense to suspend visits during a pandemic. However, what about the staff? What is the PADOC doing to ensure that guards don't introduce the virus to the prison population? As prisoners, we're already isolated from the outside world! The only way we can get the virus is from staff or from prisoners being transferred in.

Will We Make It Out Alive?

For the first time in my life, I am worried that I may not make it to see the freedom that I have been working so hard to earn over the past 20 years. The stress, anxiety, and panic that people are feeling on the inside is palpable. I am a Board Certified Peer Support Specialist. I am trained to work with others who are experiencing a crisis. Since the pandemic started, I have assisted so many peers as they struggle with these new circumstances. Depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide are common among prisoners. Those mental health struggles are amplified during a crisis such as this. Grown men cry on my shoulder because they are worried, confused, and scared.

No one cries on my shoulder anymore. Now we talk from six feet apart. We were already quarantined apart from the world. Now we're quarantined within our quarantine. Prison was already inhumane. Now it is even more so. Now, due to the pandemic, we wake up daily, wondering if this will be one of our last moments on earth.

They say, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime." But there is another saying: "A Nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones." You can learn a lot about what is wrong about society by looking closely at what is happening on the inside of prison. We all should take heed.

Sergio Hyland is a frequent contributor to The Change Agent.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, what can we learn about society by looking inside prison?