

We will not look away.

PENNSYLVANIA PRISON
SOCIETY

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



“ I don’t feel safe because it feels
like I’m on a rudderless ship.
There’s no reasoning behind the
decisions being made. *Overall,
everyone feels tense, on edge.* ”

—ANONYMOUS, incarcerated individual on pandemic prison conditions

For 234 years, the Prison Society has borne witness to injustice and inhumane treatment behind bars. We have never looked away.

This year, the world has watched videos of the deaths of Walter Wallace, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and others beaten or killed by police. Many of us want to avert our eyes, but it's important to look. We must remain aware of brutality and injustice. We must call it out. We must end it.

While cell phone videos allow millions of Americans to see police brutality in a way that was previously not possible, abuse and neglect of people in prisons and jails remains out of public view. Except for the Prison Society. Every day, Prison Society volunteers and staff are in correctional facilities, either in person or now often on video. Many Pennsylvanians don't know what happens behind prison walls, but they should. That is why in 1787 our founders established the Society and why we persist today. We will not look away.

The overlapping crises of a once-in-a-century pandemic, decades of mass incarceration, and renewed urgency to address systemic racism have brought into stark relief fundamental truths about prisons. Here are some of the lessons of these crises, lessons that make our work at the Prison Society all the more important.

Prisons are threats to the health of the incarcerated and the broader public.

Even before the pandemic, gaining access to healthcare was the number one reason incarcerated people contacted the Prison Society. Now the importance of healthcare access is more vital than ever.

The 15 largest coronavirus clusters in the United States have all occurred in prisons.¹ People in prison have died from COVID-19 at three times the rate of the general population and have an infection rate 5.5 times as high.² Once the virus enters a prison, it's not just a threat to the people who live and work there, it's a threat to the surrounding community. Staff come in and out of the prison every day. A prison outbreak of COVID-19 accelerates community spread. Simply put, keeping an excessively large number of people in prison, where they are likely to get the virus, spread the virus, and have complications from the virus, has significant public health consequences and is no benefit for public safety.

Every day, we're helping people in prison access healthcare. And every day, we're helping the public and policymakers understand COVID-19 in prison and take action to stem its spread.

—

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html#clusters>

² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2768249>

Decarceration is necessary for community health and community safety

At the start of the pandemic, 76,000 Pennsylvanians were in prison, up from 16,000 four decades earlier. Over-incarceration has been the trend for the past 40 years. More and more drug laws, greater use of prison for all crimes, and longer sentences have carried the day. Black communities, which today make up 13% of the state's population but 43% of our prison population, have felt these misguided policies the most.

The pandemic has forced the state to reverse course. Between March and June, counties throughout the commonwealth reduced their jail populations as a means of controlling the virus. As a result, 13,000 fewer Pennsylvanians are behind bars today, and overall crime has not increased. This rapid reduction is proof that we can have less incarceration while maintaining public safety.

As you'll read in this report, our advocacy and research efforts have contributed to this change. Now, with the help of our research partner, the Vera Institute, we are documenting Pennsylvania's rapid decarceration, with the intention that lessons learned from this dramatic reversal can help usher in more of the same in the years to come.

Family and community connection matter

All of us have had to manage some degree of isolation the past seven months. Prison is isolating by design. It separates already vulnerable people from one another, from their loved ones, and from society more broadly. Since the start of the pandemic, the majority of people in prison have spent the better part of their time in isolation, similar to solitary confinement, with limited time outside their cells and limited to no access to programming or families.

We have worked tirelessly to help people in prison stay connected to family and community. We reassigned staff and redesigned programs to help families stay in touch with loved ones in prison, whether over the phone, through video calls, or through letters. We continue to urge county and state facilities to increase and improve safe ways for families to stay connected.

Together, we are making sure today's hard lessons create a more just and more humane future. We can't imagine a more vital role for the Prison Society in these trying times.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Claire Shubik-Richards".

CLAIRE SHUBIK-RICHARDS
Executive Director

Most people don't
know what happens
behind prison walls,
but they should.



The Prison Society bears public witness to what life is really like for the men and women behind bars in Pennsylvania. No one else can do this. And we are needed now more than ever.”

— JOSHUA ALVAREZ, Prison Monitoring Director

This year we fought for incarcerated people who endured isolation, worry, and fear during viral outbreaks and lengthy lockdowns. We did this because we believe that everyone, including people behind bars, should be treated humanely and with dignity. We believe we can only achieve this when citizens can see for themselves what is happening behind bars. You can't fix what you can't see.

VICTORIES

We urged every county to stop viral spread behind bars.

In early April, ahead of any major carceral outbreak, we reached out to county commissioners with guidance on no-cost ways to protect people behind bars. Several counties followed our recommendations, including suspending medical co-pays.

We pulled back the curtain on pandemic prison conditions.

We surveyed Pennsylvanians living behind bars to lift up their voices and reveal their experiences during the pandemic. Our report of findings published September 24, 2020, showed many people in custody were missing a critical tool in fighting the virus—basic cleaning supplies.

We found new ways to help. Our volunteers were relentless in responding to requests for help. When in-person visits weren't possible, we maintained connection through virtual Zoom visits, phone calls, and letters. We've kept in touch with families and followed up with officials to make sure they didn't overlook issues that matter most to families.

"I'm trying to get help from the Pennsylvania Prison Society or any professional agency that can reach out to help me. The medical care here is the worst. I tested positive to COVID-19..."

—ANONYMOUS INCARCERATED INDIVIDUAL

"It's excruciating to be confined in a cramped space nearly 23-and-a-half hours a day... that really affects them (incarcerated women) mentally."

—ANDREA WITMER, PRISON SOCIETY VOLUNTEER ON VISITING SCI MUNCY IN EARLY OCTOBER

"The jail is in a state of severe neglect and disrepair. The walls are crumbling and rampant mold infestation, among other unclean and unsafe conditions."

—ANONYMOUS CALLER, PHILADELPHIA PRISONS

The damaging
effects of mass
incarceration extend
far beyond prison
walls to communities
on the other side.



Our work is focused on people and the power that community and connection give to all of us.”

—KIRSTIN CORNNELL, Social Services Director

On any given day, 76,000 Pennsylvanians are behind bars. In 1980, that number was 16,000. A 500% increase in incarceration has led to tremendous loss and isolation. The coronavirus pandemic further isolates people—from each other and from their loved ones. This is especially true for incarcerated Pennsylvanians and their family and friends in the community.

VICTORIES

We didn't stop even when the funding did. Even as our government contracts froze in response to the pandemic and our revenue for programs dipped, we transformed our social services to provide one-on-one support to families and to share critical information that, but for the Prison Society, wouldn't exist. Between March and June 2020, we answered 2,800 calls/letters/emails from family members and 2,700 letters from people in Pennsylvania custody.

We were a lifeline for people returning home. Our mentors were there for people upon release during the pandemic to help them navigate employment and housing. We paired 60 men in state custody with community mentors to help plan and navigate their return to the community. In conjunction with Broad Street Ministries, we provided on-the-spot assistance to close to 300 men and women recently returned from prison to Philadelphia.

We helped families stay connected. We are working around the clock to ensure family-centered policies mitigate negative effects of social isolation. We provided supportive parenting programming for incarcerated fathers and mothers on the outside. Between July and March, prior to the pandemic, we facilitated 2,100 trips for families to visit loved ones in prison, and since the suspension of visiting, we have helped families navigate the new, cumbersome, video visiting systems and keeping families up-to-date on developments around visiting.

"In the event of parole I believe I'll be going to a halfway house because my sisters don't have actual room for me with all my nieces and nephews, but they're still in my corner nonetheless, which means the world to me. I look forward to receiving your mail and thanks so much for the support, it feels good to know that whenever I come home, there are people who are there and care."

—PRISON SOCIETY MENTEE

"For all us moms out here with kids in the system, you make things a lot easier for us. And I just want to thank you for that."

—PHILADELPHIA
MOM WITH SON IN
SCI SOMERSET

We drive important
conversations on
prison conditions and
frame the debate on
over-incarceration.



What I have come to appreciate the most about the Prison Society is how it carries out the lofty aims written in grandiose terms in our founding documents over 200 years ago by individual actions—our volunteers meeting one-on-one responding to incarcerated people and their families, our interns reading and replying to every phone call and piece of mail, our staff creating programming to help individuals make the transition to living in the community. These actions repeat and their impact accumulates over time. This is how we're effective. This is how we create change. This is how our humanity makes an impact."

—REBECCA HILLYER, Board President

It's time to stop the abuse, stop the suffering, and put an end to the era of mass incarceration. We are committed to influencing systems of change by growing our capacity to gather information and publicize what's happening. COVID-19 has accelerated our momentum in ways that are making a difference now and will continue to contribute to future systemic change.

VICTORIES

We sounded the alarm to decrease prison populations.

In April of this year, we partnered with the Pennsylvania ACLU in asking the state Supreme Court to protect public health by releasing people in county jails who are medically vulnerable, held pretrial, or serving short sentences for minor offenses. As a result of our petition to the Court, 18 counties decreased their prison population by an unprecedented 20% as of June 2020. Our efforts also contributed to Governor Wolf's Temporary Program to Reprieve Sentences of Incarceration.

We demanded transparency on prison conditions from government officials.

We pressed the Department of Corrections to put State Correctional Institution (SCI) testing information on its website, and in response the department launched the DOC COVID-19 response page. When the Department of Corrections and Department of Health declined to publicly share information on the virus in county prisons, we stepped up and created our own interactive county map to track the spread and mitigation of the virus in all 62 county jails. This critical community health information is available only from the Prison Society.

We empowered our citizen volunteers with training to hold jails and prisons accountable.

We launched the first of a series of regional-based trainings on using incarceration data to engage local policymakers. The Vera Institute's In My Backyards Initiative funded this project.

In the King's Bench petition, filed March 30 on behalf of the Pennsylvania Prison Society and five inmates...ACLU attorneys sought the release of inmates who are at high risk of serious illness or death if infected by COVID-19 and those who are held pretrial or on short sentences for minor offenses.

—ABC 27 NEWS, MARCH 2020

The PA Prison Society surveyed 350 inmates in prisons across the state about life behind bars during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found many inmates statewide are missing a critical tool in fighting the virus—basic cleaning supplies.

—FOX 43, SEPTEMBER 2020

*“THE WORK OF VISITING PRISONERS
BEHIND BARS HAS CONTINUED WITHOUT
THE SLIGHTEST DISRUPTION SINCE 1787.”*

—They Were In Prison, A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

*“Benjamin Rush worked
fearlessly throughout the yellow
fever epidemic and made valuable
observations on the nature of the
dread malady.”*

—They Were In Prison, A History
of the Pennsylvania Prison
Society



1787

Concerned citizens established
The Prison Society.

↑ Jail on Walnut Street, Philadelphia.
*Engraved & Published by W. Birch, Enamel
Painter.* [LIBRARY COMPANY OF
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1793

YELLOW FEVER

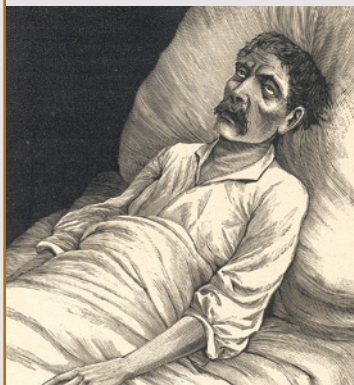
5,000 people died over a four-
month period in Philadelphia,
making the epidemic in a city of
50,000 the most severe in the U.S.

↑ The Arch Street wharf, where the first
cluster of Yellow Fever cases in Philadelphia
was identified. *Engraving by Wm. Birch & Son.*
[LIBRARY OF CONGRESS].



"In 1832 when cholera struck the city and exacted a heavy toll of lives, visiting (by Society volunteers to prisons) did not cease."

—They Were In Prison, A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society



1832

CHOLERA

Spread by contaminated drinking water, cholera hit impoverished Black and immigrant communities in Philadelphia hard.

"The quarantine caused by the epidemic of influenza...resulted in keeping [Prison Society] visitors away from four to six weeks." Nevertheless, for the year 1918, Society volunteers met with over 10,000 incarcerated people at Eastern State Penitentiary, the Philadelphia County Prison, and the Central Station holding cells at City Hall."

—The Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy, 1919



1918

SPANISH INFLUENZA

Within days of a parade promoting war bonds, patients became gravely ill. In Pennsylvania, 60,000 people died, more than in any other state.

"Prison Society volunteers continue to help, meeting in person, over Zoom or by the phone. Even with the danger and hurdles posed by the pandemic, we are fulfilling our mission every day."

—Claire Shubik-Richards, Prison Society Executive Director

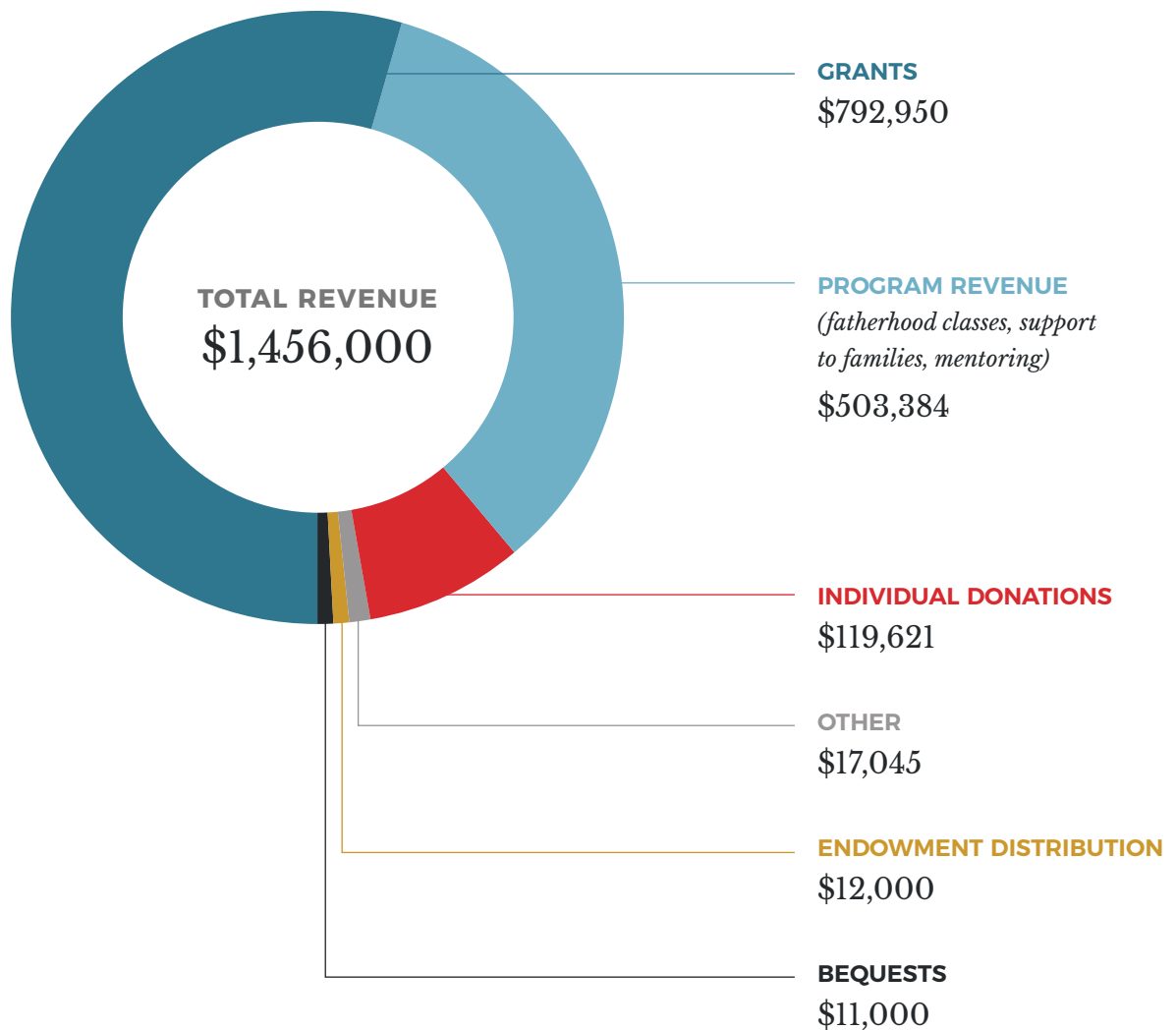


2020

COVID-19

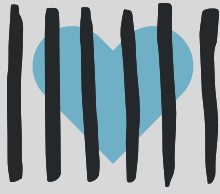
As of October 2020, more than 1,000 people who live and work in a Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution have contracted COVID-19.

Financial Report



Our year of 2020, as an organization, was a point of light in an otherwise trying time. We became stronger through the generosity and caring of other individuals. We grew because of the relationships we forged with other organizations. As a result, we will be able to continue to share that light with those we support now and in the future.”

—CHRIS COVINGTON, Treasurer



WE ARE THE SOCIETY

This has been a year like no other, as we collectively endured extended periods of hardship, isolation, uncertainty, and loss. Thanks to the support of countless donors and funders, hundreds of dedicated volunteers, and an amazing staff, the Pennsylvania Prison Society continued our work of stopping abuse in prison, supporting family and community connection, and advancing sensible criminal justice policies. Into our 234th year, we have persisted without interruption.

With your support, we pressed those in power to act boldly to reduce prison populations and save lives as the pandemic threatened people confined behind bars. We have demanded decisive leadership and action at every turn—and exposed those who did not step up. Because of your generosity, we developed responsive and effective ways of supporting the changing needs of incarcerated people and their families, even while working from home. Together, we responded swiftly and consistently to catastrophe without ever looking away.

Thank you for standing with us during times that are challenging and changing all of us.

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