

The Medical Humanities, Arts, and Ethics Series

# BEHIND BARS

## Life and Death for Inmates in the Age of COVID-19

A Lecture by

**Homer Venters, MD, MPH**

Thursday, January 14, 2021, at 4 p.m. PT

Live via Zoom

University of Southern California

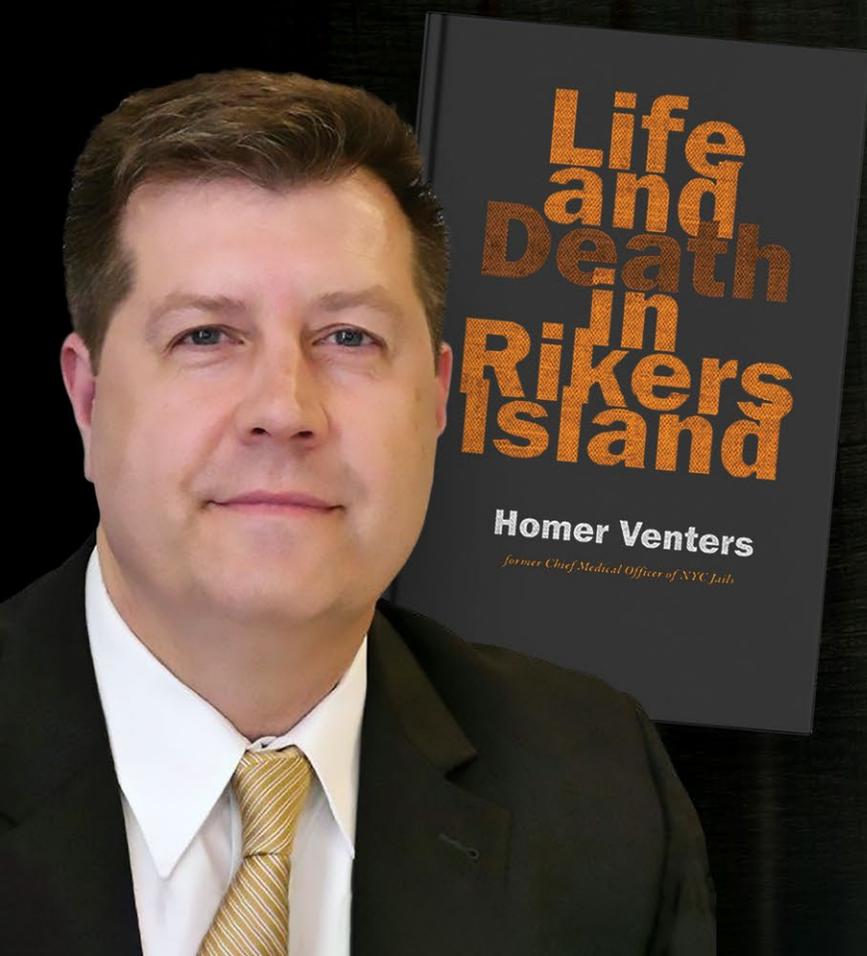
### WHAT TO KNOW

- Homer Venters is a physician, epidemiologist, and former Chief Medical Officer for New York City's jails.
- He is the author of the 2019 book *Life and Death in Rikers Island*, which examines the health risks associated with incarceration.

"The jail setting itself poses health risks."—Homer Venters

### ABOUT HOMER VENTERS

Homer Venters is a physician, epidemiologist, and leader in health and human rights. He has served as a Senior Health and Justice Fellow for the nonprofit Community Oriented Correctional Health Services, Director of Programs at Physicians for Human Rights, and Chief Medical Officer for New York City's jail system. He is the author of *Life and Death in Rikers Island*, about health in the infamous New York jail. Dr. Venters received his MD from the University of Illinois and a master's in public health research from NYU. He completed his residency in Social Internal Medicine at Montefiore Medical Center. Dr. Venters is an associate professor at the NYU School of Medicine.



## IN CALIFORNIA

In the face of the pandemic, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation expedited the release of thousands of people who had been incarcerated for non-violent offenses and who had less than a year remaining to serve. Another several thousand incarcerated people who were identified as medically high-risk were evaluated for early release on a case-by-case basis.

One of the deadliest COVID-19 outbreaks in a U.S. prison occurred at San Quentin State Prison in California's Bay Area. In summer 2020, more than 2,000 people were infected and at least 28 died as a result of the virus. In October, a state appellate court ordered San Quentin to reduce its incarcerated population by half, either moving or releasing 1,500 people. The ruling said that insufficient space for necessary physical distancing amounted to a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

## A CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUE

Civil rights attorneys and organizations including the Advancement Project, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the Fair Fight Initiative have filed lawsuits calling for the release of medically vulnerable people from specific prisons in the face of COVID-19, arguing that overcrowded, unsanitary conditions during a pandemic result in rights violations and put entire communities' health at risk.

## THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM

The United States has the largest prison population in the world and incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation. According to the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative, in 2020 approximately 2.3 million people are incarcerated nationwide.

- 1 in 5 people incarcerated in the U.S. is in for a drug offense.
- People of color make up 37 percent of the U.S. population but 67 percent of the prison population.
- Racial disparities are evident in every part of the policing and incarceration system, with Black people more likely than white people to be stopped on the street by police, more likely to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to face tougher sentencing.

Sources: The Prison Policy Initiative, The Sentencing Project, NAACP

## HEALTH AND HEALTHCARE IN U.S. PRISONS

- The 1976 Supreme Court case *Estelle v. Gamble* held that depriving incarcerated people of needed healthcare constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, a violation of their constitutional rights.
- According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, "Incarcerated individuals and those detained in immigration facilities are disproportionately affected by chronic health conditions, mental illness, and substance abuse. However, they tend to receive inadequate health

## COVID-19 IN THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM

As of January 11, 2021, there have been

**337,204**

**COVID-19 cases among people incarcerated in U.S. prisons**

**2,011**

**COVID-19 deaths of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons**

**78,093**

**COVID-19 cases of staff working in U.S. prisons**

**115**

**COVID-19 deaths of staff working in U.S. prisons**

Source: The COVID Prison Project ([covidprisonproject.com](https://covidprisonproject.com))

**"...to really be effective at implementing infection control behind bars, it takes trying to engage with the people there. And that's an uphill battle if, prior to that point, you haven't bothered to engage with them. In the New York City jail system, which was a very brutal and difficult setting, a lot of our success came from ideas patients gave us. One of the things I usually recommend in my COVID inspections is for health staff to go into housing areas and give an update on what's going on, but also hear from incarcerated people on what's working and what's not working. We still have such a one-way street that's mostly built on authority and discipline."—Homer Venters in *The Appeal***

## VOCABULARY CORNER— TERMS USED IN HOMER VENTERS’S TEDMED TALK

**jail-attributable death** – when a patient dies in large part because of something that happened within the jail facility, such as being beaten to death, being denied medical care, or dying by suicide after being locked in solitary confinement

**dual loyalty** – the conflict between the security setting and the health mission of medical staff in a prison, jail, or detention center



care before, during, and after incarceration or detention, further exacerbating their disadvantage. . . . Furthermore, as incarceration and detention are themselves detrimental to health, the AAFP supports reducing sentences for nonviolent and drug possession offenders and ending detention for those seeking legal asylum in the United States.”

- A 2013 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that each year in prison takes two years off a person’s life.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What does Dr. Venters recommend to improve the situation he describes? Do you think that’s feasible? Why or why not?
- Public health is “the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health through the organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private communities, and individuals” (C.E.A. Winslow). From a public-health perspective, how have different societies approached COVID-19? Why do you think this varies across societies, communities, states, and/or nations?
- Homer Venters has said, “To the extent we don’t do a good job [controlling the spread of COVID-19] in jails and prisons, we will certainly prolong the life of this outbreak.” Some people believe prison COVID-19 numbers should be separated from those of the rest of the county in which a prison is located. Why would that be done? Why do you think Venters sees prison outbreaks as connected to the outbreak as a whole?

## IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Homer Venters on Twitter | [@homerventers](https://twitter.com/homerventers)
- Homer Venters’s TedMed talk [tedmed.com/talks/show?id=771242](https://tedmed.com/talks/show?id=771242)
- Covid Prison Project [covidprisonproject.com](https://covidprisonproject.com)
- Temperature Check: Covid-19 Behind Bars—A Project of PEN American’s Prison and Justice Writing Program [pen.org/temperature-check-1](https://pen.org/temperature-check-1)
- *The Appeal*’s ongoing project “Coronavirus in Jails and Prisons” [theappeal.org/tag/appeal-coronavirus-tracker](https://theappeal.org/tag/appeal-coronavirus-tracker)
- Justice LA [justicelanow.org](https://justicelanow.org)
- 3/11/21 via Visions and Voices: Infesting Rights: A Lecture by Kate Gilmore [bit.ly/VVKateGilmore](https://bit.ly/VVKateGilmore)

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**KELSEY VUKIC** of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this evening's event. Those with a call number (e.g., books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g. e-books, journals, and databases) are electronic resources, which are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu) but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

### BOOKS

- ⦿ Bernice S. Elger, Catherine Ritter, and Heino Stöver, eds., [\*Emerging Issues in Prison Health\*](#) (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016).
- ⦿ Kenneth L. Faiver, [\*Correctional Health Care Services: Mental Health, Infectious Disease, Dental Care, Addiction Treatment\*](#) (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 2019).
- ⦿ Michael Ross, [\*Health and Health Promotion in Prisons\*](#) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

### DATABASES

- ⦿ [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality \(AHRQ\)](#)
- ⦿ [Disaster Lit: Resource Guide for Disaster Medicine and Public Health](#)
- ⦿ [ProQuest Central](#)
- ⦿ [PubMed@USC](#)

### JOURNALS

- ⦿ [\*International Journal of Prisoner Health\*](#)
- ⦿ [\*Journal of Correctional Health Care\*](#)
- ⦿ [\*The Prison Journal\*](#)

### STREAMING VIDEO

- ⦿ [\*The Prison in Twelve Landscapes\*](#), directed by Brett Story (Grasshopper Film, 2016).

