

Dortell Williams
H45771 / A5-101
P.O. Box 4430
Lancaster, CA 93539

COVID-19 AND PRISON OVERCROWDING:

ITS ALL IN THE FRAMING

by

Dortell Williams

I am tremendously grateful to, and for, all of the advocacy organizations that strive to liberate our imprisoned voices, voices that have been so vehemently smothered by tons of aggregate concrete and shackled by miles of cumulative razor wire.

In two recent interviews, one organization described the adverse conditions we endure daily during normal circumstances, circumstances that are now magnified by the COVID-19 threat. However, the issue was framed as one of prisons being understaffed, for which I respectfully counter, they are overcrowded -- and desperately so. Still, for me, the best vicarious description of our experience was the following written account:

Incarceration, for many people is a prolonged, slow-motion disruption of normal life, punctuated by periods of unpredictable violence. Certain aspects of incarceration can be analogized to be trapped in a natural disaster: you are cut off from loved ones, physical harm is a constant threat, and the future is full of unknowns. (Raher, 2020)

After thirty years of continuous confinement, I couldn't have described it better myself. My sole caveat to this otherwise extraordinary vicarious representation is simply how the issue of current prison conditions is framed. Again, I must dearticulate that prisons are by no means understaffed. In both televised interviews, the well-meaning advocates framed their description of our plight as one in which prison employees are understaffed. And that may be so, if we are trying to build up the prison industrial complex; however, with 2.3 million souls behind physical bars (many suffering from substance abuse syndrome or mental illness), and another 7 million tethered by parole or probation, for sure, the highest incarceration rate in the world, the truth is, prisons are overcrowded; really, really overcrowded.

Sources:

Amanpour & Company, PBS/KCET, March 26, 2020 (The Marshall Project)

Goodman, Amy, Democracy Now, March 2020 (The Marshall Project)

Raher, Stephen (2020). "The Company Store and the Literally Captive Market: Consumer Law in Prisons and Jails," Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal, Vol. XV II, p. 35