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# PUNISHMENT BY PANDEMIC

*In a penitentiary with one of the U.S.'s largest coronavirus outbreaks, prison terms become death sentences.*

By Rachel Aviv

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*After inmates complained, an official argued that their conditions were not “ones that today’s society does not tolerate.”* Illustration by Jamiel Law

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**D**eMarco Raynor, who is incarcerated at Cummins Unit, a penitentiary in southeast Arkansas, had been approved for its most prestigious job: working at the governor’s mansion. Prison labor at the mansion is a “longstanding tradition, which

kept down costs,” Hillary Clinton wrote, in a memoir. (She noted that “onetime murderers” proved to be the best employees.) Raynor saw the position, which was unpaid, as a chance to meet people with the power to grant him clemency. But, shortly before he was to begin, an officer said that he had violated prison rules by wearing slippers that he had made himself. The job was revoked. Raynor believed that the officer had intentionally thwarted his opportunity. “I still maintain my manhood, and he felt like that was too much,” Raynor said. Another officer once told him, “Man, you walk around just like you’re free.”

Raynor is forty-one, and is serving a life sentence for shooting a man during a drunken confrontation, when he was twenty. Raynor, who is black, was convicted by eleven white jurors and one black woman. “I will die remembering her name,” he told me. “She looked at me the whole trial like I was her son, and then, when the verdict came back, she couldn’t look at me.” Raynor monitors his use of language, so that he doesn’t assimilate to institutional life. He refuses to call food “money”; he will not invite people to his “house” when he means his cell. He bristles when prisoners, working unpaid jobs, describe an officer as their “boss.”

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Read *The New Yorker’s* complete news coverage and analysis of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Raynor is part of a group of men at Cummins who call themselves the Think Tank. They have all been in prison for more than fifteen years, many serving life sentences they received when they were teen-agers or in their early twenties. They consider it their role to guide younger men. Raynor, who had ambitions of being a psychiatrist, likes to break down the meaning of words like “Negro” and “chattel” and “death,” and to discuss how language shapes our identities. He and his friends hold study sessions on the history of black people in America—“The black man must be awakened to the knowledge that he is not what this society has taught him to be,” Raynor wrote, for a recent session—and circulate books about mindfulness and maintaining romantic relationships. “We are trying to take care of our children,” Qadir, another member of the Think Tank, told me. Qadir, who is forty-four (and who feared that using his full name would result in retaliation), is a clerk in the prison’s kitchen. When he notices that men are sick or struggling, he provides them with double portions, along with a note: “Don’t think you’re going to live on this. I’ve only got a certain number of people I can help.”

In mid-March, when the coronavirus first arrived in Arkansas, the Think Tank discussed the story of Noah. Qadir told me, “Here was a man building an ark, and he is saying, ‘Get ready. Prepare.’ But no one was listening.” Raynor found the story of Moses more relevant: “I view it more like, these are the plagues that God is sending upon Pharaoh, who is in love with his authority, in order to let his people go.”

Every morning, more than a hundred men at Cummins Unit go to work on the Hoe Squad. Dressed in white, they pile into an open trailer, and a tractor pulls them deep into the prison’s fields. Cummins sits on nearly eighteen thousand acres of land and has a hundred and ten thousand chickens, two thousand cattle, and forty-one horses. The men on the Hoe Squad pull weeds, dig ditches, and pick cotton, cucumbers, and watermelons. Arkansas is one of only a few states where prison labor is free. (Other states pay a nominal wage, such as ten cents an hour.) A dozen “field riders”—officers on horseback, wearing cowboy hats—patrol the inmates, and, if anyone lags, they threaten to “call the truck”: a major will drive the inmate to a group of isolation cells known as the Hole.

In late March, the men at Cummins began questioning the logic of going into the fields during the pandemic. Raynor, whose mother had been a corrections officer at another prison in Arkansas, said, “I counselled the men that they were endangering their

health by continuing to squish into a trailer, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip.”

An inmate assigned to the Hoe Squad, who asked to go by his initials, D.B., agreed, as did dozens of others. When officers called their names for work, D.B. said, “we all laid down in our beds.” The men were disciplined for “unexcused absence”—a violation that carries a punishment of up to fifteen days in isolation. “There’s a global pandemic that is air-born,” one man wrote in a formal grievance, on March 26th. “I’m being forced to go out into the field thus putting my life in danger.”

Asa Hutchinson, the governor of Arkansas, had asked that businesses cease “nonessential functions,” and D.B. couldn’t understand how the work of the Hoe Squad qualified as essential. Sometimes, he and the other men would spend a day removing grass with a hoe, in order to clear land for planting; when they finished, a tractor would swiftly mow the same patch. It seemed as if the prison was trying to demonstrate the needlessness of their labor and time. Once, when Raynor was assigned to the Hoe Squad, he told an officer that it didn’t make sense to use gardening tools rather than modern farming technology. The officer responded, “We don’t want your brain. We want your back.”

On April 1st, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* reported that an officer who worked on the farm at Cummins had tested positive for the coronavirus. “You would think our captains or sergeants or majors would warn us about something like this, but they didn’t speak about it,” another officer, whom I’ll call Marie, told me. “They kept everything in the closet. If you didn’t catch the news, you were in the blind.” A spokesperson for the Arkansas Department of Corrections had told the *Gazette* that the infected officer didn’t work inside prison walls, but Marie knew that officers couldn’t go a day without interacting with inmates. “The inmates run the penitentiary,” she told me. “Officers don’t lift their fingers for nothing. If the inmates don’t do it, it’s not going to get done.” The next day, Marie and a few other officers wore masks to work, but, when they entered the prison, they were told to put the masks away. “They don’t want the inmates frantic,” Marie said. She left her mask in her car.

A few days later, a forty-nine-year-old inmate, Daryl Hussey, who has been in prison for twenty-three years, stopped getting out of bed. Hussey lived in an open barracks, as do about half the men at Cummins, which houses nearly two thousand prisoners. In these barracks, some fifty metal cots are arranged in rows, many less than three feet from one another, and bolted to the floor. When the men lie down, they can smell one another’s breath. One of the men in the Think Tank, Dashujauhn Danzie, was the “picket man” in Hussey’s barracks: he did all the laundry. For more than a week, he had noticed that Hussey wasn’t showering, eating, or sending his clothes to the wash. When people asked Hussey what was wrong, Danzie said, “he just nodded his head like he was straight.”

On April 10th, Hussey passed out, and he was tested for the coronavirus. When the results came back positive, the Hoe Squad was finally suspended. Hussey was taken to the Hole in a wheelchair. In an e-mail, Dexter Payne, the director of the Division of Correction, had instructed all his wardens to “prepare a portion/area of your punitive isolation areas to house inmates effected by the CoronaVirus.”

Danzie stripped Hussey’s bed himself. Then he went to the nurse’s station to ask for a boil bag, so he could separate Hussey’s sheets from the rest of the wash. Danzie said that the nurse there, Shirley Lubin Wilson, told him, “Get the fuck away from my window.” In a federal civil-rights lawsuit last year, Wilson was accused of wrapping a telephone cord around an inmate’s neck while a second nurse blocked the surveillance camera. (A spokesperson for Wellpath, a for-profit health-care provider that runs the infirmaries in Arkansas prisons, said that the company “believes these allegations to be without merit.” Wilson didn’t respond to a request for comment.)

Four nurses tested the forty-six other men in Hussey's barracks for the coronavirus, administering numerous tests without changing their gloves. All but three men had it. Raynor's barracks was also tested. Raynor said that a sergeant later shouted into the barracks, "Y'all are negative." But Raynor noticed that when a man defecated a few feet away from him he wasn't bothered by the smell. He asked his cousin to call the prison's central office to find out the results of his test. He was positive. "I went around the barracks telling the guys, 'I'm positive, and you probably are, too.'"

Inmates in the prison's garment shop were given a new task: manufacturing eighty thousand masks for prisoners and officers throughout the state. A woman named Carrie Coleman told me that her son had sewn masks at Cummins for two days while he had a fever and chills. (It wasn't until he had a temperature of a hundred and four degrees that he was carried to the infirmary.) Marie said that the masks kept falling off her face; when she talked, she sucked the material into her mouth. Then she noticed that the wardens and deputy wardens were secretly wearing masks they'd brought from home underneath the state-issued ones.

On April 21st, Wellpath held drive-through testing for officers. "If your test results are positive," a memo from the Arkansas Department of Health said, "you may need to work if you do not display any symptoms." Governor Hutchinson, in his daily press conference, explained, "In terms of the guards that might have tested positive, it is my understanding that they would only be guarding barracks in which the inmates have tested positive." He added, "So those precautions are in place, and certainly they are logical." But Marie couldn't make sense of the policy: all the guards were passing through the same entrance, checkpoints, and hallways.

An inmate named Donnie said that when an officer came to the door of his barracks, where men had tested positive, he asked if she had the virus, and she said that she hadn't been tested. "Our newspaper says you must be positive for corona if you're working our barracks," Donnie told her. He said that she responded sarcastically, "Well, they say your beds are six feet apart, too."

One night, an older inmate told Marie that he was struggling to breathe. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked as if he were about to faint. Marie asked a sergeant to escort him to the infirmary, but, she said, the sergeant told her, "Tell him to go get on that kiosk"—a computer touched by dozens of inmates each day—so that he could fill out a request to visit the infirmary, known as a sick call.

Amie Burrow, a nurse who worked for Wellpath until late 2019, in several Arkansas prisons, said that, when inmates put in sick calls, they typically weren't seen by a doctor for at least two weeks. Sometimes the infirmary nurses would become so overwhelmed by sick calls that—to avoid being fined if they didn't respond within three days, as was the policy—they would shred them. (Inmates who don't have access to a kiosk write their requests on paper slips.) "It was general operating procedure," Burrow told me. "I watched nurses put the paper sick calls in the shredder and never blink an eye." When inmates complained, the nurses would say, "Oh, the slip got lost in the box," or "You filled out the wrong form." Burrow said, "They could easily blame it on the inmate."

Marie finally called a Code Green, the signal for medical emergency, on the prison radio system. A nurse arrived with a wheelchair, but the infirmary was full. Instead, the man was taken to a holding cell. He had no bed, toilet, or running water. "A lot of times, they forget the inmates are there," Marie said. "They'll stay there for hours—hours."

After the man was taken away, Marie said, she was reprimanded by a sergeant, who said, "He could have stayed on his rack and slept." She told me, "That's how they look at it: 'Tell him to sleep it off.'"

By the third week of April, Qadir, the kitchen clerk, had chills and had lost his sense of smell. He had been tested for the coronavirus, and while he waited for the results he reported to his job. Most of the other kitchen workers were refusing to work. Qadir, whose mother had been the president of the N.A.A.C.P. in West Memphis, Arkansas, felt ashamed that inmates might see him as a strikebreaker. As he walked to the kitchen, he said, “I felt eyes piercing my back. I knew they must feel like, Mr. Pro-black—Mr. I-don’t-go-for-this-or-for-that—is working for the system.”

He spent the day unloading canned goods from three tractor-trailers. “I’m physically fit, and for me to take a sixty-pound box and throw it five feet away—I love to do that,” he said. But he barely had the strength to lift a carton of ground beef. At the end of the day, he gathered what he had come for: enough green beans, peas, garlic, vinegar, and plastic gloves to last him several weeks. “I wasn’t going to hold a press conference to explain my reasoning,” he said. “But, hell, I wasn’t selling out. I was there because I needed ingredients to brave the storm.”

By April 25th, more test results had come back: eight hundred and twenty-six inmates and thirty-three staff members had the virus. The warden placed all the barracks on lockdown. With no inmates working, officers had to do the cooking and cleaning themselves. “When the officers saw how nasty the kitchen was, they got out of there,” Marie said. “It had been all right for them to go in there and call the shots. But as far as being in there for long periods of time, moving around and preparing dinner—you can’t do that in filth.”

The officers made rudimentary meals, like peanut-butter-and-jelly or baloney sandwiches, and delivered them to the barracks. Greens were almost never served, an omission that disappointed Qadir but didn’t surprise him. He has been in prison for twenty-five years—he was sentenced to life without parole when he was nineteen, after his friend shot a man and Qadir drove him away from the scene. Before the coronavirus outbreak, he and the other inmates in the kitchen cooked the most nutritious meals they could make with limited ingredients. They poured cans of vegetables into a fifty-five-gallon pot and stirred them with a boat paddle. “When you are feeding your fellow-man, there should be no half-stepping,” he said.

Prisoners often speak of a fear of adapting to incarceration to such a degree that they become institutionalized, losing their individual agency. Once the inmates stopped working, Marie saw that the officers had developed their own kind of learned helplessness. “When you work there, it’s like you really are in the slavery days, because you’ve got inmates there who will actually be, like, ‘What else you need, boss?’ ” she said. “They literally come at you like that. You drop a piece of paper, and they come out of nowhere, running to pick it up, saying, ‘I got it, I got it!’ ”

Prisoners at Cummins take on different identities depending on where in the institution they live. “They’ve divided us into so-called field niggers and house niggers,” Raynor said. The men who work on the Hoe Squad live on the East Hall, where the outbreak began. Raynor once worked as a porter in the infirmary, and, when East Hall residents came in overheated or feeling faint, he would hear the nurses say, “He’s just trying to get out of work,” or “He’s just high.”

The men on the West Hall are treated with less suspicion. They work indoors or in “up front” jobs, gardening or washing officers’ cars. Some work as “domestics” in a community near Cummins known as the Free Line, where prison employees and their families live. They clean, do yard work, and even babysit. Sometimes a warden’s children become so attached to an inmate that if the warden is transferred to a new prison the family takes their “domestic” with them. (The Department of Corrections denies that inmates interact with children.)

The hierarchy among inmates has structured life at Cummins for more than a century. Founded in 1902 on the site of two cotton plantations, Cummins, which was designed as a prison for black men, received no funds from the state; it would support itself and, in years of good harvest, make a profit. There were few paid employees. Instead, the penitentiary was largely run by inmate trustees, who carried guns and lived in shacks outside the prison. Next in the hierarchy were the “do-pops”: when the trustees were about to walk through a door, the do-pops popped it open. The lowest class of prisoners were the “rank men,” who worked on the Hoe Squad. If they didn’t pick enough cotton or vegetables, they were made to lie face down on the ground, sometimes with their pants lowered, as an officer whipped them with a five-foot leather strap. In a memoir, Thomas Murton, who, in 1968, served as the superintendent of Arkansas’s prisons, wrote, “This whole system of exploitation began in the days after the Civil War, when the farmers and plantation owners who were forced to free their slaves looked for a new source of cheap labor.” Murton was fired after he began digging for skeletons on the grounds of Cummins, where he believed several inmates had been murdered. He told the press, “You can’t provide the cure if you don’t know the disease.”

In 1970, in response to a class-action suit stemming from petitions by prisoners, a federal judge concluded, for the first time in the country’s history, that a state’s entire prison system violated the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. (“Particularly at Cummins,” he wrote.) The judge described the Arkansas system as a “dark and evil world” operating according to “customs completely foreign to free world culture.” In an annual report that year, the commissioner of the prison system acknowledged that “the so-called ‘self-supporting prisons for profit’ have been exposed as . . . destroying institutions which stand as incongruous monuments to despair.”

The case represented a “profound revolution in understanding the legal status of prisoners,” Judith Resnik, a law professor at Yale who is working on a book about prisoners’ rights, told me. Previously, reformers had tried to claim that certain punishments were un-Christian or unscientific or immoral, but “this was: there are certain prohibitions on how the state deals with me, because I am a human being entitled to rights. The obligation is not a grace—it’s a right.”

Philip Kaplan, one of the lawyers who represented the inmates, told me that, even after the prisons were placed under federal supervision, “we had to pull teeth. Their view was: these are more like animals as opposed to human beings.” The system was desegregated, but the prisoners still worked for free. As late as 1992, an internal investigation found that black inmates were ten times more likely than other inmates to be assigned the job of shining officers’ shoes. Today, though black people make up only fifteen per cent of the population in Arkansas, more than forty per cent of the state’s prisoners are African-American.

Raynor’s mother, Elvera, who began working for the Department of Corrections in 1994, said that officers were ostracized if they showed compassion toward inmates. They’d be branded as “inmate lovers,” a term derived from “nigger lover.” As a poorly paid corrections officer, she felt a sense of camaraderie with the inmates. “The wardens and majors wouldn’t even talk to us,” she said. “They thought we were too lowlife.” After Raynor went to prison, she quit. “I couldn’t sit around and watch what the inmates were going through,” she said.

**B**obby Roberts, a former member of the Arkansas Board of Corrections, told me, “What always fascinated me about our prison system is the implied contract that exists between the inmate and the correctional officer.” In theory, it shouldn’t be possible for an officer to contain a barracks of some fifty men, but, Roberts said, “there’s the written prison rules, and then there’s the way things actually operate, which is a matter of both sides understanding the boundaries.”

As the outbreak spread, the contract broke down. Some officers stopped coming to work, because they were sick or afraid. Those who showed up rarely made security rounds. They delivered meals sporadically, on carts typically used to transport laundry or trash. One man said that when he tried to submit a grievance an officer advised him not to expect the form to be signed by a sergeant, the first step for resolving a complaint. The officer said that he'd seen grievances in a bathroom trash can.

Raynor sensed that the officers blamed the inmates for the fact that they were now doing work that prisoners were supposed to perform. "It's like they think we're making them do the laundry and sweep the floor," he said. He told an officer, "This is bigger than me as an inmate and you as a low-level correctional officer. We've both been subjected to the same conditions."

During the last weekend of April, men in a barracks on the East Hall threw a TV through one of their windows. When Marie came to the barracks, they began shouting that their sick calls were going unanswered, and that the positives were being mixed with the negatives. Through the windows of the barracks, she urged them not to riot. "They don't know the depths of it," she told them, referring to the administration. "All they know is you all are here acting the fool." She reminded them, "Regardless of what, you are a man before anything."

D.B., the inmate who had been disciplined for not going to the Hoe Squad, said that one night, without explanation, a deputy warden told him and five other men to pack their belongings. They followed the orders, but, as they approached a new barracks, they saw through the windows that a few men were holding handmade knives. Another was bleeding. "They were hollering and beefing, and they looked like animals," D.B. said. "It was like something out of the movies." Donnie, who was also there, said that one man in the barracks yelled at the guards, "We don't know if the dudes coming in are positive or negative—you can't put them in here."

D.B. and the other men refused to step inside the barracks. "Take us back to where we come from," D.B. said. For fifteen minutes, they stood outside the barracks, trying to negotiate with one of the deputy wardens. Finally, he and Donnie said, the deputy warden shook his head and muttered, "I'm just about to say, 'Fuck it.'" The men were led back to their barracks. By the time D.B. returned, he was in tears. He is serving a ten-year sentence, for discharging a firearm from his car. "They have absolutely no control over this prison," he said. "We don't have nobody to reach out to. I just want to go home and do house arrest. I don't want to die like this."

The men in the Think Tank tried to defuse tension between the inmates and the officers, a practice they'd maintained for years. "At the training academy, the officers become indoctrinated that their job is to punish," Kaleem Nazeem, a member of the Think Tank who was recently released, told me. "But we tell them, 'As long as you hold on to the core values that your mother and your grandmother gave you, you're going to be all right here.'" He added, "It's all about pitch and tone."

When Qadir met officers who were new to the job, he sometimes provided them with what he called "orientation." He broke down the conditions of the average prisoner. "We want them to understand that we have been working for this prison for eight hours a day, every year, for free," he said. If an inmate on the Hoe Squad takes a cucumber from the farm—the inmates grow them, but they can go for years without tasting one—what's the harm in letting the man eat one fresh vegetable? Qadir said, "Some go by the book, some turn a blind eye, and some even feed us themselves."

To prevent the inmates from rioting as the crisis worsened, the Think Tank tried to get them to enlarge their perspective, too. Qadir, who lived on the West Hall, told them, "Imagine you are a correctional officer at home with your children after a ten-hour

shift, and you have to turn around and drive an hour back to work because there's a disturbance here." But each time a meagre meal arrived it served as a trigger. "Let this be a safe zone," Raynor warned the men in his barracks, on the East Hall. "Everybody can't go down onto the battlefield. Somebody has to be left behind to tell the story."

Down the hallway, in a different barracks, the men were not easily subdued. On May 2nd, they became so frustrated by the lack of attention—an officer had refused to sign an inmate's grievance about how they were being fed little more than hard-boiled eggs—that a few men broke open the window of the officers' control booth and unlocked the doors on their hallway. "Free the boys, man! Free them, man!" an inmate was filmed shouting. Officers fled their posts. About an hour later, an emergency-response team arrived in riot gear, with a cart of weapons from the prison's armory. The officers sprayed tear gas into the barracks. The chemical can make the respiratory tract more susceptible to infection and exacerbate inflammation. One man appeared to have a seizure. "He just laid on the ground, twitching," Charles Robinson, an inmate in the barracks, said. "He almost suffocated."

A combination of smoke and tear gas drifted into an adjacent barracks, where all the inmates had tested positive for the coronavirus. Darrell Jones, who has been incarcerated for thirty-five years, realized that he needed to turn off the ceiling fan. "It was pulling the smoke in from the hallway," he told me. "People sounded like they were choking to death." The switch for the fan was just outside the barracks door. As he stepped through the doorway, a lieutenant shot him in the face with a rubber bullet. Jones's vision suddenly went dark, and he fell to the floor. "If you don't get back in the barracks," he heard an officer say, "I'm going to shoot you again." But he was too disoriented to move; blood streamed down his face from a wound less than half an inch above his left eye. Inmates dragged him inside and began pounding on the windows, saying that Jones needed a doctor. When no one came, Danzie, the Think Tank member, cleaned the wound himself and got Jones into bed.

Five hours later, Jones was taken to the infirmary, where he heard a nurse say that his wound had "opened up like a flower." He was driven in a van to a hospital in Little Rock. For the eighty-mile drive, he lay across the back seat, behind a metal grille, with his hands and feet shackled. He was nauseated and had no vision in his left eye. At the hospital, Jones, who was not wearing a mask, informed staff that he had tested positive for the coronavirus. It was not the first time that officers, transporting positive inmates, had been cavalier about transmitting the virus. In an e-mail to all wardens on April 21st, Payne, the Division of Correction director, had written, "Hospitals are not wanting to treat our inmates because our staff are not following the guidelines."

Jones returned to the prison the next morning and, four days later, received a disciplinary violation. "Inmate was given several direct orders not to come out of the barracks but he disobeyed all orders while coming toward staff, posing aggression," the ticket said. Jones still can't see out of his left eye. If he keeps it open for more than twenty minutes, he gets a migraine.

At one of the Governor's daily press conferences, Payne acknowledged that there had been a "minor disturbance" at the prison. But, when asked if there were any injuries, he responded, "No."

Jones filled out a sick call in early May, but he is still waiting to see a specialist. He now spends his days in bed with his eyes closed, to keep his headaches at bay. He told me, "It's like they are trying to punish us for testing positive."

When Governor Hutchinson began holding daily coronavirus press conferences, he set apart the cases at Cummins. On April 19th, he presented a graph illustrating new infections in the past five weeks: cases were dipping, he reassured the public, if incarcerated people were removed from the equation. "The number that we will have coming out of Cummins dwarfs what we're having statewide," Hutchinson explained. "That's a reason, of course, to distinguish those in the reporting system."



“It hurt,” Qadir told me. “Here it is, right now in 2020, and the Governor doesn’t even want us to be a statistic. Imagine that. If they don’t count us when we’re sick and dying, then we really are nobody.” Another man in the Think Tank told me, “A lot of guys just shake their heads. They don’t think they can change anything—the hopelessness is so big, so complex—so they’d rather not think about it.”

In late April, lawyers for the Arkansas American Civil Liberties Union, Disability Rights Arkansas, and the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a federal lawsuit, arguing that the Arkansas prison system had displayed deliberate indifference to prisoners’ welfare. Fifty years after the system had been declared unconstitutional, inmates believed that they were still being subjected to cruel and unusual punishment. Resnik, the Yale professor, said that conditions had improved since the sixties, but she wondered, “Is it more weighty and terrible now because, even with prisoners having all these rights, the conditions are still debilitating?”

Cummins has had the tenth-largest coronavirus outbreak in the nation—nine hundred and fifty-six people, including sixty-five staff members, have tested positive—but the Division of Correction has made only minimal steps to contain it. The inmates aren’t given access to alcohol-based hand sanitizer, even though the medical director of infectious diseases for the state’s Department of Health has advocated for its use. “Maybe science will take precedence now in current situation,” he wrote, in an e-mail to the secretary of the department. Men are still sleeping in open barracks, less than three feet apart. (A spokesperson for the Department of Corrections told me in an e-mail that if inmates in every other bed follow new instructions to sleep with their feet in the spot typically occupied by their heads, their faces will be “separated by 6 feet from the next inmate’s pillow.”)

The inmates asked that the prison system immediately take more precautions, including releasing some people to home confinement. One of their lawyers, Omavi Shukur, told me, “For so long, we’ve argued that the rate of population growth in prisons is unsustainable, and now that argument has become palpable.” But Kristine Baker, a judge for the Eastern District of Arkansas, denied the request, writing that federal courts should “approach intrusion into the core activities of the state’s prison system with caution.” The Arkansas attorney general had argued that the risks to prisoners were not “so great that they violate standards of decency,” nor were they “ones that today’s society does not tolerate.”

M<sup>a</sup>rie noticed that older men who were sick didn’t bother asking for help. “They just stay on their racks,” she said. “They know how it works. They just lay there.” Some of the sickest inmates were placed in the visitation room, which had been converted into a makeshift hospital, where they had no access to showers or phones. A thirty-year-old man who spent several days there told me he was alarmed when an inmate who had tested negative for coronavirus was inexplicably moved in. The inmate kept trying to give officers paperwork documenting his test results. When that didn’t work, he threatened to break the vending machines if he wasn’t moved out of the room. One man, Roy Davis, died there, sitting in a wheelchair.

The Division of Correction began listing the number of coronavirus deaths on its Facebook page. There have been eleven at Cummins so far. On May 2nd, after two deaths in twenty-four hours, the Division noted that “both inmates were in their 60s and serving Life Sentences.” Raynor felt that the men were being described “like old cows. They were old, and we already milked them.” Within hours of their deaths, their names were deleted from the Department of Corrections roster online.

In the absence of any funeral service, some of the younger men at Cummins gathered in small groups to share pictures and memories of Derick Coley, who was twenty-nine when he died. In a tribute online, Cheryl Tucker, who taught G.E.D. classes at

Cummins, described Coley as “one of the most enjoyable people I have ever known.” He was set to go before the parole board this month.

On April 15th, he had been seen by a nurse who noted that he was too weak to walk and his blood-oxygen level was ninety, which would typically indicate that a patient should be hospitalized. Instead, Coley was sent to the Hole, where he remained for seventeen days. His vitals were never recorded again.

The men in neighboring cells became increasingly concerned. “They were telling the guards, ‘He needs to go to the infirmary—he can’t breathe,’” Coley’s girlfriend, Cecelia Tate, who was raising an eight-year-old daughter with him, told me. “But the guards just kept walking by.”

Another man who had been housed in the Hole told me, “Listen, these people are supposed to come every thirty minutes, but they weren’t making any rounds. They might come every four hours, but they wouldn’t even turn their heads unless you were calling their names.” To get attention, he said, one inmate banged on his toilet, and, when that didn’t work, he warned the others in the Hole to lift their belongings off the ground, because he planned to flood the floor. The man told me, “It makes perfect sense that Coley was lying back there dying, and no one ever noticed.”

The last time Tate talked to Coley, three weeks before his death, she asked if he was planning to see a doctor. “I don’t know if they’re going to let me,” he said. Tonya Morrow, who, until January, was a physician’s assistant for Wellpath, at another Arkansas prison, told me that, when officers called about sick inmates, “nine times out of ten the nurses would say he’s just faking it or trying to get out of something. If the officer says the inmate has been throwing up, the nurse will ask, ‘Well, have you seen the inmate throw up? Until you see the inmate throw up, he can’t come to the infirmary.’” Burrow, the former Wellpath nurse, told me, “It’s a pride issue. The mentality of the infirmary is: these individuals are worthless.” She said that new staff members quickly “built up a brick wall” in order to assimilate to the culture. Those who didn’t were dismissed as “givers.” “They would say, ‘I can’t believe you’re falling for their games,’” she said. (Burrow was terminated after making complaints about what she witnessed. Wellpath said that retaliation is against its policy, and denied that sick calls are shredded.)

Officers finally came to Coley’s cell—not to check on him but to clear it so that someone else could move in. He was told that it was time to return to the general population. But, when he stood up, he collapsed. When a nurse arrived, he was lying on the floor, his lips pale. Several men watched through their windows as Coley, who had been handcuffed, was taken to the infirmary in a wheelchair. A man shouted Coley’s name several times as he rolled by. He didn’t respond.

The doctor on call, William Patrick Scott, advised the infirmary staff by telephone. (Scott’s medical license has been suspended three times. In one instance, the state medical board concluded that he had “exhibited gross negligence and ignorant malpractice,” by treating patients while intoxicated.) Coley was given chest compressions by the nurses, one of whom had been involved in the incident in which an inmate was allegedly choked with a telephone cord. According to the coroner’s report, Coley was “worked on and then passed away.”

The prison’s chaplain told Tate she had two days to enlist a funeral home to claim Coley’s body. Tate didn’t have the money, so the state sent her his ashes.

At the Governor’s press conference on May 16th, Payne stood in front of a backdrop that read “Arkansas: Ready for Business,” and announced good news from Cummins: there were only twelve positive cases. The rest, he said, were “considered to have been

A recovered.” Based on my conversations with more than thirty inmates or their families, it seems that almost no one had been retested. They had simply had their temperatures taken. Some had been asked to put their fingers in a pulse oximeter, which measures blood-oxygen levels. In a letter to the Governor, Raynor wrote, “Watching a press conference witnessing your saying almost 900 people have recovered at the Cummins Unit and then I walk by a guy that can’t get out of the bed makes me question my sanity level.”

Meanwhile, at a state prison thirty-five miles from Cummins, there was a new outbreak: two hundred and twenty-eight inmates had tested positive. One had already died.

In response to the pandemic, Hutchinson allowed six hundred and forty-eight prisoners who were serving sentences for nonviolent, nonsexual offenses, and were within six months of their release, to go home. Since February, twenty-six states have released more than twenty-seven thousand prisoners. The Think Tank was disappointed that a distinction was made—by nearly every political leader discussing the need for more space in prisons—between nonviolent offenders and violent ones. In 2008, Qadir had drafted a bill titled “Restoring Those Forgotten,” which he sent to the Governor and several legislators. The bill proposed that men who, like him, had been sentenced to life without parole when they were twenty-one or younger should have the opportunity to prove that they had reformed. “In evaluating our penal system,” he wrote in a petition accompanying the bill, “there is a very thin line between correcting and condemning a life.” As Qadir expected, there was no response. Between 2012 and 2017, Arkansas’s prison population grew more than any other state’s, with the number of elderly prisoners rising more rapidly than any other age group.

Laura Fernandez, one of the lawyers representing the prisoners, reflected on the state’s decision to count inmate infections separately. “It’s like a Greek tragedy,” she told me. “They don’t realize this thing is coming right back at them.” Jefferson County, which encompasses Pine Bluff—the city closest to Cummins—had, at one point, more deaths per capita from the coronavirus than any other county in the state. Lincoln County, where Cummins is situated, had the second-highest rate of cases in the nation.

Prisoners are hidden in most realms of life, but, when it comes to infectious disease, the harms of incarceration become visible: political leaders must reckon with the fact that prisons are part of our communities. The boundaries of penitentiaries are porous: inmates come in and out, as do officers, medical staff, vendors, lawyers, and relatives. Diseases come in and out, too. The risk of tuberculosis, for instance, is twenty-three times higher inside prison walls—poor ventilation, social density, and minimal sun exposure are fertile conditions for the spread of disease—but cannot be contained within them. A 2015 study in *Emerging Infectious Diseases* found that in Dourados, a city in Brazil, more than half the cases of tuberculosis among people who had never been incarcerated were linked to strains of the disease inside the nearby prison.

Vivian Flowers, a state representative from Pine Bluff who contracted the coronavirus in late March, told leaders of the Division of Correction that she doubted their conclusion that the men at Cummins had recovered. (Last year, Flowers proposed a constitutional amendment to outlaw prison labor, but it was voted down.) Flowers wanted to be tested again before she returned to the Arkansas General Assembly, which was holding its meetings in a basketball arena, so two weeks after her first test she got another one: she still had the virus. Ten days later, she tried again. She was still positive, even though she hadn’t had symptoms in twenty-three days. “This thing is still working its way around the prison,” Flowers told me. “When the workers leave, they are going to bring it back home.”

y the middle of May, the restrictions at Cummins had begun to ease. The men were told to eat in the cafeteria again, one barracks at a time. On D.B.'s first day back, he saw the warden, Aundrea Culclager, wiping tables herself. When an inmate asked if she was afraid of exposing herself to infected prisoners, D.B. heard her reply, "No, God got me." He said, "I wasn't impressed—I just thought it was sad. How can we progress when we got the warden of the whole prison not able to make big decisions, because she's doing a minimum-wage job?"

Qadir spent his first day back in the kitchen "assessing the damages." He told me, "Imagine your daughter playing with your makeup, and you come back to see the mess. That's what this was."

After the cafeteria opened, a field rider came into Raynor's barracks and said, "Y'all better start getting ready to go back to Hoe Squad." Raynor's job was doing laundry, but he shouted back, "We are never going back out there."

Later that day, Raynor, who has founded a small organization called Forgiveness, Reform, and Freedom, which fosters reconciliation between offenders and victims, was woken up by four officers. They put him in handcuffs. One officer sat on his bed, rifling through his belongings and throwing papers and clothes on the floor. "Why is all this aggression taking place?" Raynor asked. They didn't answer. They didn't find any contraband, but they led him out of the barracks and down the hallway to the prison's holding cells, where men had been urinating through the bars and defecating on the floor, since officers were coming too infrequently for them to go to the bathroom. As Raynor stood in front of the holding cells, he heard a lieutenant ask the other officers, "Why are we locking him up if he didn't do nothing?" They allowed Raynor to return to his barracks. He wondered if, after his comment to the field rider, he was being warned.

Some of the men I spoke with were afraid to use their names; they thought that they would be put in the Hole, or sent to the Hoe Squad, as punishment. When I asked Raynor why he chose to go on the record, he told me, "I want the men in here to know that someone they know was willing to sacrifice themselves for them." The coronavirus crisis, he said, had brought to the surface what most inmates had previously only sensed. "I always knew in the back of my mind: You don't care at all about us," Raynor said. "It's scary, because everything has come to fruition." He sees the prison as a "microcosm of America, with its own ghetto and suburbs"—the East Hall and the West Hall. He worries that one misguided act from an officer will cause the men on the East Hall to start rioting again. He said, "We suffer from things that we didn't even know we suffered from."

I noticed that the men in the Think Tank used convoluted rationalizations to make peace with punishments that they knew to be unjust. Danzie, who is black, was convicted by an all-white jury of killing a white stranger, though it was unclear if the man was murdered (he was discovered in a ditch, and no weapon was ever found) and Danzie has always maintained his innocence. He, Qadir, and Raynor make sense of their life sentences by reminding themselves of unrelated wrongs that they committed as teenagers, for which they were not tried. "I have to realize there's karma," Danzie said. "That's one of the reasons I give so much of myself to youth. Every time one of these guys go free, they are taking a piece of you with them. So eventually all of you will be free." Kaleem Nazeem, who was released in 2018, after twenty-eight years in prison, told me that, when people compliment him on his adjustment to freedom, he says, "You're looking at the student—the teachers are still locked up."

Qadir and Raynor reassure each other that they won't die in prison. "God is going to make a way out of no way," Qadir said. They share the same dream: if they are ever released, they will open their own organic farms. Raynor said, "Imagine me having forty acres and a catfish pond."

As they watched the protests following the death of George Floyd on the news, they felt that this alternative life might be within reach. The protesters, Qadir said, looked to him like babies, and that gave him hope. “The generation on the front lines doesn’t know the fear of my generation,” he said. “They don’t know the fear of my mother’s generation. They don’t know the fear of our ancestors. And yet they still have the same spirit that I feel when I go before classification every year”—the annual process by which inmates are assigned jobs. They file into the classification office one at a time and stand on footprints etched into the floor. Majors who oversee different parts of the prison—the fields, the chickens, the cattle, the infirmary, the kitchen—sit at tables around them. “They look at you, size you up like a horse, and make bids on where you will work,” Qadir said. “I get this gut feeling in my stomach: the blood that pumps into my veins is the blood of my forefathers.” He went on, “Some people say, ‘Don’t question God.’ I question him all the time: Help me understand so I can endure and be on the road to recovery.” ♦

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*[Rachel Aviv](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and was a 2019 national fellow at New America.*

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