

missing

STORIES OF

THE PANDEMIC

FROM

INSIDE

OREGON'S PRISONS

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The Oregon Justice Resource Center would like to thank all of the incarcerated individuals and their loved ones who shared their experiences in prison during the pandemic with us, and graciously allowed us to include them in this compilation.



The Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in Portland, Oregon, in 2011. We work to promote civil rights and improve legal representation for communities that have often been underserved in the past: people living in poverty and people of color among them. Our clients are currently and formerly incarcerated Oregonians. We work in partnership with other, like-minded organizations to maximize our reach to serve underrepresented populations, train public interest lawyers, and educate our community on civil rights and civil liberties concerns. We are a public interest law firm that uses integrative advocacy to achieve our goals. This strategy includes focused direct legal services, public awareness campaigns, strategic partnerships, and coordinating our legal and advocacy areas to positively impact outcomes in favor of ending mass incarceration.

WE ARE JUST BEGINNING to grapple with understanding what the full consequences of the COVID pandemic are and the impact of the restrictions and changes put in place to try to prevent the spread of the disease. Many Oregon families have suffered loss and heartbreak from the deaths of loved ones from COVID. Some people are still trying to recover from the disease and are struggling with the effects of long COVID and the uncertainty of how long it will last. There are also the wider consequences of the pandemic: financial problems such as business failures, economic fallout, and family money worries; canceled weddings, graduation ceremonies, and other life events; depression and mental health issues; separation from loved ones and lack of social contact; disrupted routines and many more.

INTRODUCTION

COVID and the measures taken to prevent its spread have had a profound impact on people in prison in Oregon during the pandemic.

Prisons are known to be places of high-risk during outbreaks of infectious disease, and so it has proved during COVID. There have been more than 5,500 cases among incarcerated people and 46 have died. More than 1,800 cases have been recorded among ODOC staff and three have died.

The pandemic has piled new stresses on top of old for people in prison. Many of the routines and activities that incarcerated Oregonians rely on to stay mentally and physically healthy and cultivate personal growth have been disrupted. The loss of in-person, contact visits with family has caused great anguish to incarcerated people and their loved ones who have been prevented from visiting. Just as difficult for many has been the cancellation of programs, often run by outside volunteers, which are greatly valued by people in prison. These include everything from rehabilitation-focused programming, support in managing addictions, religious and spiritual ceremonies, special events, and many more.

We invited incarcerated Oregonians to share their stories of the past two years. Our theme is how they have been affected by the pandemic and the measures put in place to stop the spread. We encouraged them to focus not on the health impacts of the disease about which much has already been said, but on the other ways they have been affected. In this report, you will find extracts from their letters to us, grouped by common themes.

The main themes we identified in the letters were as follows:

- Loss of visits by family and friends
- Missing milestone events such as holidays and birthdays
- Loss of programs and education
- Loss of religious and spiritual activities
- Disruption to routine.

We are grateful to all who have contributed to this collection of stories about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people in prison in Oregon. Documenting this period of our state's history is important, not least because Oregon's leaders should be looking to learn lessons from how this crisis has been handled and how we can do better in future. Whether it be another disease outbreak or the effects of climate change, we can expect that, sooner or later, incarcerated Oregonians will have to endure another crisis in our prisons. Being ready for that day when it comes is crucial to minimizing the harm done to Oregonians in prison and their loved ones. □

LOSS OF
VISITS
WITH
FAMILY
AND
FRIENDS

*Lydell King, incarcerated at Snake
River Correctional Institution.*

“Me being able to see my family that come and see me has been my backbone and the reason why I continue to fight to be better each and every day.

The visits are stopped, there has been major craziness going on because of this, there has been more violence, no sense of structure, and there are more and more young people coming to prison.

I want to help and ask for any help that we can get to fix this. I want to help get us back on the right track.”

Noemi Vega Vasquez, wife of Gustavo Vega who is incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary.

"My name is Noemi Vega Vasquez and I'm married to Gustavo Vega, an Adult in Custody at Oregon State Penitentiary. Gustavo and I have two kids, our son who is almost thirteen and our daughter who is eight. My husband has been [in custody at] ODOC for the last seven years. The last couple of years have been extremely difficult on our family due to COVID-19 and the limitations it's imposed.

Before the pandemic, my husband was at Snake River Correctional Institution and had been there for five years before being transferred to OSP in spring of 2021. Already having to travel six hours to visit him once a month was hard and during the winter we were limited in our visits. Traveling to Eastern Oregon brings its challenges with the weather [and] unforeseen road closures due to floods or winter storms. Our last visit at SRCI was a week after my husband's 28th birthday. We had plans to see him the week of his birthday, but we had to hold off due to a flood on I-84 and the roads being closed. Our kids were very disappointed because we wouldn't be celebrating Dad's birthday on time, but we had hopes that we would see him and give him birthday hugs and kisses soon. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that February 16th, 2020, would be the last time I got to hold my husband or that our kids were able to see and hold their father for 14 months. Nor did I imagine our time on the phone would be cut short due to him being

called in at times because of an outbreak. We lived far away at the time he was at SRCI and we relied a lot on phone calls, video visits, and messaging to communicate with each other when we couldn't visit. Many of us take for granted the small things in life and for us communication was all we had. Phone time was and continues to be very sacred to our family. Our children rely on those phone calls and look forward to them as much as I do but they also require physical affection from their dad. Getting a hug and a kiss on the forehead is like Christmas for the kids! Our kids would count down the days until we could see Dad, and phone calls and video visits

were just something that would hold us over until we could spend time together in one room as a family and embrace each other. And even when we did get time together, it was never enough.

[While visiting the prison] I remember we would also build obstacle courses in the playroom out of large puzzle pieces and have competitions. We had so much fun and laughed a lot! Whenever we did have in-person visits, it gave us the opportunity to address concerns we had with our children, but it also opened the door for direct dialogue between my husband and our kids. Before the pandemic, we were fortunate enough to spend our whole weekend with dad. We'd have two session visits that lasted almost three hours long each session per day. We only got to do that about once or twice a month because of the distance and cost it took us to stay there. The long trip was always worth it because we got so much family time.

Our son is quickly growing up, almost a teenager, and the visits my husband and our son had made a huge difference. It kept their relationship strong and allowed for them to have intimate conversations about life. It gave us an opportunity to dream [about] build[ing] our lives after incarceration. As a family, we would talk a lot about how we want our life to be when Dad is home and the adventures we would take. As the pandemic went on and continues, I've seen a decline in the relationship between my husband and our son. Not to say that life itself isn't a factor and age, but the lack of consistent communication has played a huge role. My husband always makes it a priority to communicate with us but because of the pandemic his communication has been limited as well as the visiting. Our daughter is still very young, and she is more expressive than our son. I know for her, hearing the news that visits are constantly getting suspended or that daddy can't call for two more nights seems like an eternity and breaks her down emotionally. She cries out of frustration because she can't see or talk to daddy. She cries because she misses him so much and just wants her dad home.

When we were able to finally visit him in May of 2021, we weren't allowed to touch each other. We couldn't even enjoy drinking a soda together, take family photos or the kids play any games with him. Boy, was that hard! Sitting in front of the person you most love and cherish [who is] only six feet away but yet it felt like millions of miles away and you can't even embrace them. We didn't have to travel as long but we only got to visit for an hour once a week. How do you even recover lost time in an hour, one time a week? Where do you even begin to catch up? What do you spend your hour talking about? This continues to be a challenge. I don't get to enjoy time with my husband at the visits we have now because I'm so focused on giving that time to him and our kids. Every minute is precious to us. We do the best to make the most of it but I know how visits can be enjoyed prior to the pandemic and we long for that so much! We long to spend more than one hour in a room with Gustavo. I long to hold my husband's hand and sit next to him. I know my kids want more than just a brief one-on-one conversation with dad. They want constant snuggles and to play games and make memories with dad. They want what every other kid has and that is quality time with their dad. I know that we still face struggles all around because of the pandemic. As a society, we have learned to overcome certain challenges, but we have forgotten what it means to have loved ones incarcerated and for me that means that we have forgotten about those families who have to deal with incarceration. I know

nothing will ever get back to normal, but we can learn to deal with it as is and continue to live. Regardless of one's situation, incarcerated or not, we all need love and support. My husband needs our kids and his wife. He needs to embrace us just as much as we need to embrace him. We are his support system, and he is what keeps us going. We look forward to the day he comes home but, in the meantime, we need to be able to make the most of the time he has incarcerated. Having in person visits, being able to hug and hold each other, special programs, and consistent phone time makes the difference during this waiting period. It helps keep our family strong and standing."

It is
Very depressing
not being able
to see your kids

Kyle Hedquist, formerly incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

"I regularly visited with my family from Roseburg, Oregon, including my 90-year-old grandmother who I have only seen twice in two years and was not allowed to touch, hug, or even shake hands with. I had to sit over six feet apart and she could barely hear what I was saying due to the obstruction of the mask and her bad hearing. I literally haven't physically embraced another person for two years! I even heard of men hugging anyway despite the written and verbal warnings and just accepting the consequences. Personally, I have relied on the phone system to keep in touch with loved ones and family members, spending about \$80/month."

Joshua Roberts, incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

"[Loss of] visiting had a huge impact on me and my kids... They didn't understand what was going on and were thinking I just didn't want to see them and it is very depressing not being able to see your kids, [going] from seeing them weekly to not seeing them at all. And it put a strain in my relationship with my girl. It made it difficult to communicate, not having those few hours of direct contact with them made my time harder as well as them having to deal with everything I'm going through also. These two years have been rough and depressing for me and my loved ones even though our bond is strong it has had its ups and downs due to all the covid restrictions."

Wendell Tate, incarcerated at Two Rivers Correctional Institution

"My brief COVID story and its impact on myself and family is most centered on my relationship with my daughter. Prior to the eruption of the pandemic and cutting out visits, my daughter and I had just reconciled our differences and she came to visit me in February 2020. We cried together, made amends and she promised to keep coming. I was moved from OSP to TRCI in May of 2020. Because of the added distance and the fact that she herself does not drive, these factors along with the COVID protocols set a stage for us to disconnect again. We spoke on the phone, which is an expensive cost but that and a lack of face-to-face, eye-to-eye contact caused us to drift again."

Rob Walker, incarcerated at Santiam Correctional Institution

"The biggest impact of all was missing my momma. She's technology impaired so video visits weren't an option. Daily phone calls had to suffice for over a year at no small expense. When I finally got to see her, it was at a distance with no hugs allowed. I couldn't believe how old she got. Something inside me has been broken or maybe just warped with nothing soft in my life. She's suffered too. Sometimes in the past, she wouldn't have time for a full visit, but would come all the way through the security process just to get a hug. Last week, after two years I got [a] contact visit and got to briefly hug her. Made us cry."

Chris, incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

"On March 13, 2020, ODOC suspended all outside guests and visitors. My brother had just visited three days before for my birthday, and he would visit me at least once a month up to that time when visiting closed down. As he lives only 20 miles away, in Albany, he did not want to visit in mid-2021, when visiting reopened, on a limited and restricted basis. Making a reservation time, sitting six feet apart and conversing through masks for only a one-hour time slot, was more of an inconvenience with his medical condition of his hip. We could just as easily talk on the phone.

On the subject of the phone, Oregon DOC changed the carrier of our service which in my opinion, and those I've talked to, made the link to family and friends complicated and difficult. In my own experiences, those who had a newer phone system, suddenly could not get my calls, as they were being placed as a 'spam' call, and the filter on the phone would not ring through. I wrote to those who I could not call, and only a couple could adjust the filter. Also, the tablet system we have to send and receive emails was also replaced along with the phone system. Information could not be transferred between the systems, so all email contacts had to be re-invited. Once again, the new system is seen as 'spam' to the systems receiving, so once again contact was, and is still lost."

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LOSS OF HOLIDAYS AND FAMILY OCCASIONS

Noemi Vega Vasquez, wife of Gustavo Vega who is incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary.

“What are some special moments you look forward to spending together as a family? How about birthdays, summer BBQs, Christmas, Thanksgiving, or even a wedding anniversary? What about a soccer game or family game night or carving a pumpkin? These are all special moments as parents that we never want to miss and having an incarcerated parent makes it all that much harder to enjoy a little happiness in life. At visits, we would enjoy playing board games together, talking face to face, and enjoying snacks together. We never got to make dinner together or anything like that but there were special visits that we looked forward to.

Unfortunately, because of the pandemic we weren't able to enjoy special visits that we thought we would when my husband got transferred to OSP. Gustavo is part of the Family First program at OSP. Prior to COVID, the dads in this program would be able to enjoy special visits with their

kids. This included going outside and spending all day with their kids. They could enjoy face painting and games and activities. During the holidays, the dads and their kids could celebrate each holiday together and for us that would have meant a great deal. Can you imagine not spending a Christmas or birthday with your kid? It's unbearable to think that. And for those dads who are incarcerated, like my husband, it's truly heart breaking. Our kids have a really hard time spending these moments away from their dad but ever since COVID and not being able to fully embrace him, it's been harder, and these special moments have become

sad days. We still get to get together with our relatives, as I'm sure many others continue to do during the pandemic, but the reality is, those who are incarcerated have been forgotten. The kids of those who are incarcerated have also been forgotten. I strongly believe our kids suffer the most and they are at no fault.

Prior to the pandemic and while at SRCI, the kids got to pick out pumpkins with Dad outside of the visiting area and then paint their pumpkins. This was something special we looked forward to as a family during the fall. It was like going to the pumpkin patch and being able to "carve" their pumpkins with Dad. Before the pandemic, the kids got to decorate Christmas stockings with Dad and take a photo in front of a Christmas tree. It was like posing for a Christmas family card and the only time we could truly come close to experiencing Christmas together. There wasn't a lot of programs available at SRCI but during the holidays, the staff there did their best to allow us to enjoy these moments and make memories."

LOSS OF PROGRAMS AND EDUCATION

Nicholas Simms, incarcerated at Two Rivers Correctional Institution

“My name is Nicholas Simms and [I] am writing on behalf of AICs [adults in custody] currently living at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, OR. All programs, events, education, religious activities, clubs, visiting, etc. have been shut down for the majority of the last two years. We’re just now starting to see these things come back but are still far from [how things were in] the past. I’m someone who has been heavily reliant on programs and educational classes offered within the institution for my own peace of mind, purpose, and positive growth... All of our extracurricular programs and activities are facilitated by outside volunteers. They serve as a connection to the real world and offer human interaction that many of us lack throughout our sentence. Those interactions are paramount in our journey to rehabilitation.

This topic hits close to home because I serve as the vice president of the only club currently meeting at TRCI, The Paradigm Shift Club. This club is tasked with implementing pro-social and rehabilitative programs, events, and fundraisers that cultivate an inclusive culture.

Programs and activities are inclusive and bring individuals together. That being said, we yearn to participate in all programs and activities with our entire population. Our mental health relies on these things to sustain positive thinking and hope. Most of us incarcerated aren’t self-learners or truly have the capacity and/or resources to pursue endeavors alone. The key word [is] alone. Living in a communal setting, we’re conditioned to feed off each other for inspiration in group settings.

Something our club has been proposing for months are events with outside volunteers entering the prison. We’ve been unsuccessful in our attempts due to COVID restrictions. Our club has since pivoted and [is] now proposing activities and events which club members can facilitate on our own. Sadly, we are preparing all proposals to serve our population with COVID restrictions in place. In a facility operating isolated units, it’s so important that we start incorporating programs and events with the resources at our disposal, [namely] other AICs.

Others and I are actively and creatively attempting to implement new programs, events and fundraisers for an AIC population that is starved for anything positive, constructive, and pro-social. I hear from individuals daily who are stagnant and lost, seeking a new direction to take.

I have hope and faith that COVID restrictions are behind us and we can return to a much healthier and fruitful life.”

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Lydell King, incarcerated at Snake River Correctional Institution.

“I have been incarcerated for the last 28 years and the programs and the education class have been a big part in my transformation. Learning and staying busy gave me hope, a sense of purpose. Then COVID hit, slowly the programs and the education were stopped. These programs were put in place so older guys like me could have them come to these programs so we could talk to them, let them know that just because they made a mistake by coming to prison [it] should not stop their growth. This is hurting them and myself because I no longer have that platform to share my story with them, get the good joy of seeing the difference [of] telling my story to them and how they want to change and be better, show them that someone cares. This covid has taken all of that and because of this, the prison system has got very bad.”

**Noemi Vega Vasquez, wife
of Gustavo Vega who is
incarcerated at the Oregon
State Penitentiary.**

“Gustavo and I were looking forward to the couples’ program at OSP which is through the prison’s chaplain. This would be a great class for us to take part in because not only could we hear from other incarcerated couples but we could work out our problems face to face. It’s devastating for me as a mother and wife when I can’t hold my husband when something has gone terribly wrong or when there are financial challenges that I can’t run to him for support. I have to wait for a phone call. Now when we do get to see him, I still can’t hug him. I can’t get reassurance that everything is going to be okay. Same goes for our kids. If they are going through a rough time, they just can’t run to their dad for love and support. They have to wait to see him or talk to him on the phone and that time is very limited because of COVID.”

Kyle Hedquist, formerly incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

Club activities:

- Lifers Unlimited Club - Monthly 150 AIC
- Athletic Club - Monthly 150 AIC
- Toastmasters Club - Monthly 65 AIC
- 7th Step Foundation - Monthly 150 AIC

Toastmasters had small group meetings but eventually COVID protocols prevented all speech/communication programming altogether. However, 7th Step was able to maintain its in-house television programming including Domestic Violence Prevention, Anger Management, and Great Courses programming. Sadly, after two years of no programming, the ODOC and Oregon Board of Parole denied the validity of these programs despite providing all materials to the institutional counselors and Parole Board. Both ODOC and the OR Board of Parole accept no programming other than ODOC mandated, i.e., Pathfinders, and Parenting, despite offering none for over two years!

Treatment programs:

On the bright side, I have witnessed many mental health counselors meeting with their Behavioral Health Unit caseload. They seem to not be affected by COVID protocols, even conducting meditation classes in the Healing Garden led by staff. I also witnessed firsthand the care offered to the residents of ICH (mental health treatment): small group interactions and trips to the recreation yard during count times. As well as one-on-one counseling sessions for the participants [in the] DTU program also seemingly not obstructed by COVID protocols.

Education

I was also involved in multiple inside-out classes through the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, and Willamette University. A bright spot has been the continuation of education through correspondence through the University of Oregon utilizing both mail and institution television to include many AICs in higher education. I know that the GED program has also been able to continue unphased by COVID protocols.

Strangely, there was a printed announcement at some point saying that ODOC contractors and volunteers could not enter the prison, but we saw many contractors working inside the prison for two years: D-Block renovations, asbestos removal, roof repairs on C-Block and steam pipe repairs as well as teachers and mental health counselors coming and going. Many of these outside folks were ultimately responsible for COVID infections as they continued to test positive, impacting the people they were providing services to.

I could rant for pages but at the end of the day the AIC are without programming, without direction from ODOC and lacking actual family intervention and care. I can't imagine the impact this has had on fathers."

Wendell Tate, incarcerated at Two Rivers Correctional Institution

“There are not the same levels of activities, clubs, and programs here [at TRCI] as there were [when I was] at OSP so I cannot honestly speak to the effects COVID had on their absences. I used to attend three or four programs a week at OSP prior to my move and COVID. The outside support of volunteers and their presence and desire to see me as more than a prisoner really helped my psyche cope. I do miss that connection and semi escape from the overall general thought process this place can breed. Tensions, fear, and doubts were higher during the peaks of this pandemic and I do believe the lack of programs did not help as more and more time was spent on the unit or in the cell. Not having access to exercise for weeks also caused some depression as those endorphins once released on a regular basis were not being connected.”

WE WERE NOT
LEAVING EVERY DAY,
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TO THE FACILITY,

Chris, incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

“Once ODOC shut down all outside visitors and guests, all programs came to a halt, as the fear of COVID-19 started to overwhelm those in charge. We, the inmates (or adults in custody – A.I.C.) were not leaving every day, not bringing in the virus to the facility, yet we were being ‘locked down’ and quarantined when an outbreak occurred. I am now in my 16th year, serving a 25-life sentence, so my need for programs is essential as I am trying to plan ahead for my eventual parole hearing.

A couple of the clubs in the activities section have put together some ‘in-cell’ programs for us to do on our own, most are accompanied by a video series we can view on our own TV, for those like myself, [who] are fortunate to afford their own television. I have done several of these ‘in-cell’ programs the last two years, and while I am possession of certificates of completions for the programs, I’ve yet to see them noted on my inmate programs record.

Overall, being incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, felt as if we were being punished, with the lockdowns, quarantines, and lack of program availability.”

LOSS OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES

Kyle Hedquist, formerly incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

"Prior to COVID-19 protocols I was heavily involved in many weekly services including:

- Calvary Chapel Bible study, Milwaukie, 145 AIC
- Lutheran Chapel Service, Salem, 50 AIC
- University Fellowship, Eugene, 65 AIC

We also had our monthly hospice meetings cancelled.

Many of these programs handed out fliers and Bible studies through the institution mail system as well as some videos on the institution television system. The lack of communication with outside volunteers had been very detrimental for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the AICs, many of these regular volunteers met with AICs weekly for prayer and life-enriching words of encouragement."

Joshua Roberts, incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary

"[Loss of] our religious activities which are a big part of our ways as Native Americans has put a burden on us all not being able to practice our religion and beliefs and participate in sweat lodge ceremonies or have access to our prayer ties and pipe ceremonies/ prayer sticks. [This] has affected me personally because these practices are good for my mental stability as well as spiritual stability which is a huge part of my sobriety. Mental toughness was taken from me. We went from weekly ceremonies and religious practices to one every other month. We were allowed to smudge, but not being able to sweat and release all that negative energy pent up inside definitely has had an impact on me and my family. I'm more irritable and it has caused friction between me and my family. It has definitely caused communication issues and I've noticed me and my loved ones don't communicate like we used to."

LOSS OF ROUTINE

Rob Walker, incarcerated at Santiam Correctional Institution

“As many could tell you, for the most part, in prison, we are left to fill our day as we see fit, we call it our ‘program.’ My day was filled from breakfast until 9 pm with very little idle time. I was in the chapel three times per week and visiting momma twice, with work always a priority as something I poured my pride into. It was generally known that if you stayed out of trouble, the staff would stay out of your program, and then COVID hit. Overnight, it all came crashing down. My day included three meals and a limited work schedule. Without my favorite pastors coming in and my weekly mentorship meetings, my attitude state slipping. Morale was low everywhere and fights became commonplace. Things like meal time became a minefield of bad tempers and short fuses as we packed in the chow hall...

... things are slowly opening back up. I get to see my pastor weekly now and I’m about to pour myself in a job again, which is kind of our identity in here.”