In New York prisons, inmates say they're punished for trying to protect themselves from coronavirus

- The New York state prison system's response to the coronavirus outbreak has been chaotic and punitive, an Insider investigation has found.
- Inmates, lawyers, and advocacy groups say the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision is systematically undercounting COVID-19 cases in its facilities.
- Prisoners say they're punished for seeking medical care or trying to avoid exposure to the disease, and some who are sick try to hide their symptoms because quarantined inmates are denied amenities such as TV and books.
- In one prison, inmates say, corrections officers hoarded hand sanitizer that was supposed to be distributed to inmates.
- The crisis overwhelmed prison medical systems, inmates said, leading some facilities to limit access to care.
- A DOCCS spokesman defended the department's response to the unprecedented health crisis, saying it continues "to effectively limit and slow the progression of this virus within New York State correctional facilities."
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Niiamarte Cintron didn't want to die.

The 49-year-old was an inmate at the Great Meadow Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison that houses about 1,700 men in upstate New York near the Vermont border.

Cintron was no stranger to the criminal-justice system. Since the 1990s, he'd been arrested on multiple occasions in New York and Georgia and charged with possession of drugs and weapons.
In the summer of 2016, he shot a man whose daughter had fraudulently used his mother's credit card, DNAinfo reported at the time. He was convicted of assault, attempted murder, and criminal possession of a weapon, and received a maximum sentence of 25 years in prison, according to Department of Corrections records.

He arrived at Great Meadow at the end of last year.

Twenty-five years is a long time, but it's not a death sentence. And there was more to Cintron than his run-ins with the law. His brother, Kamarte Cintron, described him as intelligent and generous and loved by everyone around him.

"He was kind of quiet — he didn't talk a lot," Cory Ford, an inmate at Great Meadow, told Insider. "I was one of a few people he kicked it with. He was a good dude, and that's why I feel so bad about the situation."

Ford said the two of them worked together in the soap shop, where they spent hours loading boxes full of NYS Cares hand sanitizer into trucks that whisked them away to help combat coronavirus in the state.

"He was laid-back ... and mostly stayed to himself," Paul Clute, another inmate at Great Meadow who worked with Cintron bottling hand sanitizer, said. "When he got sick, I seen a big difference in him. His posture was real sluggish, as if he was struggling to stay alert."

In the days before his death, in early April, Cintron desperately sought help, his family and four inmates currently incarcerated at Great Meadow said. He told his mother on the phone that he was constantly urinating and that food didn't taste right. He felt unusually tired.

Because she has diabetes — and her son had gained weight in prison — his mother thought his ailments could be attributed to issues with his blood sugar.

But many of those who were with him said he had COVID-19.

"I swear to god he was good," Ford said. "Nothing was wrong with him until he got sick."

Clute said in a message that Cintron had complained of fever, body aches, and vomiting. He told officers he wasn't feeling well and submitted several sick-call requests — a procedure where an inmate fills out a form requesting medical care, which is then relayed to a doctor for review — desperately seeking help.

When he was seen by the nursing staff, they told him to just stay in his cell and rest, Clute said.

Ford told Insider that from his cell location in the prison's E block, he saw Cintron walk to sick call every day for about a week before his death. The two men attempted to briefly exchange words each time Cintron passed his cell.


Every time Cintron went to sick call, Ford said, they gave him ibuprofen and sent him back to his cell.

"At the time when everyone was getting sick Mr. Cintron got caught up in the same wave as everyone else did with the nursing staff, and after he was finally seen he was told the same thing as everybody
else, just stay in your cell and rest. By the time he was seen again, it was too late," Clute said. "He looked like he was going to die, and unfortunately he did.

"Mr. Cintron did everything in his power to get medical attention for his complications, but the medical staff failed him."

**A failure to meet basic standards for an inmate's safety**

On the morning of April 4, Cintron was found dead in his cell.

Because he was never tested for COVID-19, it's impossible to know precisely what role the coronavirus played in his death, if any. He is not among the 16 inmates in the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision's official tally of COVID deaths.

The DOCCS referred questions about Cintron's cause of death to the county medical examiner, who did not respond to inquiries.

"I believe that morning when the officers took him out of his cell they knew he died from coronavirus because the company officer knew he was sick," Clute told Insider.

Another fellow Great Meadow inmate, Earvin Dawson, disagreed, writing in a letter to Insider that he believed Cintron died of "a medical issue with his kidney or liver that was not taken care of by the medical staff."

His mother said that, as of mid-July, the death certificate for her son still said the cause of death was undetermined, but added that she had been told that he died of a heart attack brought on by undiagnosed diabetes.

The American Journal of Emergency Medicine has found that diabetes increases the risk of complications for COVID-19 patients, including heart attack.

Whatever the cause of Cintron's death, there's no question it happened amid a medical crisis within New York's state prison system brought on by COVID-19, and the inmates who knew Cintron said the state's chaotic response to the pandemic made it harder for him to receive the medical attention he needed.

An Insider investigation involving conversations and correspondence with more than two dozen inmates, lawyers, and advocates at eight facilities has found that the New York's prisons have systematically failed to meet basic standards for ensuring inmates' safety during this pandemic.

Inmates and advocates said prison officials have rationed medical care, limited access to tests, punished inmates for reporting coronavirus symptoms, ignored calls for help, denied access to personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, under-reported case counts, permitted guards to hoard sanitizer supplies intended for inmates, and failed to enforce the use of masks and social distancing.

Coronavirus case numbers reported by New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, or DOCCS, routinely undercount the number of inmates exhibiting symptoms, advocates and inmates said.
The department has published near daily reports showing the volume of coronavirus cases and tests performed at each facility since April, but lawyers from two nonprofit legal organizations told Insider that the numbers published include inmates who are transferred, which causes case counts to rise and fall frequently by prison.

The fluctuating figures reported by the DOCCS are difficult to evaluate, the lawyers said, and likely have the effect of obfuscating outbreaks.

"I have been incarcerated now for 28 years," Clute said, "and I have never witnessed such an event as COVID-19 and the gross negligence that has occurred in the penitentiary from the lack of training and/or concern for the well-being of the incarcerated inmates at this facility."

Jose Saldana, the director of Release Aging People in Prison, told Insider that he suspects the number of incarcerated people with coronavirus could be 15 to 20% higher than what's being reported by the DOCCS.

"There's no ventilation, there's no air being circulated in these prisons — I mean, I just find it impossible that thousands of people across the New York state prison system have not been infected," he said.

"The whole system just seems like it's designed to continue the spread of this virus."

In a statement, DOCCS spokesperson Thomas Mailey denied that the agency is undercounting cases and defended its response to the unprecedented pandemic. "From the outset of this global health crisis, DOCCS has taken swift action, guided by facts and the recommendations of the New York State Department of Health and the CDC, to stop the spread of COVID-19 among staff and incarcerated individuals. In heeding the evolving guidance of public health experts, DOCCS staff and incarcerated individuals continue to effectively limit and slow the progression of this virus within New York State correctional facilities," Mailey wrote. "Claims of inadequate medical care, and widespread lack of mask wearing, social distancing, hand washing and access to hand sanitizer are untrue and decisively disproven by the data, most notably that the number of COVID-related deaths within DOCCS is dwarfed by that of several other states' correctional institutions, despite the fact that New York was once the epicenter of coronavirus cases."

'You've got to be damn near dying for them to do anything'

Inmates told Insider that after Cintron died, correctional officers spread rumors that he died from drinking hand sanitizer. But the inmates said that's false. They said it is not possible to bring hand sanitizer from the soap shop to the block, because inmates are required to go through a detector while going in and out, Ford said.

The bottles, he said, were too large to feasibly conceal.

Dawson agreed, telling Insider "it was impossible for inmates to steal that stuff."

"No inmate is allowed to have hand sanitizer in his cell, it is contraband!" Shakim Allah, a 60-year-old inmate at Great Meadow, wrote in a message. "This inmate was left in his cell for a week complaining of symptoms of coronavirus and received no medical attention."
Clute added: "I believe the officers started the rumors of drinking hand sanitizer to, first, stop the spread of panic, and, two, to keep us from contacting his family or ours to let them know what happened to him. I think it was to try and throw us off of their negligence and to make us have no sympathy for him."

Clute also said that after Cintron’s death, his cell block experienced an outbreak, with inmates falling sick and testing positive for COVID-19. He said that there were 43 men in his company and that most of them, including himself, believed they contracted the virus.

At least 10 people were moved to quarantine after testing positive, and many were hospitalized for coronavirus. Despite multiple people submitting sick calls, he said, many went unanswered.

Allah said that after Cintron’s death, prison officials immediately began isolating inmates who had lived near his cell. He told Insider that "almost everyone" on his tier described having symptoms of the coronavirus, including him.

As of July 23, according to the DOCCS, 43 inmates had tested positive at Great Meadow since March. Five Great Meadow inmates, including Cintron, have died so far in 2020. A DOCCS spokesman said none of them were attributable to COVID-19.

But Ford said that is not true. "Absolutely people have died in here from it," he said.

Ford said that men near Cintron’s cell were quarantined, and a week or two after his death, men became sick.

"You've got to be damn near dying for them to do anything," Ford added. "As far as, like, getting medication and going to the hospital, the only way you was doing that is if you were on your deathbed."

A DOCCS spokesperson told Insider that all deaths of incarcerated individuals "other than natural causes or from a known medical condition [are] thoroughly investigated by New York State Police and DOCCS' Office of Special Investigations. All deaths in DOCCS' facilities are reviewed by the State Commission of Correction."

The department did not respond to questions about whether they had any information suggesting Cintron drank hand sanitizer, or whether correctional officers were spreading rumors that he had before his death.

**Advocates and inmates say New York is hiding the true extent of the coronavirus outbreak in state prisons**

Insider spoke with, messaged, and reviewed correspondence and other materials from incarcerated people at Clinton, Collins, Sing Sing, Fishkill, Sullivan, Green Haven, Wallkill, and Bedford Hills, in addition to Great Meadow.

Each facility had at least one confirmed case of the coronavirus — some had dozens. Each inmate told Insider they believed that the true size of their facility's outbreak was much larger than the state has acknowledged.
"I would honestly say two-thirds of the population has experienced symptoms," Bruce Bryant, age 50, who is incarcerated at Sing Sing, said. "I do believe if they were to test all of us, it would be overwhelmingly positive for antibodies."

The DOCCS reported that 11% of inmates who were tested for coronavirus returned positive results, with 601 confirmed cases as of July 23. But before a surge in testing directed at older inmates started in early July, the number was more than three times that — 37%.

"I'd say 80 to 90% of the population has been exposed to the virus," Claude Johnson, 60, who's incarcerated at Fishkill, said. He said several men in his unit have experienced coronavirus symptoms, including him.

The Legal Aid Society reached a similar conclusion.

In an April petition for habeas corpus, the nonprofit legal-services provider wrote that the DOCCS numbers "likely drastically underestimate the number of incarcerated individuals who have contracted the virus. According to its protocol, DOCCS tests only those incarcerated individuals who are symptomatic and have received a medical evaluation."

"Our physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants, working with our nurses, are following the testing guidance of the CDC and NYS DOH," the DOCCS spokesperson said. "Utilizing a petition filed by the Legal Aid Society which was based on anecdotal, unverified information which was dismissed by the court is irresponsible and insulting to the people we protect."

Despite the potential for transmission, inmates from seven out of eight facilities told Insider that social distancing was nonexistent, arbitrarily executed, or impossible to carry out.

Several inmates described limitations on the number of people allowed to sit at each table in their mess halls, but no measures taken in the closely packed lines to enter those halls.

Others said no social distancing guidelines were being enforced at all.

"When I have to take a shower, there are 60 to 75 inmates in the shower at the same time," Corvall Hampton, 30, who is incarcerated at the Clinton Correctional Facility, said.

"If I'm taking a shower next to another individual at the next showerhead, he's approximately half a foot away from me. If I'm going to recreation, there are about 300 inmates outside."

Mess halls, yards and workout pens, showers, and lines to use phones were most frequently cited as areas where attempting to social distance was futile.

A lack of personal protective equipment and basic sanitation has made already vulnerable prison environments even riskier.

Inmates at a number of facilities described a single hand-sanitizer dispenser being shared by hundreds of people; cells reassigned without being cleaned even after housing inmates infected with the coronavirus; high-traffic areas being sanitized only at the end of the day; and receiving one bar of soap a week in lieu of sanitizer.

"The major problem with the phones is that after I use it, it is not being sanitized before the next person," Stanley Bellamy, a 57-year-old inmate at the Green Haven Correctional Facility, said. "I personally cover the phone with a cloth before letting it touch my ear or face."
Hampton, who said he uses bar soap and cold water from his sink to clean his cell, told Insider that his facility would not allow him to take his own soap and towel out to wipe the phones off.

The DOCCS spokesman said "showers are cleaned after each use and before the next person can use it. The telephones and kiosks for tablets are also cleaned after each use by an individual, and the mess halls are cleaned three times a day."

**Corrections officers at Fishkill hoarded hand sanitizer for themselves, 2 inmates say**

Two incarcerated men at Fishkill — Johnson and Christopher Gaudiello, who is 30 — said that at the start of the pandemic, correctional officers would not allow inmates to use the hand sanitizer provided to them. Instead, the officers took it all for themselves.

After inmates complained and a memo went out saying hand sanitizer was for both inmates and officers, the officers began pouring it in their personal bottles until there was none left for the men, Gaudiello told Insider.

"It was a sad case of selfishness and showed how DOCCS staff views us as a paycheck and our life doesn't matter," he said.

Despite a fact sheet on the DOCCS website saying the at all residents have been supplied with surgical masks, six inmates at four facilities told Insider they did not receive a mask until May, two months after COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization and two months after New York attorneys and advocates had begun hearing about coronavirus cases in the state’s prisons.

Gaudiello said that when his housing unit was placed in quarantine in early April — after inmates who lived there tested positive for the coronavirus — each person received a single surgical mask they were expected to wear for more than a week.

At that point, he said, the masks were falling apart and caused irritation as men breathed in the masks' fibers. The FDA has said that surgical masks are not intended to be used more than once.

Johnson, of Fishkill, told Insider that it wasn't until the first week of May that the facility began distributing masks to the entire population. Gaudiello described them as "wool-like surgical masks" consisting of "a piece of a heavy blanket fashioned into a mask."

Jennifer Scaife, the executive director of the Correctional Association of New York, an independent oversight group that monitors New York’s prison system, visited Fishkill on July 8 and 9.

She said the men told her that around the time her organization was scheduled to visit the facility, every inmate was issued two new surgical masks. Before that, they hadn't received fresh masks for about two months.

Scaife said that while some Fishkill residents told her that the facility did the best it could, she heard stories of absent medical staff and positive coronavirus cases that were never treated.

She told Insider that one inmate reported being quarantined in a cell with a bucket for a toilet and no shower for nine days.
"And lots of people said, 'Oh, I definitely had ... the tell-tale symptoms, and I was really sick, but I never got tested,'" she said. "One person had it, he was tested, but he never saw a doctor."

At several facilities, inmates said guards received PPE and supplies weeks before the inmates.

"The officers had masks one month before us," Simon Dedaj, who is 56 years old and incarcerated at the Sullivan Correctional Center, said. Dedaj said he received his first reusable mask on May 13.

But many inmates accused guards of failing to wear masks.

"Staff is mandated to wear masks at all times, but half of staff members don't wear their masks at all," Gaudiello said.

In a letter to the Correctional Association of New York shared with Insider, one Bedford Hills inmate, whom Insider has agreed to keep anonymous, wrote that "the officers refuse to wear masks and some even refuse to wear gloves, claiming that they're either immune to the virus or if they get it, they just get it."

The inmate wrote that one correctional officer knew how afraid she was of the virus and conspicuously coughed on her whenever they passed each other.

As months passed, prison staff did not become more receptive to using PPE, Insider found. In an internal report shared by the Center for Appellate Litigation, two attorneys said correctional officers at their clients' facilities were still not wearing masks as of July 9.

Scaife also confirmed that during her July visit to Fishkill, staffers were not wearing masks.

"We saw plenty of staff who weren't wearing masks, or who had a mask kind of under their chin and as soon as we came around with our escorts ... they quickly pulled their masks up over their nose," she told Insider.

Witnessing guards' cavalier approach to PPE has led inmates to speculate that correctional officers were responsible for bringing the coronavirus into the state's prisons.

Johnson, of Fishkill, told Insider that an officer at his facility, Esther Sheafe, came to work sick with the virus. He said he believed she infected men in his unit, and they became ill.

In a March Facebook post, Sheafe posted a picture of a Princess cruise ship she traveled on, the same cruise line that experienced a coronavirus outbreak in which hundreds were infected.

In Sheafe's post, one person commented, "Oh that's the ship you got sick on!!!"

She replied, "Regal Princess, But I really think it was the airplane coming back to New York."

Sheafe did not respond to requests for comment.

The DOCCS spokesman dismissed Scaife's claims: "The false rank speculation cherry-picked by CANY is simply false and serves only to promote the organization's attempt to garner attention and relevance." He added that the department conducts "weekly inspections to ensure compliance with the myriad of policies put in place to protect staff and inmates during the health crisis. Their inspection reports have shown general compliance of the mask policy by staff."
Asked about claims that Sheafe came to work even though she was sick, the spokesperson said, "All DOCCS staff must respond to a series of screening questions and be temperature checked each time they enter a facility or Department offices. All staff are mandated to wear a mask while on duty. Those who are exhibiting symptoms or are feeling ill are advised to remain at home."

**An inmate seeking a test after being exposed was asked 'Who is going to pay for it?'**

For inmates who come down with coronavirus symptoms, tests have been near impossible to receive.

Inmates at the Fishkill Correctional Facility and Sing Sing Correctional Facility — home to two of the largest reported outbreaks in New York state prisons — said that having a high fever alone was not enough to warrant a test for the disease.

Despite a growing body of scientific evidence that many carriers of the disease are asymptomatic, virtually every symptom of the virus was needed to receive a test, they said.

Across 52 facilities that house 43,000 incarcerated people, the DOCCS had tested just over 1,400 inmates — 3% percent of New York's total state prison population — for the novel coronavirus by the end of June, the department's COVID-19 reports say. Nearly 40% of those tests came back positive.

On its website, the department wrote that tests were administered only to incarcerated individuals exhibiting symptoms, and after a medical evaluation is conducted.

It is unclear how many staff members have been tested so far, but the DOCCS said that as of July 10, 1,300 prison staff have tested positive.

When Bellamy, of Green Haven, requested a test after interacting with two inmates who had tested positive for the virus — one of whom died — he said he was denied.

"Who's going to pay for it?" Bellamy said the nurse asked him.

Brittany Francis, a lawyer at the Center for Appellate Litigation, a nonprofit law firm that represents clients in New York state prisons, told Insider that the limited number of tests permits the DOCCS to avoid responsibility for a crisis that's escalated beyond its control.

"If you truly know the full scope of COVID in these facilities, it becomes very obvious that there is no way to keep people safe," Francis said. "There's no way to distance them enough or provide enough supplies to keep prisons from turning into clusters."

In the first week of July, the DOCCS appeared to ramp up its coronavirus testing, more than doubling the number of total tests administered, to 6% of the population.

Part of the effort was due to the conversion of the Adirondack Correctional Facility — a remote prison previously designated for adolescent offenders — into a penitentiary for inmates age 55 and older, and the subsequent transfer and testing of nearly 100 older inmates to the new facility.

On July 10, a day after the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed at the prison, the Adirondack Daily Enterprise reported that a second coronavirus case had been found, which caused observers to worry
that the situation could develop into a health crisis comparable to the outbreaks that ravaged nursing homes across the state months earlier.

"It is even more concerning then that it is already in this facility, and it could really develop into a nightmare scenario very quickly," one lawyer told Insider.

In mid-July, inmates at Fishkill, Sing Sing, and Green Haven said their facilities were testing people age 50 or 55 and older. Bellamy said in a message that "several people, even now, are still testing positive for the virus."

"They started testing guys over 50 about a week and a half ago," Bryant added. "I hear one or two are now in quarantine due to their test results."

**Inmates and advocates say several prisons suspended 'sick call,' preventing inmates from getting fast access to medical care**

Without rigorous testing in place, New York's prison medical system appears to have been overwhelmed by the virus.

**In a sworn declaration** filed in the Supreme Court of the State of New York County of Oneida — on behalf of medically vulnerable inmates susceptible to serious complications or death if they contracted COVID-19, and who requested release from custody — the DOCCS deputy counsel Charles Quackenbush said its existing comprehensive pandemic-flu protocol has been modified for COVID-19 and "each facility maintains an emergency control plan that is reviewed annually and is uniquely designed to meet the facility's needs, including preparedness measures, response mechanisms and short- and long-term recovery provisions."

The department's health services policy manual — obtained by Insider through a Freedom of Information Law request — says inmates "will have access to medical care seven days per week" and access to scheduled sick call at least four days a week.

But five inmates, advocates, and lawyers told Insider that sick call had been suspended at the outset of the pandemic in at least two facilities, Fishkill and Sing Sing. At facilities where sick call wasn't formally suspended, inmates told Insider that requests went ignored except in severe cases of illness or repeated requests.

The moratorium has meant that inmates with preexisting medical conditions, including mental-health conditions, have faced barriers to receiving care.

"We don't see any indication that the department has prioritized people with medical vulnerabilities or provided them with any additional attention, despite the fact that this pathogen preys on people with those vulnerabilities," Stefen Short, a lawyer at the Legal Aid Society, said.

Instead, four inmates at four different facilities described a common remedy prescribed by medical staff: being given an ibuprofen or an aspirin and sent back to their cells. It's the same treatment Cintron received before he died.
"The suspension of sick call not only prevented people from getting medical attention for other health related issues, but it also stopped people from reporting symptoms some of which may have very well been COVID-related," Stephen Brathwaite, a 49-year-old inmate at Sing Sing, said.

"A lot of times an inmate has to drop two or three [sick call] slips before he is called to medical sick call," Allah, of Great Meadow, said, adding that correctional officers and medical staff threatened prisoners who repeatedly asked for emergency medical help with misbehavior reports.

The DOCCS spokesperson flatly denied that sick call was suspended: "This is untrue. Sick call was never suspended at any DOCCS facility."

'They are treated like they are being punished for contracting the virus'

According to at least five inmates and attorneys, prison staff took disciplinary actions against people who attempted to protect themselves from the virus, including the use of handkerchiefs, bandanas, and other ad hoc materials as PPE.

"If you make your own mask, they call it an altered material," Hampton, of the Clinton Correctional Facility, told Insider.

"If you alter your appearance, they're writing you disciplinary tickets, or they're drawing you up into segregation," Hampton said, referring to the prison's "keeplock" program.

Disciplinary tickets mean losing access to the commissary, phone calls, showers, and other privileges for an extended period. Keeplock, a form of isolation considered less severe than solitary confinement, keeps inmates on lockdown for 23 hours a day.

In some cases, Insider learned, inmates received disciplinary tickets because they requested sick call but did not have fevers high enough to warrant medical care.

The punitive actions taken by state prisons have resulted in a culture of fear when it comes to seeking medical attention. Multiple inmates told Insider that they were reluctant to report symptoms to their facilities for fear they’d be disciplined or isolated, a tendency lawyers and advocates have also observed.

"Because of the department’s use of certain draconian interventions, like solitary confinement as medical quarantine, there are people who have symptoms who are attempting to sort of self-care in their cell or in their dorm," Short, of the Legal Aid Society, said.

One inmate at Great Meadow — the same facility Cintron died in — who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation from prison staff, told Insider through his lawyer that he believed he had the coronavirus but did not report it because he did not want to be cut off from communicating with his family while sick.

Other inmates expressed similar sentiments, citing the lack of access to basic necessities during quarantine.

"No personal property, no showers, or phone calls, no reading material, no fresh air,' Allah, of Great Meadow, said. "They are treated like they are being punished for contracting the virus."
Scaife added: "They don't have trust and confidence in the state to care for them if they need it. This is a very scary environment for anyone who's in it right now."

**5 months in solitary confinement for objecting to sharing a cell with a sick inmate**

Ramon Rodriguez, a 36-year-old inmate at the Fishkill Correctional Facility, told Insider in a call and a series of messages that he was punished with solitary confinement for trying to stay safe from the virus.

Rodriguez said that he was previously held at the Wallkill Correctional Facility, where staff wanted him and four other inmates to stay in a five-person room that had been previously occupied by an inmate who tested positive for the coronavirus.

The sick inmate's belongings were still in the room when they were told to move in, Rodriguez said. When he asked for cleaning supplies to disinfect the room, staffers told him they were out. When the inmates later relayed their concerns about moving into the room to the sergeant, one of the four explained that he had been sick for the past three weeks and lost his sense of taste and smell. He wasn't tested for the coronavirus, and expressed apprehension about being in a room with four other men, including Rodriguez.

The sergeant sent the four men back to their old cells. But about two hours later, Rodriguez said, they were handcuffed, strip-searched, ordered to remove their masks, and loaded onto a bus to Fishkill.

Three days later, after another strip search and being tossed in filthy cells, Rodriguez was served tier-three disciplinary tickets — the most extreme kind — for refusing a direct order, a movement-regulation violation, interference with an employee, and for creating a disturbance and demonstration.

At a hearing in May, Roger Harris, Wallkill's deputy superintendent for security, sentenced Rodriguez to nine months in solitary confinement. At the time, Rodriguez told Insider, he was "sick as a dog"; over the previous few days he had experienced body aches, fatigue, chest tightness, hot flashes, trouble breathing, and the loss of taste and smell.

Although Rodriguez was tested for the coronavirus at Wallkill because his roommate was positive for the disease, he told Insider he never received the results.

He said in early June that he was feeling better and serving out his time in solitary.

"I'm locked in my cell 22 ½ hours a day," Rodriguez said. "I go out for recreation, and I'm still locked down.

"I can't even exercise. It's very depressing and stressful."

On appeal his sentence was later reduced to five months.

"It's horrible," Rodriguez's sister, Tina Rodriguez, told Insider in a July phone call. "You end up going in confinement all the way until January for standing up for yourself and being in a cell with a man who has [coronavirus]? That's crazy."
"Now he's got to stay in a cell 23 hours a day since he stood up for himself not to die."

When questioned on the circumstances surrounding Rodriguez's solitary confinement sentence, the DOCCS spokesperson said, "Please submit a FOIL request for an incarcerated individual's discipline record." Insider had already submitted a request to the DOCCS for those records. It was denied.

Harris did not respond when asked why he gave Rodriguez the nine month sentence.

'We deserve to be treated like human beings'

As the weeks and months drag on and coronavirus cases continue to rise in the US, inmates told Insider they were terrified of what's to come.

They are afraid of contracting the virus, of reporting and being forced into solitary, or, even worse, of not surviving and losing the chance to walk again as free men.

"Everybody is a little on edge, a little anxious," Johnson, of Fishkill, told Insider in a phone interview. "We haven't seen family members in almost three months since the lockdown, and you got relatives out there and friends in here who are sick, who are dying. So it can be a little overwhelming at times."

Bellamy, the 57-year-old at Green Haven, acknowledged to Insider that, regardless of COVID, he would likely die in prison. At age 23, he was sentenced to 62 ½ years to life. If he does complete his sentence, he won't be free until he's 85.

But, he said, many of his fellow inmates have long lives to look forward to after their sentences end.

"This is what creates the health problems with a lot of us," Bellamy said in a phone interview. "That we have this anxiety, we have this stress, we have this trauma, and we have to deal with it day in and day out, and it's intensified. "And then you get the coronavirus coming here, and put that on top of everything else we're going through."

"Incarcerated people are people too," said Bellamy, who has earned his GED and two college degrees behind bars. "We are human beings, we are stakeholders in the community, we are your sons, your fathers, your husbands, your sisters, daughters, wives, grandmothers.

"We're people, regardless of the fact that we've committed a crime. We are human beings. We deserve to be treated like human beings."

Do you have a personal experience with the coronavirus you'd like to share? Or a tip on how your town or community is handling the pandemic? Please email covidtips@businessinsider.com and tell your story.