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A protest in Philadelphia in April 2020 demanding Mayor Kenney and the First Judicial District take action to immediately release people from the city's jails in the face of COVID-19. ([Joe Piette](#) / [Flickr](#))

After a long struggle led by prison justice activists, the Illinois COVID-19 vaccination plan now [includes prison](#) inmates, who are starting to receive the vaccine along with prison guards and essential workers. To be sure, vaccination is a good and necessary step. Yet it is not all that is needed and does not make up for the terrible horrors inmates and their loved ones, especially their mothers, have [endured throughout the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Consider that across Illinois, under Phase 4 guidelines, the COVID-19 plan requires that everyone abide by social distancing policies and strict public health procedures. Across the state, personnel must make sure employees have protective equipment, and testing is widely available—except within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC).

In Illinois, there are no phases for inmates. There is indefinite lockdown.

I have learned about how COVID-19 has been raging through IDOC and the terrible conditions Illinois inmates have endured from my work with [MAMAS](#), an organization of mothers of primarily Black and Latinx incarcerated victims of police violence. For these mothers, COVID-19 continues to mean that they do not know when they might see their children again; when their children might gain access to their lawyers; or when they will be able to adequately move their bodies again.



## Taliban's Tightening Grip on Media Freedom



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## Wife Catherine's Apparent Suicide



Mothers of inmates who have been infected with COVID-19 live with the terror that prison guards are trapping their child in a cell as big as a parking spot for 23 hours a day as “quarantine,” or that their child may never recover—especially since some inmates are already suffering long-term effects and some have died. Inmates are not receiving [proper medical attention](#) and the system denies their mothers information about their children’s existing symptoms or [whether or not they might survive](#).

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As the New York Times editorial board noted last November, [America is letting the coronavirus rage through prisons](#). Indeed, the Illinois Department of Corrections does not follow COVID-19 safety guidelines. Near the end of 2020, the [Chicago Tribune reported](#) at least 59 incarcerated people have died since March after becoming infected with COVID-19 in Illinois custody. This death toll has doubled since November.

Last month, the Marshall Project reported the spread amongst inmates in Illinois prisons is [205 percent higher](#) than the general population. At the same time, Gov. Pritzker’s plan for Illinois makes recommendations for nearly every place where people live except for IDOC.

If Gov. Pritzker truly cares about containing COVID-19, he should work to ensure that IDOC follows a set of guidelines for safety at  prisons and jails. He should take responsibility for failing to protect the state of Illinois from prison staff

bringing the virus outside when they come in and out of our communities everyday while also ignoring the terror inmates and their families have been enduring.

[Mothers report](#) that prison staff get masks while their children do not; that many guards don't wear masks at all and some barely wash their hands. They say inmates with symptoms are barely tested and those who are recovering from COVID-19 or have long-term effects have been virtually ignored. The children of these mothers, all grown adults, lack access to adequate soap, water, and cleaning supplies. They are constantly moved around, and they are crowded into showers.

On top of all of this, inmates are struggling with additional [mental health challenges](#), an understandable but still terrible response to being trapped in a place where COVID-19 is raging like wildfire.

To be sure, Gov. Pritzker's policies have [protected the health and safety of many Illinoisans](#). They have helped [contain the spread of COVID-19 according to CDC guidelines](#). Yet the mothers I work with say that the lack of COVID-19 protections in IDOC imply that our state officials believe that inmates are less than human, that they do not deserve to be protected from death like everyone else, and that their lives do not matter.



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**Shannon Heffernan**@shannon\_h · [Follow](#)

An independent monitor, appointed by a federal judge, says "the prioritized and expedited" administration of COVID-19 vaccines to vulnerable people in prison may be Illinois "last and only opportunity" to prevent avoidable deaths."

7:52 PM · Jan 4, 2021



73


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Since Black people are overly represented in Illinois prisons, the Black mothers I work with feel that the governor, along with IDOC officials, believe that Black lives don't matter and that the COVID-19 death sentence in Illinois prisons and jails is an extension of slavery.

If Gov. Pritzker truly cares about containing COVID-19, he should listen to what mothers and all loved ones of inmates are saying about how and why COVID-19 has been raging in IDOC. The mothers I work with have become advocates and experts on COVID-19 in prisons in their own right, out of necessity, in the absence of state action. Governor Pritzker might then realize that he is placing everyone in the state of Illinois at risk.

## The Path Forward

A [campaign](#) launched by loved ones fighting for the mental and physical health of inmates demonstrates the steps needed to stop the spread of COVID-19 in jails and prisons. The petition calls for expanded yard time, access to libraries, more mental health resources, phone and video calls, and in-person visits w  ally, the campaign demands that the Illinois Department of Corrections follow CDC safety guidelines and set

a rational timeline to end its lockdown. I only wish IDOC would stand on the right side of COVID-19 history and do the same.

Now that we have a vaccine, many of us are celebrating the positive outcomes of the last 10 months. Some of us found a new love of community. Others started feeding their hungry neighbors. Yet if we continue to ignore the physical and mental health needs and struggles of inmates, their mothers, and their loved ones that will continue long after vaccinations, any claim to an expanded love for community in a COVID-19 world remains meaningless.

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## Detention Centers and Jails Have Become COVID-19 Hotbeds. It's Time for Community-Based Solutions

Examining nursing homes, prisons, jails, psychiatric hospitals and immigration detention centers through a disability lens allows for creative redesigns that question the very function of these institutions. It's time to unite the movements for abolition, decarceration and defunding police, and invest in long-term, community-based solutions—rather than disconnected, piecemeal reforms.



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## #JustUs Campaign Demands Emergency Plans for Prisons During COVID-19

The lack of needed legislation to protect prisoners is acting as the judge, jury and executioner. Having a proper and humane plan during crises means the difference between life and death. The #JustUs campaign urges each state to adopt and institute an emergency management plan to protect incarcerated populations.

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**TAGGED: BLACK LIVES MATTER, COVID-19, WOMEN IN PRISON**

### ABOUT NADINE NABER

[Nadine Naber](#) is a professor of gender and women's studies and global Asian studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a public voices fellow of The OpEd Project. She is the author and/or co-editor of [five books](#), [a TEDX speaker](#); and co-founder of [MAMAS](#) and [Liberate Your Research](#).

