

Prison Workers during Covid

Who Is Keeping Us Safe?

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ: Who do you think is keeping prisoners safe during Covid?

Prior to Covid, my prison job was as a tutor. I assisted teachers by grading papers, tutoring other prisoners, and making copies of lessons. However, during Covid, the prison canceled our classes, and I became an essential worker in the restricted housing unit. My duties were to sanitize the living area, empty the trash, clean the showers, pass out facemasks, and wipe down surfaces. I gladly accepted this responsibility, mostly because I understand that in prison, if you want it cleaned right, you have to clean it yourself.

The problem is that although the prison staff say they take Covid seriously, in practice they prioritize the appearance of cleanliness over actual

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sanitation. I often found myself with inadequate protective gear. For example, they gave me a facemask made of paper, and it only lasted a few hours.

I doubt it provided much protection. I had gloves but no face shield or hand sanitizer. I was cleaning areas—such as the showers—where quarantining prisoners had been. I entered those showers afraid of being infected but knowing that if I didn't do my job, the shower wouldn't be cleaned.

Despite being an essential worker, not once was my temperature checked. When I requested one of the N95 facemasks that the guards and general population workers wore, I was told no! How much was I getting paid to do this essential work? Nineteen cents per hour!

As time passed, the prison got more and more relaxed and took safety less seriously. I eventually



A Texas inmate cleaning inside a prison. Photo courtesy of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

quit my job as a block worker because I no longer felt safe. Also, I didn't want to help the prison give the appearance of doing a good job whenever higher-ups visited. From what I hear, many prison workers have contracted the virus I just hope none have gotten too sick or died.

Sterlin Reaves is a 44-year-old inmate in Pennsylvania. He's using his experiences to educate and be a "change agent." You can write him at SC-Sterlin Reaves-dx5999, PO Box 33028, St. Petersburg FL 33733

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What is the sequence of events that Sterlin lays out in this essay? Use phrases like, first, after that, subsequently, and finally to tell the story.
2. What two reasons does Sterlin give for quitting his job as a block worker?
3. Have you ever quit something as a form of protest? Find a partner and tell the story of what happened. Your partner should ask you questions about the situation to understand it better. After you have had a chance to tell your story and answer questions about it, write it up in an essay.